"The Poetics of Everyday Behavior" Revisited: Lotman, Gender, and the Evolution of Russian Noble Identity

Michelle Lamarche Marrese

Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History, Volume 11, Number 4, Fall 2010 (New Series), pp. 701-739 (Article)

Published by Slavica Publishers
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2010.0004*

"The Poetics of Everyday Behavior" Revisited

Lotman, Gender, and the Evolution of Russian Noble Identity

Michelle Lamarche Marrese

In a letter to her brother in 1828, describing a course of summer reading that included Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott, Mariia Mukhanova begged his forgiveness for the choice of language in her previous letter. "I don't know why I wrote to you in French," she admitted, attributing her decision to "female capriciousness, to which I, like many women, am susceptible. I have always preferred to express myself in Russian."[1]

Mukhanova's apology raises important questions both about the relation of Russian noblewomen to European culture and, more generally, the evolution of noble identity in pre-reform Russia. Since the 19th century, scholars have identified the encounter between educated noblemen and European civilization as a central question in the history of the Russian nobility. The motif of the "alienation" of the Europeanized nobleman from the customs of his native land has dominated this debate: while historians such as Marc Raeff argued that cultural change culminated in the isolation of intellectuals from both the state and Russian people, producing the "superfluous man" of the literary imagination, a competing school underscores the persistence of

For their careful reading and insightful comments, I am indebted to John Bushnell, Hilde Hoogenboom, Daniel Kaiser, Alexander Martin, Michael Marrese, Andreas Schönle, Douglas Smith, Sally West, Martina Winkler, and the two anonymous *Kritika* reviewers. This paper was originally presented at the VII ICCEES (International Council for Central and East European Studies) World Conference in Berlin, July 2005. The research and writing of this article was supported by generous grants from NCEEER (National Council for Eurasian and East European Research), the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Fulbright Scholar Program.

[1] P. I. Shchukin, *Shchukinskii sbornik* 5 (Moscow: A. I. Mamontov, 1906), 367.

"shared superstitions and rituals" that bound the vast majority of the nobility to peasant culture.[2] The related question of how Russian noblewomen experienced the assimilation of Western manners and morals in the post-Petrine era has, by contrast, attracted little analogous attention. Numerous studies have examined the advances made in the education of noble girls in the late 18th century. These works have, however, focused primarily on the significance of Western models in fostering women's role as moral and cultural arbiters in the family and society. Indisputably, improvements in female education transformed expectations of marriage and motherhood among nobles of both sexes.[3] Yet the impact of noblewomen's increasing familiarity with European culture on their own perceptions of national identity, and whether these differed from those of their male counterparts, remains largely unexamined.

The historiographical convention that highlighted the uneasy relationship of the Westernized nobleman to native tradition took on new life with the publication of Iu. M. Lotman's seminal essay "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Eighteenth-Century Russian Culture." "During and after the Petrine period, the Russian nobleman was like a foreigner in his own country," Lotman argued. "As an adult he had to learn through unnatural methods what is usually acquired through direct experience in early childhood.... To behave properly was to behave like a foreigner, that is, in a somewhat artificial manner, according to the norms of someone else's way of life." The nobleman of the 18th century thus found himself perpetually "play-acting" in his

[2] Raeff argues that Russian noblemen operated in a "cultural and social vacuum": see his *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1966), 158. Dissenting or more nuanced views include Janet M. Hartley, *A Social History of the Russian Empire, 1650–1825* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1999), 129–30. Priscilla Roosevelt, in particular, emphasizes the "shared superstitions" of noble and peasant: see her *Life on the Russian Country Estate: A Social and Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 277, 181. The "alienated" nobleman was a common figure in the work of 19th-century historians: V. O. Kliuchevskii, "Western Influence in Russia after Peter the Great," trans. Marshall S. Shatz, *Canadian–American Slavic Studies* 28, 4 (1994): 419–44 (from Lectures 8–10 in *Kurs russkoi istorii*); and A. V. Romanovich-Slavatinskii, *Dvorianstvo v Rossii ot nachala XVIII veka do otmeny krepostnogo prava* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Ministerstva vnutrennikh del, 1870), 74–80. On the role of French culture in exacerbating the cultural schism, see Émile Haumant, *La culture française en Russie* (Paris: Hachette,1910).

[3] Barbara Alpern Engel, *Women in Russia, 1700–2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11–24; Olga E. Glagoleva, "Dream and Reality of Russian Provincial Young Ladies, 1700–1850," *Carl Beck Papers*, no. 1405 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2000); Catriona Kelly, "Educating Tat´yana: Manners, Motherhood, and Moral Education (*Vospitanie*), 1760–1840," in *Gender in Russian History and Culture*, ed. Linda Edmondson (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2001), 1–28; Carol S. Nash, "Educating New Mothers: Women and the Enlightenment in Russia," *History of Education Quarterly* 21, 3 (1981): 301–16; Jessica Tovrov, *The Russian Noble Family: Structure and Change* (New York: Garland, 1987).

existence, adopting European manners while simultaneously maintaining an "alien" Russian attitude toward these new forms of behavior. Significantly, Lotman denied women similar possibilities for self-fashioning, remarking that "the behavior of the noblewoman was much closer in principle to that of the peasant than to that of the nobleman. In her life there were no moments of individual choice, and her behavior was determined by age."[4] While the "semioticized" life of the Russian nobleman created possibilities for a range of behavioral styles, the existence of Russian noblewomen was circumscribed by the imperatives of marriage and childbirth.

The appearance of "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior" and a series of related articles[5] inspired a productive new line of inquiry among scholars of the Russian elite.[6] In particular, these works drew upon Lotman's thesis that, in the wake of the collision of European culture and Russian tradition, art "invaded life" and the everyday behavior of the nobility became highly theatricalized. Although scholars countered Lotman's claim with assertions that theatricality, illusion, and the imitation of foreign models were also attributes of the elite in Western Europe, they followed his lead in maintaining that the

---

[4] Iurii M. Lotman, "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Eighteenth-Century Russian Culture," in *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, ed. Alexander D. Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 69–70, 75 (first published in Russian in 1977). Lidiia Ginzburg also denied women's potential for self-determination, arguing that women in Russian romantic circles played a role "independent of their personal accomplishments," resulting in "banal imitations" of the spiritual life of "the true ideologues": "The 'Human Document' and the Formation of Character," in *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, 208.

[5] Lotman, "The Decembrist in Everyday Life (Everyday Behavior in Eighteenth-Century Russian Culture," and "Concerning Khlestakov," in *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, 95–149, 150–87 (first published in 1975); Lotman, "The Theater and Theatricality as Components of Early Nineteenth-Century Culture," and "The Stage and Painting as Code Mechanisms for Cultural Behavior in the Early Nineteenth Century," in *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, ed. Ann Shukman (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Contributions, 1984), 141–64; 165–76 (first published 1973).

[6] See Thomas Newlin, *The Voice in the Garden: Andrei Bolotov and the Anxieties of Russian Pastoral, 1738–1833* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001); Irina Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence Russian Style: The Duel in Russian Culture and Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Priscilla R. Roosevelt, "Emerald Thrones and Living Statues: Theater and Theatricality on the Russian Estate," *Russian Review* 50, 1 (1991): 1–23, and her *Life on the Russian Country Estate*; Laurence Senelick, "The Erotic Bondage of Serf Theatre," *Russian Review* 50, 1 (1991): 24–34; Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy,* 1: *From Peter the Great to the Death of Nicholas I* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995). For an overview of the significance of the "Moscow–Tartu" school in transforming the study of Russian culture, see Wortman's review of S. Iu. Nekliudov, ed., *Moskovsko-tartuskaia semioticheskaia shkola* (Moscow, 1998) in *Kritika* 1, 4 (2000): 821–29.

Russian noble was unique in exporting the ritual quality of court life to his estate in the provinces and transforming his daily life into an "improvised performance."[7] Lotman's investigations of cultural history thus encouraged a new variation on the theme of Russian exceptionalism in regard to the 18th- and early 19th-century nobility. The conviction that Europeanization created a cultural schism between noble and peasant that was unique to Russia was, as we have seen, one of long-standing in the work of historians.[8] Lotman's innovation was instead to highlight the impact of European culture on personal consciousness and to posit the emergence of a psychological fissure among 18th-century nobles, compelled to behave "according to the norms of somebody else's way of life." The wholesale borrowing of Western codes of behavior meant that Russian nobles were not supposed to become foreigners, merely to resemble them; thus, Europeanization also heightened the semiotic significance of traditional forms of daily life, producing "the feeling of being forever on the stage" that Lotman argued was characteristic of gentry life in the post-Petrine era.[9]

The significance of theatricality and literary models in the lives of the upper strata of the Russian elite is not in question here, although some critics have—rightly—begun to question both the uniqueness of the Russian case and Lotman's assertion that self-fashioning was confined to the nobility.[10] Lotman's more controversial allegation that 18th-century nobles assimilated European culture yet continued to experience it as "foreign" remains, however, uncontested.[11] The notion that the European Russian had a "split identity," behaving as a "European" on the "public stage," while his private, inner

---

[7] Thomas Seifrid, " 'Illusion' and Its Workings in Modern Russian Culture," *Slavic and East European Journal* 45, 2 (2001): 205–15; Lotman, "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior," 84.

[8] The thesis of the "cultural schism" in 18th-century Russian society remains a truism, despite evidence to the contrary. As Isabel de Madariaga argues, the gulf between noble and peasant was not unique to post-Petrine Russia but existed throughout much of Europe and was often bridged through popular culture. In Russia, both the armed forces and the country estate provided channels that kept cultural contact between the elite and the uneducated alive. See "Sisters under the Skin," in *Articles on Russian and Soviet History, 1500–1991,* 2: *Imperial Russia I, 1700–1861*, ed. G. M. Hamburg (New York: Garland, 1992), 17.

[9] Lotman, "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior," 69–70.

[10] Richard Stites, *Serfdom, Society, and the Arts in Imperial Russia: The Pleasure and the Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); David L. Ransel, "Enlightenment and Tradition: The Aestheticized Life of an Eighteenth-Century Provincial Merchant," and Laura Engelstein, "Personal Testimony and the Defense of Faith: Skoptsy Telling Tales," in *Self and Story in Russian History*, ed. Engelstein and Stephanie Sandler (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 305–29, 330–50.

