

RUSSIAN LITERATURE – Early Modern Period

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POETRY

In the 17th century Russia, apart from oral songs, there was no real tradition of poetry; it existed in the context of *virshi*, *byliny*, and *lyric songs*. The scale of the production of Russian verse is difficult to estimate due to the limited availability of texts, and existing texts have survived only in manuscript copies whose handwriting was hard to read and reproduce. Between the 1650s and the early years of Peter I's reign, poetic composition was increasingly centered at the royal court. Although the number of courtiers, poets and theologian involved in this writing was relatively small, their production was prodigious, totaling tens of thousands of lines of verse.

It was during Peter the Great's struggle to secularize Russian culture, that talented, well-educated poets who had spent their time abroad adapted European models and began to create Russian poetry.

During Peter the Great's reign, printing was put under the supervision of a new Printing Office, and the departments that were responsible for the publication of state and liturgical decrees, and liturgical books, came under the authority of the Head Chancery (*Bolshoy dvorets*). Russian poets became part of a patronage system within this office. Promotions were entirely dependent on service in the Head Chancery and to the Patriarch (since a clerk's duties included both the correction and publication of religious and liturgical texts), as well as reciprocal patronage. Publication required support from institutions such as the Academy of Sciences which was subject to the tsar's authority, and the court. Poets confined themselves to writing odes commemorating some specific occasion, or praised of the heroism of the sovereign and the military.

Several features distinguished poetry in the 18th century from that of the 17th century. First, the corpus of poets' works was compiled in anthologies, rather than remaining a collection of scattered works. Another was the motivation for poetic composition. Previously poets claimed that writing for the sake of art and future generations was their primary motivation, while in the 18th century self-expression became the motivation. Finally, novel patterns of behavior and new literary customs were introduced via the translation and imitation of French, German and English literature.

Syllabic Verse: When Russian writers began the process of creating secular literature, a number of different traditions were available to them as models. However, this new literature was expected to have certain distinctive characteristics, such as being "European", urbane, and as different from the entertainment of common, uneducated Russians as it could be. As a result, Russian poets turned to foreign poetic traditions.

The Ukraine, Belorussia and Poland were the sources for the development of Russian syllabic poetry. In the early 17th century Ukrainian and Belorussian poems were the models for the first *virshi* (secular poems based on spiritual verse). *Virshi* took the form of either isosyllabic couplets or couplets whose lines contained a varying number of syllables (relative isosyllabism).

In 1678, Russia's first and only full-time court poet Simeon Polotsky introduced a syllabic verse system in Church Slavonic and in Polish that dominated Russian poetry for a century. Prince Antioch Kantemir, who was widely known as the first Russian writer to blend life and poetry in his works, also supported this type of verse. During the period of Peter I, pastoral and amatory poetry composed in Russian syllabic verse and modelled on French and German poetic forms was fashionable among his courtiers. Feofan Prokopovich was a well-known poet who wrote syllabic verse during Peter I's reign, but following Peter's death in 1725 Feofan's style began to change, becoming increasingly varied and experimental, and showing the influence of the Italian *ottava rima* style of stanza composition.

Syllabo-tonic System: A truly Russian poetic tradition was established within a few decades, in part due to the efforts of poets such as Vasily Trediakovsky and Mikhail Lomonosov who not only composed poetry, but also wrote treatises on the composition of verse.

Russian syllabic verse rapidly fell out of favor following the appearance of Trediakovsky's syllabo-tonics, verse composed in equal disyllabic metrical feet, a form frequently utilized in Russian popular ballads.

By the mid-18th century new genres such as satire and didactic poetry made their appearance. Both were standardized by Lomonosov, while poets such as Aleksandr Radishchev and Gavrila Derzhavin took more experimental approaches to these genres.