[11] Lotman, "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior," 72.

life "was swayed by Russian customs and sensibilities" has, as a result, become a recurring motif in work on the Russian nobility.[12]

The goal of this essay is to challenge Lotman's paradigm of the post-Petrine noble as a "foreigner in his own country" and to offer a competing portrait of the cultural world of the Russian nobility in the 18th and early 19th centuries. In the following pages I, first, offer a critique of Lotman's reliance on binary oppositions as the foundation of his thesis and locate his argument in an intellectual tradition that originated among Russian intellectuals and European observers in the late 18th century. Second, I demonstrate the limits of Lotman's model of agency and identity when applied to nobles outside the elite circle of literary and political figures who featured overwhelmingly as the protagonists of the scholar's work. As we shall see, an examination of artifacts from noble family papers allows a far more complex perspective on the social roles and cultural identity of noble men and women. Unlike Lotman, who emphasized the "consciously theatrical" behavior of the Europeanized nobility and only minimally addressed the experience of women, I maintain that the worldview of much of the Russian elite was characterized by unproblematic cultural bilingualism.[13] Familiarity with Western and Russian ways of life permitted nobles of both sexes to participate to varying degrees in European culture without detracting from their feelings of belonging to Russia and to experience both forms of behavior as natural.[14] In particular, the testimony

[12] Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 43–45; Irena Grudzinska Gross, *The Scar of Revolution: Custine, Tocqueville, and the Romantic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 52–53; Roosevelt, "Emerald Thrones and Living Statues"; Simon Werret, "Potemkin and the Panopticon: Samuel Bentham and the Architecture of Absolutism in Eighteenth-Century Russia," *Journal of Bentham Studies*, 2 (1999); A. Woronzoff-Dashkoff, "Disguise and Gender in Princess Dashkova's *Memoirs*," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 33, 1 (1991): 62–74; Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, 1:86. See also Engelstein, "Personal Testimony and the Defense of Faith," 330: "For the Europeanized aristocracy, identity was always in quotation marks." In her work based on the testimony of 19th-century memoirs, Priscilla Roosevelt argues that young nobles experienced a "cultural divide between a Russian infancy and a European adulthood," while Mary Cavender maintains that "in correspondence, the emotional and most intimate self emerged as Russian, rather than as pan-European": Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian Country Estate*, 181; and Mary W. Cavender, *Nests of the Gentry: Family, Estate, and Local Loyalties in Provincial Russia* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 55.

[13] Lotman, "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior," 72–73.

[14] By focusing on figures such as Peter the Great and eminent political and literary figures in his work, Lotman did not even touch on the profound cultural and economic diversity that characterized the Russian nobility. As early as 1886, the literary scholar A. P. Pypin criticized the notion of the estrangement of Russian nobles from their native tradition and observed that European culture had minimal impact on much of the 18th-century nobility, particularly in the provinces. See Pypin, "Do-petrovskoe predanie v XVIII-m veke," *Vestnik Evropy* 4, bk. 6 (June 1886): 680–717; bk. 7 (July 1886): 306–45.

of noble correspondence undermines Lotman's assertion that the "collision of the old and the new" produced a loss of "internal unity" and resulted in the "dual perception" he identified among the elite.[15] Indeed, the very difficulty of distinguishing between "Russian" and "Western" ways of life by the end of the 18th century underscores the extent to which the post-Petrine nobility quickly came to perceive the adoption of European culture as a routine matter rather than "learned" behavior.

Identity in Quotation Marks: Lotman and the Cultural History of the 18th-Century Nobility

Far from being an anomaly, Lotman's account of the problematic reception of European culture among the post-Petrine nobility was founded on precedent that originated in the 18th century and was articulated with particular vigor by 19th-century intellectuals.[16] In the words of Alexander Herzen, the men of his father's generation, having been exposed to European influence, were "foreigners at home, foreigners abroad … spoilt for Russia by Western prejudices and for the West by Russian habits."[17] Lotman's attention to role playing in noble life also echoed the observations of European visitors to Russia, who singled out theatricality and the talent for imitation as characteristic of the Russian nobility. "Civilized Russians of both sexes … behave in the most ordinary circumstances of life as though they were acting a part in a drama," exclaimed one Englishwoman who spent several years in Russia in the 1850s.[18] In his scurrilous report on the court of Catherine II, Charles Masson remarked that the "noble Russian … has, in fact, a great aptitude for adopting the opinions, manners, customs, and languages of other nations…. He will change his taste and character as easily as the fashion of his dress; surely, therefore, this suppleness of mind and senses is a distinguishing feature."[19] The result of this "ridiculous imitation of foreign … manners," asserted Sir George Macartney in 1768, was to "divest them of all national

[15] Iu. M. Lotman, *Besedy o russkoi kul´ture: Byt i traditsii russkogo dvorianstva (XVIII–nachalo XIX veka)* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 1994), 298; Lotman, "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior," 72.

[16] Hans Rogger, *National Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 45–84, 126–85. Curiously, Lotman makes no mention of Herzen's observations in his work.

[17] Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts: The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen*, trans. Constance Garnett; abridged Dwight Macdonald (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 66.

[18] *At Home with the Gentry: A Victorian English Lady's Diary of Russian Country Life*, attributed to Amelia Lyons, ed. John McNair (Nottingham: Bramcote, 1998), 9, 23.

[19] [Charles Masson], *Secret Memoirs of the Court of St. Petersburg* (London: H. S. Nichols), 267–68.

character." Anticipating Herzen's indictment of his father's contemporaries, Macartney wrote of Russian nobles who traveled abroad that "to Frenchmen they become despicable Russians, to Russians despicable Frenchmen, to others equal objects of pity and contempt."[20]

Lotman's model of the Russian noble as a "foreigner" in his native land who conducted his life as if on a stage thus was not, strictly speaking, a novel insight. His reformulation of the question of noble self-definition in terms of the semioticization of daily life did, to be sure, represent a more sophisticated perspective on the problem of cultural borrowing than that of his predecessors.[21] At the same time, the parallels between Lotman's analysis and the commentary of contemporaries should alert us to the need to treat Lotman's own pronouncements as cultural artifact, rather than an unproblematic description of Russian noble consciousness. Multilingualism was widespread among the upper levels of the European nobility in the 18th and 19th centuries. Yet in the Russian context facility for foreign languages and emulation of foreign fashion took on special significance both for European observers and for the descendants of the 18th-century nobility.[22] According to his son, the diplomat Sir John Sinclair strongly disapproved of the predominance of "French customs and phraseology" at the Swedish court, but it was Russia he singled out as "the most imitative of all nations."[23] Similarly, the Marquis de Custine repeatedly referred to Russians as "born imitators" in his account of

[20] Anthony Cross, ed., *Russia under Western Eyes, 1517–1825* (London: Elek Books, 1971), 203–4. See also Maria Di Salvo, "What Did Francesco Algarotti See in Russia?" in *Russian Society and Culture and the Long Eighteenth Century: Essays in Honour of Anthony G. Cross*, ed. Roger Bartlett and Lindsey Hughes (Münster: Lit, 2004), 81.

[21] For a critical view of the "cliché that Russians are somehow more inclined than people of other nations to translate literature into life," see Laura Engelstein, "Paradigms, Pathologies, and Other Clues to Russian Spiritual Culture: Some Post-Soviet Thoughts," *Slavic Review* 57, 4 (1998): 871.

[22] Contemporary scholars continue to elaborate this motif, suggesting that European culture and languages played a "colonizing" role among the Russian elite: Gross, *The Scar of Revolution*, 52; Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 156–57; Kalpana Sahni, *Crucifying the Orient: Russian Orientalism and the Colonization of Caucasus and Central Asia* (Bangkok: White Orchid, 1997), 15. Hosking goes so far as to assert that "in no other empire of modern Europe was the assimilation of a foreign culture as complete" and remarks on the "incongruity of the nobles' situation and the resultant rift within Russian culture." Later he observes that educated nobles were the first "consciously patriotic Russians," but notes that "the nobles' Russianness was very different from that of the peasants." See Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire*, 159. One wonders if the "Polishness" of the Polish gentry was identical to that of the Polish peasant, or for that matter whether national identity was shared among the elite and the peasantry of much of Europe.

[23] John Sinclair, *Memoirs of the Life and Works of Sir John Sinclair*, 1 (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1837), 142, 150.

his travels in Russia in 1839—a talent, he asserted, that is "characteristic of infant peoples."[24] Among the 19th-century Russian intelligentsia, this concept of the imitative character of the Russian people would take its most extreme form in the "Philosophical Letters" of Petr Chaadaev, who wrote in 1829 that "our exotic civilization rests so much on Europe's … that we have no other language but hers."[25] By contrast, the anonymous author of an article that appeared in the journal *Zritel´* in 1792 angrily denied the allegations of foreigners that Russians possessed no national character and were capable only of imitation, which he attributed to the "fashionable upbringing" that his compatriots had embraced. He went on to reject the possibility of cosmopolitanism, claiming that no intelligent man could prefer the customs, morals, and faith of a foreign country to those of his native land.[26]

Lotman's assertion of the opposition between "natural" or "neutral" Russian tradition and "learned" or "alien" European culture founded on imitation thus had a genealogy that dated from the late 18th century and proves to be, in Svetlana Boym's formulation, less a *description* of Russian culture than a *perpetuation* of its cultural mythology.[27] For all of its intuitive appeal, Lotman's analysis of the poetics of everyday behavior falls short as a depiction of how individual nobles experienced the interaction of European culture and Russian custom in their daily lives. The problematic nature of Lotman's model derived, at least in part, from his emphasis on binary oppositions as the foundation of Russian culture, which is much in evidence not only in "The Poetics of Everyday Life," but also in later essays on noble culture in *Besedy o russkoi kul´ture*.[28] The scholar's interpretation of everyday behavior

---

[24] Astolphe-Louis-Léonor, marquis de Custine, *Custine's Eternal Russia: A New Edition of Journey for Our Time*, trans. and ed. Phyllis Penn Kohler (Miami: Center for Advanced International Studies, University of Miami, 1976), 120.

[25] Peter Chaadaev, "Apology of a Madman," in *Readings in Russian Civilization,* 2: *Imperial Russia, 1700–1917*, ed. Thomas Riha (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 308.

[26] "Neshto o vrozhdennom svoistve dush rossiiskikh," *Zritel´* (St. Petersburg, February 1792): 9, 12, 14.

[27] Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 30.

[28] Lotman, *Besedy o russkoi kul´ture*, 189. The dual character of Russian culture was a recurring motif in the work of Lotman and other members of the Tartu school of semiotics. Whereas Western civilization permitted "neutral behavior … and social institutions," the structure of Russian culture was distinguished instead by fundamental polarities (holy/sinful, Russia/the West, old/new) that allowed for no intermediary zones. For critical views of this approach, see Jonathan H. Bolton, "Writing in a Polluted Semiosphere: Everyday Life in Lotman, Foucault, and de Certeau," Amy Mandelker, "Lotman's Other: Estrangement and Ethics in *Culture and Explosion,*" and Andreas Schönle and Jeremy Shine, "Introduction," in *Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions*, ed. Andreas Schönle (Madison: University of Wisconsin

suffered equally from incessant recourse to late 18th- and early 19th-century literary texts to illustrate his generalizations about noble life and from the gendered nature of his argument, which either excludes women from the realm of culture or relies primarily on the testimony of male authors to interpret women's experience.

Paradoxically, much of Lotman's work disputed the thesis of a radical break between "old" and "new" Russian culture and challenged the conviction of 19th-century thinkers that the "captivity" of Russia to European culture in the 18th century had produced a "false civilization."[29] Yet the tension between Lotman's attention to binary oppositions in Russian society and his pronouncements on continuities in new cultural forms remained a striking feature of the scholar's work on the Russian nobility. On the one hand, Lotman acknowledged that post-Petrine culture was "considerably more traditional than is generally thought": the new order in fact preserved much that was present in Russian "tradition" and relied less on "Western" values than on inverted models of Muscovite culture.[30] At the same time, his depiction of post-Petrine noble consciousness assumed a binary opposition between Russian tradition and European civilization, rather than the emergence of a Europeanized culture in which elements of Russian custom persevered.[31] The essential polarity of post-Petrine Russian culture thus produced the "dual perception" which encouraged the Russian nobleman to "treat his own life as

Press, 2006), 320–34, 59–83, and 3–35; Boym, *Common Places*, 29–30; and Schönle, "Social Power and Individual Agency: The Self in Greenblatt and Lotman," *Slavic and East European Journal* 45, 1 (2001): 74–77. As Bolton observes, the very notion of a stark distinction between the "everyday" vs. the "foreign" or the "ritualized" is problematic: "In fact," he argues, "we do learn some everyday behavior as we would learn a 'foreign language.' " See Bolton, "Writing in a Polluted Semiosphere," 322–23.

[29] O. M. Goncharova, *Vlast´ traditsii i "novaia Rossiia" v literaturnom soznanii vtoroi poloviny XVIII veka* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel´stvo russkogo khristianskogo gumanitarnogo instituta, 2004), 3–15; Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 261.

[30] Iu. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskii, "Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (to the End of the Eighteenth Century)," in *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, 30–66 (first published in 1977); Lotman and Uspenskii, "Binary Models," 54.

[31] It is worth noting that Lotman's paradigm of Russian noble identity also skirts the problem of the multinational character of the nobility. A more comprehensive model would have to acknowledge the complicated triadic nature of noble identity, which incorporated elements of European, Russian, and Asiatic culture. For a case study that touches on this problem, see Constantine Bolenko, " 'Russian Grandee, European *Grand Seigneur*, and Tatar Prince' N. B. Iusupov: On the Question of Self-Orientalization of the Russian Nobility in the Last Third of the Eighteenth–First Third of the Nineteenth Century," *Ab Imperio*, no. 3 (2006): 161–216.

highly semioticized." In other words, "to behave properly was to behave … in a somewhat artificial manner."[32]

At the heart of Lotman's work on the Russian nobility was the distinction he drew between "routine behavior"—which was acquired from society and allowed for no alternatives—and "signifying activity," which is "always the result of choice."[33] Yet over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries the relationship between Russian custom and European culture, the "routine" (or "natural") and the "signifying" (or "learned"), was highly ambiguous.[34] Indeed, from the second half of the 18th century on, proponents of national culture were hard-pressed to define "Russianness" or Russian tradition, aside from its obvious manifestations in the form of language, religion, folklore, and national dress.[35] In an essay published in 1806, in which she contrasted the traditions of old Russia with those of the present, Princess Dashkova maintained that before the introduction of European customs Russians had been distinguished by "love for the Fatherland," observance of religious belief, strong family ties, and the modesty of women.[36] Dashkova's essay exemplified the propensity of her contemporaries to play up the alleged contrast between unspoiled Russian customs and the affected manners of the French; nonetheless, European behavior was in fact far more "natural" in

[32] Lotman, "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior," 69, 72. Lotman assured his readers that to say that behavior is "theatrical" is not to "imply that it is insincere or reprehensible," but that it "holds a meaning that extends beyond the everyday." See Lotman, "The Decembrist in Everyday Life," 105. Lotman's insistence on the "dual perception" that plagued the nobility is also reminiscent of the assertion of several generations of Russian intellectuals that Russian life was characterized by the opposition of *byt* (everyday, material life) and *bytie* (spiritual life), and that Russia was a land of "transcendental homelessness." For a critique of this concept, see Svetlana Boym, "Estrangement as a Lifestyle: Shklovsky and Brodsky," *Poetics Today* 17, 4 (1996): 517–18; and Catriona Kelly, *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), xxxiii.

[33] Lotman, "The Decembrist in Everyday Life," 129.

[34] Jonathan H. Bolton notes that the "semiotic/nonsemiotic distinction … deserves interrogation" ("Writing in a Polluted Semiosphere," 322).

[35] As Hans Rogger observes, to be "truly Russian once more, to return to the ancestral virtues, one first had to know what these virtues were, what elements there were in the national culture that were vital and unique" (*National Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century Russia*, 70). Lotman, too, noted that national culture had to be reconstructed at the end of the 18th century, at the same time that critics of European influence launched their attack on the latter as "superficial and alien" (Lotman and Uspenskii, "Binary Models," 65).

[36] E. R. Dashkova, "Neshto iz moei zapisnoi knizhki," in *O smysle slova "vospitanie": Sochineniia, pis'ma, dokumenty* (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 2001), 222–23. When Countess Antonina Bludova described an acquaintance as "completely Russian," she added that was to say he was Orthodox. See "Zapiski grafini Antoniny Dmitrievny Bludovoi," *Russkii arkhiv*, no. 7–8 (1872): 1255. For his part, Lotman identified religious devotion as a key element in Russian tradition (*Besedy o russkoi kul'ture*, 298).

the context of the daily lives of the educated elite than their attempts to resurrect Russian tradition. In his famous description of the "Russian dinners" given by the Decembrist Kondratii Ryleev in the 1820s, Lotman noted that the guests smoked cigars, while making a point of eating traditional Russian dishes, such as cabbage and rye bread. "The cigar is strictly a matter of habit," Lotman remarked, "testifying to the profound Europeanization of everyday life, while the cabbage is an ideologically weighted sign."[37] Russian tradition, in the form of popular customs, and European culture thus did not so much oppose as coexist in the worldview of the post-Petrine noble, and the classification of each as "neutral" or "alien" was constantly in flux in pre-reform Russia.[38]

Lotman's reliance on literary sources as an accurate reflection of noble behavior was instrumental in shaping his model of noble identity. Although warning of the dangers of equating the literature of "norms and prescriptions" with the "real life" of an epoch, Lotman turned to literary texts and their creators as the primary exemplars of the consciousness of a particular age.[39] On more than one occasion he maintained that cultural history should be as "inclusive as possible,"[40] and that the lives of "unremarkable people" should interest cultural historians as much as those of their remarkable counterparts.[41] Yet, while drawing periodically from memoirs, sermons, and material culture, Lotman rarely ventured beyond the lives of the most prominent literary and political figures to illustrate his paradigm of everyday behavior. Personalities such as Grigorii Potemkin, Mikhail Lomonosov, General Suvorov, and Aleksandr Radishchev loom large in the pages of his work on noble culture, while the lives of "unremarkable" nobles are assumed to adhere to the pattern set by their remarkable contemporaries.[42]

[37] Lotman, "The Decembrist in Everyday Life," 137.

[38] As Boym observes, 19th-century contemporaries mocked the attempts of the Slavophiles to adopt pre-Petrine Russian dress, which resulted in a kind of parody of Western mythologies about Russian culture. "It turns out," Boym remarks, "that truly national behavior is even more difficult to learn than unnatural foreign manners" (*Common Places*, 98).

[39] Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, 128; "Every work of literature can be examined … as a fragment of a certain cultural or structural unity of a higher order," Lotman argued ("Concerning Khlestakov," 151). Lotman's archival work, carried out early in his career, focused exclusively on literary texts and figures. See Ann Shukman, *Literature and Semiotics: A Study of the Writings of Yu. M. Lotman* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing, 1977), 180–85.

[40] Kelly, *Refining Russia*, xvi.

[41] Lotman, *Besedy o russkoi kul´ture*, 13.

[42] Marc Raeff's thesis of noble alienation from state and people also relied on a limited range of sources which, according to his critics, did not represent the experience of the vast majority of Russian nobles, who could not afford the luxuries associated with "westernization"—namely, education and travel. See Michael Confino, "Histoire et psychologie: À propos de la

Similarly, this accent on the literary artifacts of a small subset of the elite in Lotman's work influenced his analysis of the experience of noblewomen. In his final lectures on Russian culture, published posthumously as *Besedy o russkoi kul´ture* in 1994, Lotman devoted attention to topics such as marriage, divorce, and women's education. Here, too, however, Lotman not only presented women primarily as "sensitive barometers" of social change, rather than cultural agents in their own right, but based his portrait of "woman's world" at the turn of the 19th century on accounts of Pushkin, Karamzin, and Novikov and their womenfolk. Discussions of family life again highlighted the conflict between "Russian tradition" and the influence of "Europeanization." Significantly, in the tradition of his 19th-century predecessors Lotman implied that women largely escaped the psychological schism which plagued their male counterparts. The scholar drew attention in particular to the example of Princess Natal´ia Dolgorukaia, noting that, unlike her male contemporaries, Dolgorukaia achieved a seamless assimilation of the old and the new, of Russian custom and European culture.[43] By contrast, he argued, the later memoirs of Anna Labzina reflected the "dramatic conflict of two cultures"—the religious world of old Russia and the secular views of the new order.[44] In keeping with his portrayal of the Russian nobleman as a "foreigner in his own country," Lotman's discussion of the impact of European culture on noblewomen shared much in common with 19th-century accounts.[45] Thus the scholar maintained that by the 19th century women sought their own place in the cultural realm without relinquishing "the right to be a woman"—an analysis highly reminiscent of Herzen's assertion that, despite her achievements as

noblesse russe au XVIIIe siècle," *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations* 22, 6 (1967): 1199; Arcadius Kahan, "The Costs of 'Westernization' in Russia: The Gentry and the Economy in the Eighteenth Century," *Slavic Review* 25, 1 (1966): 46, 66.

[43] Lotman, *Besedy o russkoi kul´ture*, 46, 103, 298. Historians in imperial Russia consistently singled out Dolgorukaia as an exemplar of the Russian noblewoman who received a European education yet escaped the "corruption of morals" prevalent among women of her class in the 18th century. See E. N. Shchepkina, "Vospominaniia i dnevniki russkikh zhenshchin," *Istoricheskii vestnik*, no. 8 (1914): 537; and Gitta Hammarberg, "The Canonization of Dolgorukaia," in *The Russian Memoir: History and Literature*, ed. Beth Holmgren (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 93–127.

[44] Lotman, *Besedy o russkoi kul´ture*, 304, 301–13. For a dissenting view, see Gary Marker, "The Enlightenment of Anna Labzina: Gender, Faith, and Public Life in Catherinian and Alexandrian Russia," *Slavic Review* 59, 2 (2000), 377–78, 388–89.