In addition to establishing standards for satire and didactic poetry, Lomonosov established three stylistic levels – high, middle and low - for poetry in his *Letter Concerning the Rules of Russian Prosody (Pismo o pravilakh rossiyskogo stikhotvorstva)*. The "High Style", characterized by the use of elements from Old Church Slavonic, was considered appropriate for the composition of tragedy and heroic poetry. The "Middle Style" could be used for writing ordinary dramas, while the more colloquial "Low Style" was restricted to farce, correspondence and daily speech.

Lyrical Poetry: Towards the end of the 18th century lyric love poetry challenged the prevailing religious, philosophical and political themes, and the masters of this genre were Aleksandr Petrovich Sumarokov and Gavrila Derzhavin.

Ode: 18th century Russian odes were characterized by their political subject matter, nationalist tone, extreme deference to the monarch, and archaic language. Odes were generally presented to the monarch in the name of the Academy of Science and composed in honor of some official event (coronations, birthdays, etc.) However, the writers of odes in this period were also attempting through their art to help Russia catch up with the West, culturally and scientifically, and adapt contemporary western culture to Russia's particular needs. Lomonosov was the first eminent poet writing classical odes, while Gavrila Derzhavin, with his panegyric ode *Felitsa*, marks a turning point in the history of Russian poetry with its semi-humorous style. Derzhavin presaged the style that would be developed by early 19th century poets through his combination of awareness of the natural world and emotional subjectivity with a clearly classical style.

Karamzinian movement: The literary movement created by Nikolay Karamzin dominated the last decade of the 18th century and the first two of the 19th. Inspired by the French elegant style, Karamzin wrote in a novel literary language modeled on the language of the educated gentry, composing poetry that was clearly classical, but that also had a new sensibility. This language, later elaborated by Pushkin, became the standard language of 19th century literature.

DRAMA

17th century: It was not until the 17th century, with the introduction of literary culture, that the concept of a dramatic repertoire became known in Russia. Simeon Polotsky became the first dramatist in the history of Muscovy with his comedy on the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* printed in Moscow in 1685. The text of Simeon's comedy was in Russo-Slavonic and reprinted four times. In the Kievan school, on the other hand, the main dialogue in drama was in Latin or Slavonic.

Dimitry Tuptalo, who established the first Orthodox seminary in Muscovy, also opened the school of drama where his first drama *The Repentant Sinner* was performed in the 18th century. At this century the school drama was also given at other institutions, like the Slavonic-Greco-Latin Academy in Moscow.

In the 17th century a large number of works were translated from western languages. The degree of Western influence grew dramatically with the reforms of Peter I. One result of this increased contact with Western Europe was the attempt to adapt the literary models of Western Europe to Russian writing. German pastor Johann Gottfried Gregory, who later became a playwright in Moscow, wrote his play *The Action of Artaxerxes* in German, and it was then translated into Russian. After his death, Georg Hübner staged his *Bayazed and Tamerlane*, and then Stefan Chizhinsky wrote his *David and Goliath* and *Bacchus and Venus*; both of these works were subsequently lost.

18th century: In 1702 a public theater was established in Red Square by order of Peter the Great. When completed, a German theater troupe came to put on performances. Initially the performances were in German, but by 1705 plays were being translated into Russian and performed. Most of these plays were translations of German and Dutch comedies, or poor adaptations of plays such as Molière's *Amphitryon* and *Le Médecin malgré lui*. Later, both the Moscow Academy and the Moscow Medical School would stage dramas. More surprising, perhaps, was the establishment of a theater in Rostov by its bishop, Dimitrii, which he then used for performances of plays he wrote.

In 1707 Natalya Alekseevna, daughter Tsar Alexis I, had her own court theater and wrote plays herself which were dramatized versions of saints' lives and a play titled *The Tale of Otto, Roman Emperor*.