[45] Lotman's commentary on Dolgorukaia is virtually identical to that of the historian V. O. Mikhnevich. See Mikhnevich, *Russkaia zhenshchina XVIII stoletiia: Istoricheskie etiudy* (Kiev: Iuzhno-russkoe knigoizdatel´stvo, 1895), 146. His pronouncement on women as "sensitive barometers" of cultural change is also drawn directly from the 19th-century historian Mordovtsev: D. L. Mordovtsev, *Russkie zhenshchiny novogo vremeni: Biograficheskie ocherki iz russkoi istorii. Zhenshchiny pervoi poloviny XVIII veka* (St. Petersburg: A. Cherkesov, 1874), xi.

director of the Academy of Sciences, Princess Dashkova had "above all" been "born a *woman* and remained a *woman* throughout her life."[46] Despite half-hearted efforts to historicize 19th-century portrayals of women's moral heroism and sensitivity, Lotman, like his predecessors, insisted on the essential, unchanging wholeness of female nature and located women on the margins of cultural conflict in the post-Petrine era.[47]

Agency and Gender in the Post-Petrine Era

Lotman's attention to the unique status of European culture among the Russian elite, wittingly or not, derived from an intellectual tradition that emerged in the late 18th century. Unlike his predecessors, however, a central theme of Lotman's work was the element of personal choice in the lives of Russian noblemen: the world of the post-Petrine noble was one of alternatives in which the individual consciously selected from an array of behavioral styles appropriate to his position in life.[48] Following their emancipation from state service in 1762, he declared, noblemen enjoyed the option of managing their estates or conducting a life of leisure. Those who elected to serve the state could follow several career trajectories, including the choice of military or civil service, serving in the capital or the provinces, or working abroad in diplomatic service. For Lotman, the very essence of aristocratic life was "the presence of choice, the possibility of changing from one type of behavior to another." The "creation of styles"—the way individuals dressed, spoke, and behaved—hinged both on status and location: noblemen "unconsciously but unerringly" revised their style of behavior when their role in society

[46] Lotman, *Besedy o russkoi kul´ture*, 75; A. I. Gertsen (Herzen), "Kniaginia Ekaterina Romanovna Dashkova," in *Spravochnyi tom k zapiskam E. R. Dashkovoi, Ekateriny II, I. V. Lopukhina* (Moscow: Nauka, 1992), 16. Strikingly, Herzen did not attribute the same cultural estrangement to Dashkova that he did to his father and other men of her generation, despite her immersion in European culture.

[47] Lotman characterized noblewomen as "intensely emotional" and superior to men by virtue of their spiritual strength (*Besedy o russkoi kul´ture*, 46, 57).

[48] According to one scholar, Lotman's emphasis on agency expressed his concern to demonstrate that everyday behavior was not dictated by ideology but always included an element of the "personal." See Kim Su Kvan (Kwan), *Osnovnye aspekty tvorcheskoi evoliutsii Iu. M. Lotmana: "Ikonichnost´," "prostranstvennost´," "mifologichnost´," "lichnost´"* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2003), 109. The notion of life as a "creative act" was a leitmotif of Lotman's work. As he wrote in his biography of Pushkin: "Life gradually removes a person's freedom of choice. The law of art is the increase in possible choices" (quoted in Irina Reyfman, "Iurii Lotman's Pushkiniana," *Slavic Review* 58, 2 [1999]: 443). As Wortman notes, semiotics became a rich field for investigating Russian history and culture in part because it could be "implicitly counterpoised to Marxist dogma"; at the same time, "It was embraced, as many ideologies were by the 19th-century Russian intelligentsia, as a totalistic system … [that] had a markedly utopian character" (review of Nekliudov, 824).

changed, or as they moved between St. Petersburg and their country estates. Noblewomen, in contrast, did not embark on a similar "search for behavioral models," since their lives were dictated by age rather than individual choice.[49]

Lotman's schema of the possibilities for noble behavior, along with his assertion that the introduction of European culture rendered the daily life of the nobility an "improvised performance," remains, however, problematic on a number of levels. Indisputably, a small number of noblemen controlled the assets and social influence to transform their estates into aristocratic "playgrounds," where they were free to assume, by turns, the roles of estate administrator, participant in serf theater, or provincial man of letters or to return to the capital and take part in court life and state service.[50] For this minority, "the possibility of changing from one type of behavior to another" was, indeed, the "basis of the aristocratic way of life." Yet the lives of the vast majority of Russian noblemen were characterized less by the prospect of unfettered choice than they were by the dictates of limited means and the constraints of hierarchy, both within the patriarchal family and in society at large.[51] Thousands of petitions to the sovereign in the 18th and early 19th centuries bring to life the pervasiveness of debt among nobles of every rank, as well as their dependence on more highly placed patrons to obtain a desirable post in state service or even to travel abroad—a state of affairs that inevitably narrowed the parameters for self-fashioning for most noblemen.[52]

Conversely, although marriage and motherhood were nearly universal among Russian noblewomen, their responsibilities as wives and mothers by no means precluded an element of flexibility, however modest, of "behavioral style." Although few women in pre-reform Russia could escape their traditional roles, the substance of those roles was not identical for all noble-

[49] See Lotman's diagram of the "basic possibilities for noble behavior" in "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior," 75–76.

[50] No more than 1% of the serf-owning nobility qualified as "grand seigneurs," who possessed more than 1,000 serfs, while 84% owned fewer than 100 peasants—the minimum number required to eke out a precarious living on an estate. See Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime* (New York: Scribner's, 1974), 178. On the estate as an aristocratic playground, see Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian Country Estate*.

[51] On the basis of service records from the Heraldry Office, I. V. Faizova argues that the rate of retirement did not increase dramatically after the Emancipation Manifesto of 1762. See Faizova, *"Manifest o vol'nosti" i sluzhba dvorianstva v XVIII stoletii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1999), 107–11.

[52] For some examples of such petitions, see Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv drevnikh aktov (RGADA) f. 9 (Kabinet Petra I i ego prodolzhenie), op. 5, no. I, ch. 5 (1716–25), ed. khr. 29 (1731–35); f. 10 (Kabinet Ekateriny II), op. 1, ed. khr. 496 (1763); ed. khr. 614 (1776–97). The overwhelming majority of these requests were not granted, regardless of the rank of the petitioner. See RGADA f. 10, op. 1, ed. khr. 483 (1763).

women.[53] By the late 18th century, the Russian nobility had become avid consumers of prescriptive literature that exhorted women to abandon life in society and focus their energies on childrearing. While some women embraced the "cult of domesticity" and reveled in family life, for others life at court, estate management, and devotion to their husbands continued to constitute the core of their identity. The letters of Princess Elizaveta Meshcherskaia to her mother early in the 1840s, in which she regularly recounted the activities of her children, were a celebration of the joys of domesticity. Although she ventured on occasion to the theater or on social visits, Meshcherskaia assured her mother that the life of society (*la vie du monde*) "tempts me not at all; I feel so well, so happy at home, that I have no desire at all to change my way of life." Not surprisingly, she followed her sister's entry into high society in St. Petersburg with concern, if not outright disapproval.[54]

At the other extreme, Countess Sof´ia Panina barely mentioned her children when she wrote to her husband, Nikita Panin, living in exile at the turn of the century. "You cannot doubt that without you the world would become a desert for me, and despite my children I wish nothing more than to end my life at the same time as yours," she declared.[55] Well into the 19th century, noblewomen demonstrated a range of behavior in regard to domestic life. Moreover, noblewomen expressed their devotion to their children in a variety of ways, some of which were very much at odds with prescriptive literature. A woman such as Varvara Tomilova saw to the education of her daughter and assumed the task of bathing her every day, since—as she explained to her husband in a letter in 1812—these daily baths strengthened the child's attachment to her.[56] Yet for others, a good mother was one who, above all, looked after the financial interests of her children through close attention to estate management or worked unflaggingly to place their daughters at court, even if she relegated their physical care and education to nannies and governesses.[57] The "duty of a mother" to maintain the inheritance of her children was a

[53] On competing views of marriage, motherhood, and women's education in late 18th- and early 19th-century Russia, see Kelly, *Refining Russia*, 3–84.

[54] RGADA f. 1379 (kn. Meshcherskie), op. 1, ch. 3, ed. khr. 1916, ll. 5, 8, 11–12.

[55] RGADA f. 1378 (Meshcherskie), op. 1, ed. khr. 23, l. 1.

[56] Rossiisskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (RGIA) f. 1086 (Tomilovy i Shvartsy), op. 1, ed. khr. 703; ed. khr. 203a, l. 213.

[57] For a discussion of memoir literature on this topic, see Michelle Lamarche Marrese, *A Woman's Kingdom: Noblewomen and the Control of Property in Russia, 1700–1861* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 197–204. In his schema of noble behavior Lotman failed to acknowledge that noblewomen enjoyed the option of administering their estates; an analogous diagram of female behavior would include the possibility of active estate management for a substantial number of noblewomen. For examples of noblewomen placing their daughters as

prominent theme in both memoirs and in contemporary correspondence.[58] In short, if Lotman overstated the degree of self-determination available to noblemen in pre-reform Russia, he simultaneously underestimated the opportunities that women enjoyed, despite their exclusion from state service. The introduction of European norms thus not only shaped the cultural inclinations of the nobility but broadened the spectrum of social roles available to nobles of both sexes.

Language and Cultural Identity

To a greater extent than state service or family life, however, the use of language offered noble women and men a common arena for "self-fashioning" in the post-Petrine era and opens a potential window on the impact of cultural change on noble identity.[59] A full treatment of bilingual consciousness among the elite and across various strata of the nobility would, of necessity, embrace material culture, reading patterns, and manifestations of religious devotion, as well as the phenomenon of multilingualism that characterized the highest level of the Russian nobility. Yet, as I will demonstrate, it was the use of language—both native and foreign—that inspired educated Russians and foreign observers most profoundly to ponder the dilemma of Russian "exceptionalism" in regard to cultural borrowing and which gradually emerged as the focus of the debate over Russian national identity.

As Paul Bushkovitch observes in his work on the late 17th-century boyar elite, tracing cultural change is notoriously difficult, since—particularly in the Russian context—sources are far from abundant and their discovery is often a matter of chance.[60] In the case of 18th-century Russia, evaluating how individual nobles experienced cultural change in an era of escalating contact with the West is further hampered by the absence of a significant memoir

ladies-in-waiting, see RGADA f. 1386 (Saltykovy), op. 2, ed. khr. 73, l. 35 (1794); f. 1261 (Vorontsovy), op. 3, ed. khr. 1715, l. 5 (1782).

[58] Gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii muzei (GIM), Otdel pis′mennykh istochnikov f. 182 (Shishkiny), op. 1, ed. khr. 7, l. 206 (1802).

[59] On the interconnection between language and "changes in manners" in 18th-century Russia, see Victor Zhivov, *Language and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Russia*, trans. Marcus Levitt (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), x–xi. Zhivov accepts the opposition between "European" and "traditional" in everyday life, yet his work is devoted to the synthesis of "Enlightenment culture" and the "religious and linguistic heritage" of pre-Petrine Russia (*Language and Culture*, 52–53, viii).

[60] Paul Bushkovitch, "Cultural Change among the Russian Boyars, 1650–1680: New Sources and Old Problems," *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte* 56 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000): 92.

literature.[61] As a result, Lotman's striking assertion that the Russian noble of the post-Petrine era integrated European behavior into his daily life yet "at the same time felt it to be foreign" is supported with remarkably little evidence. Indeed, Lotman's primary example of noble life as theater is drawn not from a memoir, but from an account based on the "notes" of Vasilii Golovin (1696–1781) and "family legends" compiled by his descendants and published in 1847. Having demonstrated the element of "theater" in Golovin's life, Lotman rapidly turned to his real preoccupation: the role of literary texts in molding the "behavioral style" of a few prominent members of the elite, which elevated their "everyday existence according to some ideal."[62]

In contrast to Lotman, the source base for my argument is drawn from correspondence in 30 archival collections of noble family papers, dating from the early 18th to the mid-19th centuries. The number of letters I read in each collection varied considerably: in several, I read as few as 10–20 letters; in others, such as the Vorontsov and Saltykov collections, I reviewed as many as 200. Indisputably, as a source for the daily life of the nobility, correspondence presents significant challenges: epistolary culture in the form of the familiar letter, as opposed to letters concerning business, was slow to develop in Russia and emerged only in the latter part of the 18th century.[63] Moreover, such evidence does not lend itself easily to statistical analysis, and even a broad sample inevitably reflects the lives of an elite subset of the nobility.[64] At the same time, the authors of these letters range from personalities as prominent as Princess Dashkova and other men and women close to the center of power to families such as the Urusovs, who resided in provincial towns such as Iaroslavl′ and rarely ventured to the capitals. A survey of noble correspondence therefore offers a much-needed opportunity to move the focus from the literary and political celebrities who feature overwhelmingly in Lotman's work,[65] and to

[61] Writing about the Russian nobility in the last third of the 18th century, Elena Marasinova argues that, to a greater extent than memoir literature, letters express the beliefs and preoccupations of the members of the elite. See E. N. Marasinova, *Psikhologiia elity rossiiskogo dvorianstva poslednei treti XVIII veka (Po materialam perepiski)* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1999), 99.

[62] Lotman, "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior," 72, 75–81.

[63] William Mills Todd III, *The Familiar Letter as a Literary Genre in the Age of Pushkin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

[64] Elena Marasinova's survey of noble correspondence comprises 1,800 letters by 45 authors. The weakness of her sample, however, is that her review of authors includes only one woman—Princess Dashkova; furthermore, her sample is drawn overwhelmingly from 19th-century published sources, and the protagonists of her work consist of high officials and literary figures who were prominent in the reign of Catherine II. She does not deal with the question of language in this work. See Marasinova, *Psikhologiia elity rossiiskogo dvorianstva*, 38.

[65] My survey is by no means exhaustive: thousands of letters survive in the family papers held in RGADA and RGIA alone, and the confines of an article do not allow for a full treatment

consider—in Bushkovitch's words—those individual nobles who "represented different layers, with different degrees of 'newness' in their cultural world."[66]

Both the choice of language and the subject matter of correspondence reveal that the affinity of the Russian nobility for foreign languages and their immersion in European culture was limited to a small substrata of the elite and became commonplace only in the 19th century. The letters furthermore demonstrate that familiarity with European culture by no means resulted in the alienation of Russian nobles from important aspects of their native culture and traditions. Their communications instead document, first, the very gradual impact of Europeanization on noble life in the immediate post-Petrine era. Second, they indicate that from approximately mid-century those nobles who left literary artifacts were comfortably bicultural and experienced both "traditional" and "European" forms of behavior as "natural." Inevitably, language played a role in the development of noble identity, yet it was not until the reign of Catherine II that educated Russians began to equate national identity with use of their native tongue.[67] The preference on the part of many nobles for communicating in French was thus less a signal of cultural alienation than a means of exhibiting their membership in a wider community of the European elite.

Over the course of the 18th century, a command of foreign languages became imperative for educated nobles of both sexes and served to distinguish the nobility from other social estates.[68] Nonetheless, contemporaries and modern historians alike singled out the propensity of the Russian nobility from the mid-18th century to converse in French as the primary symptom of the estrangement of the elite from Russian life; indeed, remarking

of epistolary culture. The letters I read were chosen largely at random and include letters by nobles of both sexes. Fortunately, most of the *opisi* indicate the language in which the letters were written, which allowed me to gather a sample beyond the letters I read in detail. The collections I surveyed include the following: RGIA f. 878 (Tatishchevy); f. 914 (Volkonskie); f. 923 (Glebovy); f. 946 (Liubomirskie); f. 971 (Kochubei); f. 1086 (Tomilovy i Shvartsy); f. 1088 (Sheremetevy); f. 1117 (Saltykov I. P. i Miatleva P. I.); RGADA f. 1258 (Beshchentsevy); f. 1261 (Vorontsovy); f. 1263 (Golitsyny); f. 1270 (Musiny-Pushkiny); f. 1272 (Naryshkiny); f. 1273 (Orlovy-Davydovy); f. 1274 (Paniny-Bludovy); f. 1278 (Stroganovy); f. 1287 (Sheremetevy); f. 1289 (Shcherbatovy); f. 1290 (Iusupovy); f. 1366 (kn. Volkonskie); f. 1386 (Saltykovy); f. 1378 (Meshcherskie); f. 1379 (kn. Meshcherskie); f. 1395 (Ian´kovy); f. 1453 (Samoilovy); f. 1445 (Kochubei); f. 1609 (Baratynskaia A. D.); f. 1616 (Urusovy); Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (RGALI) f. 172 (Volkonskaia Z. A.); and GIM, f. 47 (Glebovy-Streshnevy).

[66] Bushkovitch, "Cultural Change among the Russian Boyars," 109.

[67] For a discussion of the role of language in shaping personal consciousness, see O. Iu. Solodiankina, *Inostrannye guvernantki v Rossii* (Moscow: Academia, 2007), 262–63.

[68] D. K. Zhane (Jeanet), "Frantsuzskii iazyk v Rossii XVIII v. kak obshchestvennoe iavlenie," *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Seriia 9: Filologiia*, no. 1 (1978): 62–70.

on the "half-European nature" of Alexander Herzen's surroundings, Martin Malia observed that "the duality of languages simply served to symbolize and heighten the duality of life."[69] As Herzen himself wrote about his father, "When he was being educated, European civilization was still so new in Russia that to be educated meant being so much the less Russian. To the end of his days he wrote more fluently and correctly in French than in Russian." Herzen went on to add that his father had "literally not read one book in Russian," and that he scorned all manifestations of Russian literature and history.[70] Nor was Herzen alone in his assessment: among nobles who composed memoirs in the 19th century, observations on the inability of kinfolk and acquaintances to speak fluent Russian and lamentations about the quality of instruction in their native language became a common trope.[71] Indeed, such remarks were so common—particularly when read against the backdrop of the vast body of correspondence that nobles of both sexes composed in Russian—it is tempting to conclude that discussions of language in memoir literature were less a description of the real state of affairs than a means of calling attention to the 18th century as an aberration in Russian history and the problematic status of cultural borrowing.

Mariia Mukhanova's letter to her brother, in which she suggested that communicating in French was "artificial," thus brings to the fore the very questions that preoccupied Lotman: the impact of European culture on the consciousness of the Russian nobility and the division between the "semiotic" and "non-significant" in daily life.[72] On the surface, Mukhanova's disparaging comment on her use of French seems to bolster Lotman's allegation that the manifestations of European culture in Russian noble life were

[69] Martin Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1965), 18. The conviction that the French-speaking nobility lacked an authentic cultural identity persists to the present, particularly among readers whose perceptions of the Russian nobility have been shaped by Tolstoy. See the recent discussion of a new translation of *War and Peace* that appeared in the *New York Times* (October 2007), in which readers remark on the "Frenchness" of the Russian nobility and the "mind-boggling" fact that nobles could not "express thoughts in their native language." As W. Gareth Jones observes, critics still debate the relationship between Tolstoy's contemporary world, his own cultural preoccupations, and the historical moment he depicted: "'Tis Sixty Years Since: Sir Walter Scott's Eighteenth Century and Tolstoi's Engagement with History," in *Russian Society and Culture and the Long Eighteenth Century*, 185–94.

[70] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 67.

[71] For a thorough review of this literature, see Solodiankina, *Inostrannye guvernantki v Rossii*, 262–81.

[72] Mukhanova nonetheless continued to favor French as her language of written communication. See her letters to Antonina Bludova in 1864 and 1870: RGADA f. 1274, op. 1, ed. khr. 2192; and Lotman, "The Stage and Painting," 168.

"consciously theatrical." Mukhanova's sentiments were anticipated in 1825 by Varvara Sheremeteva, who exclaimed in Russian in a letter written to her family, "I don't know why I always express myself in French [*vse ob"iasniaius na frantsuzskom dialekte*], I write very badly and sometimes come to a stop, not knowing how to write."[73] Yet a more comprehensive review of language choice in noble correspondence testifies to the degree to which European culture coexisted with Russian custom and was experienced by the nobility as routine. Rather than supplanting national tradition, heightened contact with Western Europe marked the emergence of a cultural bilingualism that—like theatricality—was not unique to Russia but a feature of aristocratic life throughout 18th- and early 19th-century Europe.[74] Nobles socialized in Russian tradition and European manners therefore did not experience one as "natural" and the other as "artificial" but achieved varying degrees of biculturalism, which did not preclude their attachment to their homeland, customs, and native language.[75] Moreover, as we shall see, it was no accident that the authors of these letters were women, who bore the burden of male anxiety about the widespread use of French in educated Russian society and became the focal point of debates about language and national identity at the beginning of the 19th century.

The initial reception of European culture remains the subject of speculation and debate: those sources that exist—largely in the form of accounts by foreign observers—testify to initial unease and cultural dissonance among the Petrine elite. Noblewomen, in particular, displayed reluctance to adopt revealing Western clothing,[76] while the difficulty of describing European culture in their native tongue was apparent in the memoirs of Russians traveling

---

[73] V. P. Sheremeteva, *Dnevnik Varvary Petrovny Sheremetevoi, urozhdennoi Almazovoi, 1825–1826 gg.* (Moscow: Sinodal´naia tipografiia, 1916), 26.

[74] Hosking notes that "Russian intellectuals … [and] some Russian aristocrats too—had the broadest and most universal culture to be found in any European nation." Nonetheless, he argues that this produced a deeper rift between the elite and ordinary people than existed elsewhere in Europe (*Russia: People and Empire*, 290).