It was Alexander Sumarokov who was considered the founder of Russian drama, blending Russian themes with European dramatic forms in his works. Sumarokov was appointed as the first director of the Russian theater in 1756 by Elizabeth, and directed Russia's first professional public theater between 1756 – 1761; his works would become the basis of the theater's repertoire. His later works included comedies such as *The Troublesome Girl*, *The Imaginary Cuckold*, and *The Mother as Rival of Her Daughter*; and such tragedies as *Mstislav* and *Dimitry the Pretender*. This last work was ostensibly a tale about a despotic ruler, and has often been interpreted as a criticism of papal power. However, its real significance was as an indirect criticism of Catherine the Great's arbitrary use of power, while at the same time defending legitimate monarchy. *Dimitry the Pretender* was thus the beginning of a long tradition of theater as political criticism. In addition, Sumarokov's plays *The Guardian* and *Khorev* were regarded as the first political comedy and tragedy in Russia.

Later, other prominent dramatists copied the classicist tradition. Lomonosov, on the order of Elizabeth, wrote two plays for her theater: *Tamira and Selim* and *Demophon*. Mikhail Kheraskov with his three-act tragedy *The Nun of Venice* followed the classicist canon with a greater national awareness. Yakov Knyazhnin adapted several plays by Metastasio, Racine, and Voltaire for the Russian stage and wrote the tragedies *Rosslav* and *Vadim of Novgorod*. Vladislav Ozerov was the last major tragic dramatist in the classicist tradition. His first play *Yaropolk and Oleg* was modelled on the style of Knyazhnin, and he scored his greatest success with his patriotic tragedy *Dimitry Donskoy*.

The major playwright of Catherine the Great's era was Denis Fonvizin. Two of his most famous plays were the neo-classical *The Minor* and *The Brigadier*. Both were satires of the values of the age and attempted to encourage more moral conduct, however *The Brigadier* takes particular aim at the ignorance and moral laxity of the upper classes. Despite the fact that the monarchy often took issue with Fonvizin's works, Catherine the Great was an admirer of them.

FICTION

There were a number of secular fictional stories such as the *Tale of Queen Dinara*, a fictionalized biography of Queen Tamara of Georgia and the queen of Dinara composed in the 16th century. Another secular fiction work was the *Homily on Hops by Cyril, a Slavonic Philosopher*.

The 17th century marks the beginning of prose fiction that was translated from Polish. There were other works translated from South Slavic and also Czech. Manuscripts of these works of fiction were collections of stories that had been translated from Western sources, and were circulated among the Russian elite. Tales such as *Melissa*, and *Stephanites and Inchnelates* were among the best-known examples circulated in manuscripts. Another example was a collection of moral stories called *Speculum magnum exemplorum* translated from Polish. Also worthy of mention is a work called the *Gesta romanorum* translated from Polish in 1681, a collection of religious allegoric fiction used for Sunday sermons.

Original Russian secular prose fictional works began to be composed towards the end of the 17th century. One outstanding work was the *Tale of Savva Grudtsyn* that ran 15 printed pages, and written in Russo-Slavonic. It included several fantastic stories set in real life, such as the satirical story of the *Tale of Frol Skobeev* that implicitly depicted the moral decline of Russian society in the new Petrine period. It was a cautionary tale about the moral laxity that inevitably accompanies the abandonment of Christian virtues.

Prose fiction in manuscripts from the 18th century was under some influence from Western literature as well as traditional religion and oral literature. However, the trend in 18th century Russian fiction was to return to the older, traditional forms of storytelling in place of Western narrative styles. Among the most popular examples was the anonymous *Story of the Russian Sailor Vasily Koriotsky and the Beautiful Princess Irakliya of the Land of Florence*. This work combined elements of chivalric romances, adventure stories, didactic allegories and folktales.

The first Russian fiction work intended for a small, elite and secular readership was *The Journey to the Isle of Love*, written by Trediakovsky. The purpose of this work was perhaps to create a new etiquette and new forms of romantic expression for post-Petrine Russian society. A related innovation was the emergence of erotic fiction that depicted romantic liaisons among the upper class as a game.

By the end of the 18th century, native prose fiction began to appear with Mikhail Chulkov's *The Comely Cook* whose plot and setting were modelled on a European picaresque novel, and it was a remarkable example of the Russian rogue novel. His *The Mocker, or Slavonic Tales* was another fictional work which draws the attention of the modern reader with its protagonist who happily gravitates between the conflicting moral standards of moralistic literature and the value system of the subculture.