[75] As Sara Dickinson observes, by the 1770s many nobles understood that familiarity with European culture was imperative for a proper education yet were also wary of the impact of foreign influence on "Russian cultural and political integrity. Both approaches were available to the Russian elite … and [were] not mutually exclusive." See her *Breaking Ground: Travel and National Culture in Russia from Peter I to the Era of Pushkin* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 52.

[76] Paul Keenan, "The Function of Fashion: Women and Clothing at the Russian Court (1700–1762)," in *Women in Russian Culture and Society, 1700–1825*, ed. Wendy Rosslyn and Alessandra Tosi (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 131–32; Daniel L. Schlafly, Jr., "A Muscovite *Boiarynia* Faces Peter the Great's Reforms: Dar´ia Golitsyna between Two Worlds," *Canadian–American Slavic Studies* 31, 3 (1997): 261, 265.

abroad.[77] As Lindsey Hughes remarked, many Russian nobles at court initially maintained a "hybrid" lifestyle as they adjusted to changes in clothing, language, and proper conduct in public.[78] The evidence of material culture nonetheless indicates that Europeanization was highly selective, a process of integrating and familiarizing "alien" culture without displacing Russian values. The historian R. M. Kirsanova, for example, explains the popularity of certain European fashions in the early 18th century on the basis of their similarity to traditional Muscovite dress.[79] Eighteenth-century dowries and, to a lesser extent, wills and probate records also reveal that the passion of the nobility for collecting Western furniture, clothing, and other luxuries took second place to the Russian tradition of bestowing icons upon young women about to embark on family life. Significantly, the prevalence of European dress, manners, and forms of entertainment among the nobility by no means conflicted with adherence to customary expressions of religious devotion—a key element in Russian "tradition."[80] This pattern was even more persistent outside Moscow and St. Petersburg: when local officials compiled inventories of the financial losses suffered by victims of the Pugachev rebellion in 1775, the most common items cited were icons and horses, with occasional references to china, crystal, or carriages. Only one nobleman reported the theft of "various French and German books."[81]

The written artifacts of the nobility before the late 18th century also fail to exhibit symptoms of "dual perception" among their authors. Lengthy absences of noblemen in military service, as well as the vast distances that separated family members, made written communication imperative. Thus, as in the antebellum South, "the substance of social relations was often

[77] Dickinson, *Breaking Ground*, 31; N. P. Pavlov-Sil´vanskii, "Graf Petr Andreevich Tolstoi," in *Sochineniia,* 2: *Ocherki po russkoi istorii XVIII–XIX vv.* (St. Petersburg: M. M. Stasiulevich, 1910), 15–16. Dickinson notes, however, that "attention to issues of national identity" was of little concern to Prince Boris Kurakin, whose travel journal dates from 1705 to 1708 (34).

[78] Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 294.

[79] R. M. Kirsanova, *Russkii kostium i byt XVIII–XIX vekov* (Moscow: Slovo, 2002), 33.

[80] Such examples are far too numerous to list. For my source base, see Marrese, *A Woman's Kingdom*, 138–41, 154–55, 169. For a typical example, see the 1731 dowry agreement of Princess Evdokiia Shakhovskaia, which begins with an inventory of icons and goes on to list such items as dresses in the French style, German lace, and Dutch linen (*O rode kniazei Iusupovykh* 2 (St. Petersburg: n.p., 1867), 370–74.

[81] RGADA f. 1274, op. 1, ed. khr. 205. See in particular ll. 532, 538, 562 ob.

epistolary,"[82] despite the formulaic nature of many letters.[83] Yet, if these letters were indeed "remote performances of the self,"[84] they betray little evidence of "estrangement" from Russian life or that their authors felt that they were "foreigners" in their native land. The correspondence of post-Petrine nobles of both sexes was composed, with few exceptions, in Russian. It concerned, above all, requests for news of the other's whereabouts and health, problems of estate management, legal entanglements and petitions for promotion in service, with frequent allusions to the problem of debt and requests for financial help from wealthier kin—in short, it shared much in common with correspondence that survives from the 17th century.[85] Individual nobles, both male and female, represented themselves in their letters as concerned parents or spouses, exasperated estate managers, and devoted servants of the state—none of which indicate that European culture had profoundly transformed their daily lives.

By the late 18th century, however, increased opportunities for travel and an influx of foreign tutors resulted in a greater tendency among the elite to communicate in foreign languages, particularly in French. The content of these letters, not to mention their emotional range, also demonstrate significant change: although estate management, patronage, and state service remained constant themes, many nobles increasingly stressed their status as consumers of European culture and material goods.[86] Praskov´ia Miatleva was

---

[82] Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 13; Catherine Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 29.

[83] As Kristen B. Neuschel observes in regard to interpreting the letters of the nobility in 16th-century France, "These were verbal formulas that were used to convey a much wider range of meaning about the relationships they were describing than they now seem to convey to us, whose uses of language are quite different" (*Word of Honor: Interpreting Noble Culture in Sixteenth-Century France* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989], 21).

[84] Johnson, *Soul by Soul,* 13.

[85] For typical examples, see RGADA f. 11 (Perepiska raznykh lits), op. 1, ed. khr. 320 (1762); f. 1258, op. 1, ed. khr. 80 (1766); f. 1261, op. 3, ed. khr. 440 (1760–67); f. 1263, op. 1, ed. khr. 8399 (1761); f. 1270, op. 1, ed. khr. 83 (1740); f. 1272, op. 1, ed. khr. 26 (1727–34); f. 1274, op. 1, ed. khr. 1531 (1711–17); f. 1278, op. 1, ed. khr. 608 (1768); f. 1395, op. 1, ed. khr. 10 (1738–39); ed. khr. 72 (1735); ed. khr. 92 (1750); ed. khr. 206 (1757); RGIA f. 1088, op. 1, ed. khr. 36 (1769); ed. khr. 43 (1759); f. 1117, op. 1, ed. khr. 308 (1747). For examples of late 17th-century correspondence, see the letters of Prince Khovanskii and his circle: *Starina i novizna* 10 (Moscow: Sinodal´naia tipografiia, 1905): 283–457.

[86] Nobles of both sexes requested goods of European origin that they could not obtain in the provinces or even in Moscow. See, for example, GIM f. 47, op. 1, ed. khr. 6, l. 20 (1776); *Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova* (*AKV*) 4 (Moscow: [publisher not given, because every volume of *AKV* cites a different publisher], 1872), 471–72 (1761). While in Paris, Princess Natal´ia Golitsyna carried on an extended correspondence with Prince Aleksandr Golitsyn as she

typical of her contemporaries when she recounted that she was attending the Italian opera and the French theatre on a regular basis.[87] Varvara and Ol′ga Panina made repeated references in their letters to reading aloud in the evenings and translating various texts from French and English into Russian.[88] Enthusiasm for European culture and luxuries, however, did not signal an end to engagement with native tradition. Young noble men and women also took pains to demonstrate their knowledge of Russian, as well as the history and geography of their country.[89] Similarly, discussions of attendance at church and pilgrimages to monasteries were a common feature in letters of even the most "Westernized" nobles of both sexes.[90] In 1806, Count Grigorii Kushelev wrote to his wife and children in Russian while he tended to affairs on one of their estates yet remarked that he was suffering from the absence of French newspapers, since Russian papers consisted of nothing but government directives and announcements of the sale of estates. He also mentioned reading a novel in French, which he hoped would instruct his sons in the dangers of "materialism and godlessness." Kushelev thus demonstrated both his immersion in the details of provincial Russian life, expressing concern about the serf recruits leaving his estate, and his desire to acquaint his sons with European literature.[91]

Competence in several languages—including their own—clearly was as significant as the acquisition of Western luxuries in defining social status. Countess Dar′ia Saltykova and her husband, Field Marshal Petr Saltykov, were not alone in insisting that their children strive for fluency in numerous languages: their three daughters routinely composed letters of identical content to their parents in Russian, French, German, Italian, and English.[92] As a

obtained lace and other items intended for his daughter's dowry (RGADA f. 1263, op. 1, ed. khr. 4325; ed. khr. 7286). For correspondence with purveyors of goods in Paris, London, and Amsterdam, see RGIA f. 1117, op. 1, ed. khr. 104, l. 12; ed. khr. 261.

87 RGADA f. 1386, op. 2, ed. khr. 4, l. 181 ob. See also *AKV* 4 (1872), 462.

88 RGADA f. 1274, op. 1, ed. khr. 3389, ll. 5–6, 10 (1797–98).

89 RGADA f. 1366, op. 1, ed. khr. 477, l. 2; f. 1386, op. 2, ed. khr. 5, l. 87; ed. khr. 23, l. 2; ed. khr. 74, l. 101; RGIA f. 946, op. 1, ed. khr. 15, l. 30.

90 RGIA f. 1086, op. 1, ed. khr. 37, l. 11 (1787); ed. khr. 203a, l. 213 (1812); Sheremeteva, *Dnevnik*, 5, 16–18; *Arkhiv kniazia F. A. Kurakina* (*AKK*) 6 (St. Petersburg: Izdannaia pochetnym chlenom Arkheologicheskogo instituta kniazem F. A. Kurakinym, 1896), 350.

91 RGIA f. 971, op. 1, ed. khr. 153, ll. 3 ob.–4.

92 RGADA f. 1386, op. 2, ed. khr. 5; op. 2, ed. khr. 20; op. 2, ed. khr. 23; op. 2, ed. khr. 71. The daughters of Count Dmitrii Bludov also wrote to their parents in at least three languages: see RGADA f. 1274, op. 1, ed. khr. 1672 (1826–40); ed. khr. 1736 (1830–39). As John Randolph notes, in the first half of the 19th century multilingualism characterized interaction in the Bakunin family, whose patriarch, Aleksandr Mikhailovich, insisted that his children learn, "in rough order of fluency," Russian, French, German, Italian, and English (*The House*

result, foreign tutors and governesses were much in demand in noble households.[93] In a contract drawn up in 1756, Ivan Larionovich Vorontsov engaged Jean Charpentier and his wife to oversee the education of his eight-year-old son and six-year-old daughter—to teach them to read and write in French and Latin, as well as to instruct them in arithmetic, history, and geography.[94] The young daughter of Count Petr Chernyshev was educated at the hands of a Swiss governess. The latter, Jeanne de la Chapelle, described her responsibilities to her brother in 1765: "The youngest daughter … is thirteen; I am trying to develop her (writing) style, since she writes as well as I do; I teach her spelling as well as I can, and I try to instill good morals [*je lui prêche les bonnes moeurs*]."[95] Classes at the Smolnyi Institute for Noble Girls were taught in French until the reform of the institute in 1783, when Russian became the language of instruction in most subjects.[96] From their earliest years many nobles of both sexes grew up in an environment where foreign languages, particularly French, were constantly in use.