Another picaresque novel, *Adventures of Ivan, a Merchant's Son*, a romantic brigandage by Ivan Novikov, was an import from Western literature and introduced more specifics of Russian life, graphically depicted the uncertainty of social mobility and the vagaries of fortune.

Fyodor Emin's prose fiction *Fickle Fortune, or the Adventures of Miramond* was a vehicle to convey his political and moral ideas. His *The Letter of Ernest and Doravra* was the first attempt at a Russian epistolary novel with sentimentalist traits, and was a clear imitation of Rousseau's *La nouvelle Héloïse*.

Another prose fiction writer of this period - Mikhail Kheraskov published his *Numa, or Flourishing Rome* depicting a utopian dream of an enlightened monarchy, a mythical king of Rome, which was an imitation of the enlightenment ideas portrayed in Catherine II's own manifesto.

Influenced by Richardson, Goethe and Sterne, Aleksandr Radishchev wrote his *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow*. In it he used the situations and people that he encountered on his journey to launch a scathing critique of numerous issues in Russian society, from the excess and luxury of court life in the capital to prostitution and the institution of serfdom. As a result, the *Journey*, which is stylistically closer to European fiction works than to Russian fiction, was published anonymously.

In the last third of the 18th century, inspired from European sentimentalism, Russian prose fiction was having difficulties making progress against substantial foreign translations of the Western writers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Samuel Richardson, Jonathan Swift and Laurence Sterne.

In the last decade of the century, it was Nikolay Karamzin with his first novella *Eugene and Julya* published in Russia's first magazine for children, challenged his European contemporaries. Also, with his first Russian sentimental story, *Poor Liza* and his historical novella *Martha the Governor*, Karamzin started a new stage in Russian literature. Karamzin's later works, *The Sensitive Alan and the Cold Man*, and *A Knight of Our Times*, exhibit keen psychological observation combined with a deep sentimental analysis.

Discussion Question

What are the specific characteristics of 18th century Russian fiction?

ESSAY

Russian authors did not directly copy the western style of writing, but they tried to adapt their writings to this new genre as Mikhail Lomonosov did in his essay *On the Usefulness of Church Books in the Russian Language* (1757). He distinguished three styles of Russian: higher, middle and lower, linking them with appropriate themes and genres.

During the reign of Catherine the Great, satirical journals began to publish writings that resembled essays. In 1769, Catherine's satirical journal *All Sorts and Sundries* came out, and she encouraged other writers to follow her lead.

Nikolay Novikov published his essayistic work on leading Russian writers under the title *An Essay on the Historical Dictionary of Russian Writers* (1772). It contained bibliographical information on pre-Petrine Russian writers. Novikov published his first satirical journal *The Drone*, which appeared as a weekly in 1769-1770. His journal contained his writings criticizing the social conditions of the serfs, and targeting Catherine's policies, as well as her government's inefficiency and corruption. In his essay, *The ancient Russian library* (1773–1775), Novikov criticized the French critics and Russian aristocrats' French perspective that saw Russia as a backward and uncivilized country.

Russian writer Aleksandr Sumarokov wrote his own essay *On Versification* in 1781, and examined all five syllabotonic meters and the changes in Russian verse and in their use since 1735.

Toward the final quarter of the 18th century, Russian writers began to show a growing interest in political issues. There were writers, like Denis Fonvizin, Aleksandr Radishchev and Mikhail Shcherbatov, who wrote articles that described how to govern the state. For example, in his essay *On the Corruption of Morals in Russia* (1786–89), Shcherbatov talked about the decline of the morals at the court and criticized Catherine's policies.

Denis Fonvizin, on the other hand, in his *Discourse on the Indispensable Laws of the State* (1784), gave suggestions to tsar Paul to end his favoritism and oppressive rule and to create laws to bring harmony and stability to the country.