The omnipresence of French in polite society, however, neither put an end to the use of Russian among the elite nor transformed nobles into foreigners in their native land. A striking feature of noble correspondence in the pre-reform era is the ease with which many nobles, both male and female, alternated between Russian and French,[97] as well as the great number of nobles whose epistolary artifacts survive exclusively in Russian. Yet the conviction that much of the Russian nobility spoke their native language poorly, if at all, became the subject of satire in journals and plays at the end of the century and persists both in historiography and the popular imagination. The author of the anonymous article in *Zritel´* in 1792 bemoaned the failure of many nobles to learn Russian and argued that inability to communicate with bailiffs lay at the heart of poor estate management.[98] Evidence

in the Garden: The Bakunin Family and the Romance of Russian Idealism [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007], 103). See also RGIA f. 1044, op. 1, ed. khr. 19 (1846).

[93] Solodiankina, *Inostrannye guvernantki v Rossii*.

[94] RGADA f. 1261, op. 1, ed. khr. 3047, l. 1.

[95] RGIA f. 1117, op. 1, ed. khr. 327, l. 7.

[96] J. L. Black, "Educating Women in Eighteenth-Century Russia: Myths and Realities," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 20, 1 (1978): 35–36; E. Likhacheva, *Materialy dlia istorii zhenskogo obrazovaniia v Rossii,* 1: *1786–1796* (St. Petersburg: n.p., 1890), 147, 215.

[97] See, for example, RGADA f. 1263 (Golitsyny), op. 1, ed. khr. 135 (1784–86) (letters of Prince A. M. Golitsyn); f. 1274, op. 1, ed. khr. 1628 (1847–49) (letters of Ekaterina Novosil´tsova); *AKV* 18 (1880), 307, 323–24 (letters of Dmitrii Tatishchev).

[98] *Zritel´* (February 1792): 18. The pernicious influence of French culture and exhortations to readers to learn their native language was a prominent theme in several contemporary journals, such as *Sobesednik liubitelei rossiiskogo slova*, to which Princess Dashkova was a frequent

for this truism may be found, to be sure, in letters by noble men and women who lamented the difficulty of learning their native language. Most notably, scholars cite the example of Princess Dashkova, who "learned Russian as she would a foreign language" after her marriage, since her mother-in-law could communicate in no other tongue.[99] Similarly, writing to her sister in 1768 at age 27, Princess Natal´ia Golitsyna assured the latter that she was making progress in Russian, although she complained that her husband tired her with his endless attention to her mistakes. Fortunately, she continued, she now expressed herself with greater ease, and two years later she was confident enough to compose letters in Russian.[100] In a letter to her cousin dated 1775, Princess Aleksandra Repnina, at age 18, swore "on her honor" that, "knowing my own language less well than French," she was devoting her time to working on translations.[101]

Significantly, it was the exigencies of life abroad that often led Russian nobles to adopt French as their primary language. Natal´ia Golitsyna's father was the diplomat Count Petr Chernyshev, and she spent most of her childhood in Europe.[102] Princess Repnina was living in Constantinople when she confessed her poor knowledge of Russian to her cousin Prince Kurakin. When Fedor Karzhavin arrived in Paris in 1754, he wrote in Russian to his father, who had demanded examples of his writing in three languages. By 1762, however, he admitted that he had lost his ability to write in Russian and vowed that he would learn his native tongue again before returning home.[103] At the same time, extended sojourns outside Russia often intensified the desire of Russian nobles to maintain their native language. While in Switzerland in the early 1790s, Princess Varvara Belosel´skaia wrote to her husband in Italy in French and repeatedly urged him to engage a French governess for their daughter but communicated without fail with her parents in Russian. She

contributor. Yet even nobles such as the writer Zinaida Volkonskaia, who bemoaned her lack of fluency in her native tongue, certainly read petitions from their peasants and bailiffs in Russian. Volkonskaia's comments on several petitions survive in Russian in her own hand (RGALI f. 172, op. 1, ed. khr. 203, ll. 7–11 [1824–27]; ed. khr. 242, l. 59 [1818]).

[99] I. N. Kurochkina, "The Formation of Behavioral Culture in Russian Society of the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century," *Russian Studies in History* 42, 1 (2003): 14; *The Memoirs of Princess Dashkova*, trans. and ed. Kyril Fitzlyon, intro. Jehanne M. Gheith (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 38.

[100] RGIA f. 1117, op. 1, ed. khr. 105, ll. 2, 59. French, however, remained the primary language for Golitsyna throughout her life.

[101] *AKK* 8 (1899), 157.

[102] V. A. Mil´china, "Iz putevogo dnevnika N. P. Golitsynoi," *Zapiski otdela rukopisei* 46 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennaia biblioteka SSSR im. V. I. Lenina, 1987), 95.

[103] *Pis´ma russkikh pisatelei XVIII veka* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1980), 224, 227.

also expressed disapproval on more than one occasion about the tendency of her elder daughter to speak in French or German and informed her husband that she forced the latter to use her Russian as often as possible.[104] Similarly, the mother of Antonina Bludova wrote from Berlin in 1830 that she insisted that her sons read the journal *Invalid* "so that they won't forget Russian, since we have no Russian books."[105] Although Praskov´ia Naryshkina kept a diary in French while she lived in Poland with her sister in 1811, she also copied numerous poems in Russian, devoted to patriotic themes, in her album.[106]

Among Russians who were less well traveled, the pervasiveness of French in educated society made the transition from one language to the other an inescapable fact of daily life for many. In 1825, Varvara Sheremeteva wrote to her mother and sister-in-law that she was sending them news clippings that described the Decembrist uprising. "I wanted to send them in Russian, but there were no more copies," she added. Although Sheremeteva herself wrote primarily in French, her husband's postscripts to his sister were in Russian.[107] Varvara Panina informed her mother that, on their country estate in 1798, she and her neighbors performed Russian and French comedies in turn, while her daughter reported that she and her sisters set aside two days a week to study and communicate only in English.[108] Elizaveta Meshcherskaia corresponded with her mother in French, but the notes she made on her extensive reading—largely on religious themes—survive only in Russian.[109]

This mingling of languages was a source of irritation for foreigners, who rarely enjoyed a command of Russian. Martha Wilmot complained in her journal during her visit to Princess Dashkova in 1804: "The everlasting mixture of french & Russ prevents my enjoying half the conversation that goes forward, as I cannot comprehend the latter language which is of course constantly used. Most foreigners complain that when they begin to interest themselves in any conversation begun in French, suddenly the language changes (& most of the *well educated* have five to chuse amongst)." Wilmot's aside implies that, for Russians in elite circles, the casual use of one language or another was a matter of course, rather than behavior that fell, in Lotman's formulation, into the realm of the semiotic or significant. Her report of an evening devoted to "old Russian amusements" at the home of an acquaintance also reveals that the Francophile tendencies of the Russian nobility did

[104] RGALI f. 172, op. 1, ed. khr. 157, ll. 11 ob., 21–22, 24, 31–32, 38–39; ed. khr. 162.

[105] "Zapiski Bludovoi," *Russkii arkhiv*, no. 7–8 (1872): 1256.

[106] RGADA f. 1272, op. 1, ed. khr. 135; ed. khr. 125.

[107] Sheremeteva, *Dnevnik*, 138, 104.

[108] RGADA f. 1274, op. 1, ed. khr. 3389, ll. 6, 10.

[109] RGADA f. 1379, op. 1, ed. khr. 1714; ed. khr. 1916.

not preclude a lively interest in national culture.[110] A further suggestion that Russian was spoken in the highest circles of society comes from the letters of Countess Dar´ia Saltykova, a lady-in-waiting to Catherine II who frequented the court on a regular basis. Saltykova composed her letters to her husband in French; when recounting conversations, however, it was not unusual for her to report them in Russian. Her letters regularly concluded with a blessing for her husband in Russian.[111]

Clearly, generation, opportunities for travel, and social status all contributed to language choice. The example of the Vorontsovs, Princess Dashkova's natal family, illustrates the relative weight of these elements, as well as the centrality of bilingualism in the daily lives of elite Russians. Dashkova herself made much of her poor command of Russian, yet the testimony of her family's correspondence tempers her allegations that she grew up in a predominantly French-speaking environment. Count Roman Larionovich Vorontsov, Dashkova's father, knew little, if any, French: the letters of all of his children to him, including those of Dashkova, were composed solely in Russian.[112] Writing to his father in 1760, Semen Vorontsov expressed his wish that Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws* could be translated into "our language," so that the former could read it.[113] As a diplomat who served in England for many years, Semen wrote with perfect ease in French and English but demonstrated unflagging attention and sensitivity to the use of his native language. In 1785, he reproached his brother Aleksandr for his use of the formal "you" when he wrote in Russian—a form which should be used between brothers "in our tongue" only in official correspondence. He then added, "but I hope you will stop writing to me altogether in our native language, since I honestly cannot make out one-twentieth of it."[114] Later still, writing from London in 1824, he complained to his son that contemporary Russian had become vulgar and impoverished with the dwindling influence of Church Slavonic. For all that Vorontsov was a thoroughly "Europeanized" nobleman who lived

[110] Martha Wilmot Bradford, *The Russian Journals of Martha and Catherine Wilmot, 1803–1808*, ed. the Marchioness of Londonderry and H. M. Hyde (London: Macmillan, 1935), 105, 141.

[111] RGADA f. 1386, op. 2, ed. khr. 75, ll. 9–10, 129; ed. khr. 76, ll. 19–20. See also *AKV* 34 (Moscow, 1888), 344, in which Anna Stroganova quotes her mother's speech in Russian.

[112] For R. L. Vorontsov's letters to his son Aleksandr, and the latter's letters to him, see *AKV* 31 (Moscow, 1885), 21–68; 409–24. See also Dashkova's letter to her father dated 1783 and the letters of her sister, Elizaveta Polianskaia: RGADA f. 1261, op. 11, ed. khr. 913; op. 3, ed. khr. 1715 (1765–82).

[113] *AKV* 16 (1880), 15.