Aleksandr Radishchev, in his *A Journey From St. Petersburg to Moscow* (1790), delivered his stinging criticism of serfdom, the political system and the unlimited political power of landowners.

Sentimentalism, inspired by Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782– 89) and the translation of Montaigne's essays written in 1803, gradually displaced Classicism as the predominant literary genre and new genres like confessional narratives soon followed.

In 1792, Peter Plavilshchikov published an essay *Theater* in one of the journals he edited with Ivan Krylov, *The Mirror*. In his essay, he criticized the imitation of French plays and advocated the creation of a truly national drama which could be drawn from real Russian life.

A proponent of Sentimentalism, Nikolay Karamzin, in his didactic essay *A Bit about the Sciences, Arts, and Enlightenment* (1793), criticized Rousseau's claim that the science ruined morals; but at the same time, he

emphasized that science, arts and the Enlightenment had brought modernization to the West. His political essays, published in *Vestnik Evropy*, included his remarks on the political and social atmosphere in Europe before the French Revolution.

Mikhail Muravyov was one of the most refined of essayists in this period. In his essay *The Amusements of the Imagination* published in 1797, he used a discussion of Sumarokov's tragedies to praise invention as an honor.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In the 17th century, *The First Letter to Andrey Kurbsky* written by the Grand Prince of Muscovy, Ivan IV (the Terrible), was a message addressed to Prince Andrey Kurbsky, who defected to Lithuania during the Livonian War. The letter talks about Ivan's early years, his mistreatment and his abuse by Russian nobles.

The Story of My Life written by the monk Martiry Zelenetsky appeared in the same century. depicts his life in a monastery for few years, his journey to a place called 'Green Island' to establish a new monastery, the miracles he witnessed in Green Island, and his instructions addressed to the local monks.

The Tales of Anzersky Cloister (1636-1656) was written by Eleazar Anzersky, who founded the Trinity Monastery on Anzersky Island in the White Sea. The *Tales* includes stories about events that occurred in the course of founding the monastery and the miracles witnessed by Eleazar.

The Life Stories (1672–1675) written by Archpriest Avvakum was a self-testimony about his imprisonment in Pustozersk, his dramatic struggle for his religious convictions, and his inner struggles and emotions.

Following his close associate Avvakum, the monk Epiphany wrote his own life-story. In his autobiographical stories *The Life Stories* (1667–1671), Epiphany focused on his pain, his bad experiences and the miracles that he had witnessed in his lifetime.

Alexander Radishchev's work *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* (1790) is considered an autobiographical narrative that contains a harsh criticism of Russia's social and political system under Catherine the Great, and his violent reaction to the abuses of Russian serfdom. As a result of this work he was immediately arrested, tried for treason, and condemned to death, but his sentence was later commuted to exile in Siberia.

Nikolay Karamzin's *Letters of a Russian Traveler* (1789-90) described the author's experiences during his travels through Germany, England, France and Switzerland. Karamzin also portrayed numerous sketches of literary figures he met.

Open Hearted Confession about My Deeds and Thoughts, written by Denis Fonvizin during the last years of his life was another autobiographical work that was left unfinished at his death in 1792. Fonvizin's *Confession* was an expression of his joy in all the diverse aspects of human and a response to the previously published pseudo-confession of Rousseau. Unlike Rousseau, he admitted to his sins and all the lawless deeds he had committed in his lifetime that was filled only with regret and repentance.

Fedor Glinka's eight volume *Letters from a Russian Officer* (1815-16) which described military events witnessed by the author and his experiences fighting in the campaigns of the Napoleonic Wars was considered on a par with Karamzin's *Letters of a Russian Traveler*.

Women Writers: The first published autobiographies by women writers date from the last decade of the 18th century; public figures like Catherine the Great's and her friend Ekaterina Dashkova's autobiographical sketches were published only decades after their death. Catherine the Great, being a proponent of the Enlightenment, wanted to imprint the role of a woman's leadership on Europe.

Reading

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