[114] *AKV* 5, pt. 2 (1876), 30–31. Semen addressed Aleksandr with the informal "you" in Russian, but the formal "vous" in French.

abroad for decades, his attachment to his native language long predated the patriotic defense of Russian language and literature that emerged at the end of the 18th century. Indeed, throughout his life he insisted on his patriotism: "Although there are villains who accuse me of being English, I am more Russian in my heart and soul than millions of my compatriots who believe they are good Russians," he wrote to his brother in 1802.[115]

Exchanges between other members of the Vorontsov family follow a similar pattern: nobles of both sexes born before mid-century were more likely to correspond in Russian, even if they read French, while their children exhibited a greater inclination to communicate in the latter tongue. Routine interaction with their families, as well as with nannies and other house serfs, nonetheless made speaking and reading knowledge of Russian imperative, even for nobles who could not write it well. Baroness Anna Stroganova, who was raised with her cousin Princess Dashkova in the home of Stroganova's father, maintained a regular correspondence with her parents in 1761 while she lived in Vienna with her husband. Stroganova's letters to a number of correspondents survive primarily in French, yet she clearly read and wrote Russian: both of her parents wrote to her exclusively in that language. Indeed, when requesting instructions from Prince Aleksandr Golitsyn on how her mother should present an ambassador's wife to the empress, she urged him to write to her mother, Anna Karlovna, on this topic "in detail and in Russian."[116] Stroganova's father, however, Mikhail Vorontsov, could write in French when the occasion required; moreover, upon his death in 1767, Vorontsov, left a library that included works in French and Latin.[117]

Generation clearly played a prominent role in language choice—Dashkova noted that her husband's Russian-speaking family consisted largely of elderly people—yet it was not a foolproof indicator of the propensity of correspondents to prefer a given language: Princess Golitsyna composed a petition to Prince Zubov in French in 1793, but the letter from her daughter that accompanied it was written in Russian.[118] Anastasiia Shcherbinina, Princess Dashkova's daughter, wrote to her uncle Aleksandr Vorontsov throughout her life in French; in her letters to her cousin, Mikhail Semenovich, she chose to

[115] *AKV* 17 (1880), 548–49; *AKV* 10 (1876), 163.

[116] *AKV* 34 (1888), 318–46; RGADA f. 1263, op. 1, ed. khr. 3358, l. 3 (1768).

[117] For M. L. Vorontsov's letters to his nephew Aleksandr Vorontsov, see *AKV* 31 (1885), 84–404. One letter survives in French; ibid., 190–91. For his library, see *AKV* 32 (1886), 102–3. For his letters to his daughter and other kin, see *AKV* 4 (1872), 459–79; and RGADA f. 1261, op. 3, ed. khr. 182 (1764).

[118] RGADA f. 193, op. 1, ed. khr. 258, ll. 1, 4.

write in their native language.[119] Mikhail, for his part, took care to write to Dashkova in Russian.[120]

Despite the emphasis on foreign languages in the education of young noble men and women, Russian language and culture were—as Wilmot noted—by no means neglected in the homes of even the most Europeanized aristocracy. Communication in French, as well as other languages, coexisted with engagement in "traditional" forms of Russian culture. Ekaterina Sabaneeva described her mother's sister, born at the end of the 18th century, as a woman who knew three foreign languages and was well versed in foreign literature but frequently read sacred works in Russian.[121] Ekaterina Khvostova, who was born in 1812, wrote that her mother had a thorough knowledge of three foreign languages but "loved her own more."[122] Library collections offer further evidence that Russian nobles in the second half of the 18th century purchased books in the languages of Western Europe but also avidly collected manuscripts and books in Russian.[123]

For the 18th- and early 19th-century nobility, the use of French was associated with gentility and proper noble behavior, rather than rejection of national culture. As Lotman himself observed, fluency in French expressed the "caste consciousness" of the elite. At the same time, demonstrating refinement through the use of "pure" Russian became an increasing preoccupation of the elite in the late 18th century.[124] The unique status of French is all the more apparent in that, although many Russian nobles were multilingual and reported reading in German, English, or Italian, they

[119] RGADA f. 1261, op. 3, ed. khr. 1060 (1767–1802); op. 2, ed. khr. 596 (1810).

[120] Ibid., op. 3, ed. khr. 215 (1800).

[121] E. A. Sabaneeva, *Vospominaniia o bylom iz semeinoi khroniki, 1770–1838* (St. Petersburg: n.p., 1914), 89. See also P. Pekarskii, "Russkie memuary XVIII veka," *Sovremennik* 50, 3–4 (1855): 80.

[122] E. A. Khvostova [Ekaterina Shushkova], *Zapiski, 1812–1841* (Leningrad: n.p., 1928), 25. N. N. Mordvinova noted that her father "considered it imperative to train children in calligraphy, especially in Russian," and not to allow them to use "foreign handwriting." See her "Zapiski grafini N. N. Mordvinovoi," *Russkii arkhiv*, no. 1 (1883): 183.

[123] V. A. Somov, "Krug chteniia peterburgskogo obshchestva v nachale 1760-kh godov (Iz istorii biblioteki grafa A. S. Stroganova)," *XVIII vek* 22 (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2002), 200; RGADA f. 1289, op. 1, ed. khr. 919, ll. 1–2 ob. (1798).

[124] Iu. M. Lotman, "Russkaia literatura na frantsuzskom iazyke," in *Izbrannye stat´i,* 2: *Stat´i po istorii russkoi literatury XVIII–pervoi poloviny XIX veka* (Tallinn: Aleksandra, 1992), 351. Lotman notes furthermore that, like literature in Latin in Western Europe in the early modern era, "Russian literature in French is part of Russian culture of its time" (ibid., 355). On increasing attention to the purity of Russian among the educated elite, see W. Gareth Jones, "The Russian Language as a Definer of Nobility," in *A Window on Russia: Papers from the V International Conference of the Study Group on Eighteenth-Century Russia, Gargnano, 1994*, ed. Maria Di Salvo and Lindsey Hughes (Rome: La Fenice, 1996), 293–98.

nonetheless selected French as their language of *written* communication. Mariia Mukhanova mentioned reading Shakespeare in the original and commented on the impossibility of appreciating his work in any other language.[125] Yet immersion in foreign languages and literature did not imperil a sense of national identity among nobles of either sex. Writing from Paris, Prince Aleksandr Kurakin spoke indignantly of his compatriots who forgot the love of their homeland in France and lost all desire to return to Russia. "As for me, I can attest that the more I get to know foreigners in their homeland, the more my attachment to my native land takes root in my heart," he declared to Nikita Panin in 1772.[126] When Countess Stroganova wrote to her husband in 1807, she dwelt at length upon her patriotic sentiments, as well as exhorting her spouse to remain "a good Russian" as he served his country abroad.[127] Mariia Volkova also voiced her patriotic feelings in letters composed in French in 1812,[128] while, as Lotman notes, the use of French was so natural for Russian nobles that Sergei Glinka, the editor of the patriotic journal *Russkii vestnik*, found nothing odd in corresponding with his contributors in the language of the enemy.[129] In 1825, Varvara Sheremeteva commented upon her visit to the palace of Grand Prince Mikhail, "I was very pleased that there is nothing foreign in the palace; everything is made in Russia—china, bronze, crystal, and everything is magnificent."[130] Neither Stroganova, Glinka, nor their compatriots betrayed any conflict between their sense of being at home in a "foreign" language and their loyalty to their native land, anymore than authors of contemporary memoirs found it peculiar to compose them in French.[131]

---

125 *Shchukinskii sbornik* 5 (1906), 367. In my survey of family papers, I found very few letters written in any foreign language other than French. For an exception, see a letter in English from N. Mordvinova (RGIA f. 1067, op. 1, ed. khr. 68, ll. 9–10 [1803–4]).

126 *AKK* 6 (1896), 341.

127 RGALI f. 569 (Shchepkina), op. 1, ed. khr. 4, l. 22.

128 M. Vostryshev, ed., *Zapiski ochevidtsa: Vospominaniia, dnevniki, pis´ma* (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1989), 277–322. See also A. V. Belova, "Povsednevnost´ russkoi provintsial´noi dvorianki kontsa XVIII–pervoi poloviny XIX v. (K postanovke problemy)," in *Sotsial´naia istoriia. Ezhegodnik 2003: Zhenskaia i gendernaia istoriia* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2003), 275.

129 Lotman, "Russkaia literatura," 353.

130 Sheremeteva, *Dnevnik*, 47.

131 Kelly Herold argues that French-language memoir literature is comprised of "documents of a pre-national past whose authors expressed no sense of national identity conflict." See Herold, "Russian Autobiographical Literature in French: Recovering a Memoiristic Tradition (1770–1830)" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1998), 3.

Gender and the Politics of Language

At the turn of the 19th century, as the question of creating a Russian literary language became the central intellectual polemic of the era,[132] the significance of gender in promoting the bilingualism of the Russian nobility took center stage: in short, the predominance of French in polite society became closely associated with noblewomen. Following the lead of 19th-century critics, modern scholars have embraced the view that "the great majority of women's letters of this period were written in French," and that "Pushkin was but imitating life in his art when he forced Tat´iana's hand to write her letters to Eugene in *French*."[133] Ironically, 18th-century noblewomen lagged behind their menfolk in acquiring the rudiments of literacy, much less fluency in foreign languages.[134] The male members of the Kurakin family, for example, many of whom spent extensive time in Western Europe, corresponded among themselves and their male acquaintances in French by mid-century, yet their womenfolk persisted in communicating in Russian. Although Prince Aleksandr Borisovich wrote his memoirs and letters in French, his daughter—a lady-in-waiting at the court of Empress Elizabeth—responded in Russian, as did other kinswomen, such as Princess Natal´ia Repnina. Both women understood French, as Kurakin wrote to them in that language, but felt more at ease writing in their native tongue.[135] The letters of many "society women" close to the court, such as Princess Anna Golitsyna, survive in French,[136] but proximity to the court did not guarantee that women would prefer that language. Ekaterina Rumiantsova, wife of the renowned Field-Marshal Rumiantsov-Zadunaiskii and herself a lady-in-waiting, bombarded her husband with

[132] Gitta Hammerberg, "The First Russian Women's Journals and the Construction of the Reader," in *Women in Russian Culture and Society*, 83–104.

[133] Lina Bernstein, "Avdot´ia Petrovna Elagina and Her Contribution to Russian Letters," *Slavic and East European Journal* 40, 2 (1996): 216–17.

[134] The comments of foreign observers at the Russian court that noblewomen outstripped men in their knowledge of foreign languages is in keeping with their general observations of gender disorder in Russia. On the refinement of Russian noblewomen, see L.-F. Ségur, "Zapiski o prebyvanii v Rossii v tsarstvovanie Ekateriny II," in *Rossiia XVIII v. glazami inostrantsev*, ed. Iu. A. Limonov (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1989), 329.

[135] See letters written in the 1770s, in *AKK* 6 and 8 (1896, 1899). See also the correspondence between Praskov´ia Golitsyna and her brother, Ivan Shuvalov, from 1763 to 1778 (Gosudarstvennaia natsional´naia biblioteka, Otdel rukopisei, f. 875), conducted in Russian.

[136] "Poslednie dni tsarstvovaniia Ekateriny II (Pis´ma kniagini Anny Aleksandrovny Golitsynoi," *Istoricheskii vestnik* 30 (October 1887): 82–109; "Pis´ma kniagini Ekateriny Nikolaevny Orlovoi," *Russkii arkhiv*, no. 10 (1877): 113–15.

letters written in Russian.[137] Noblewomen from elite families who lived in St. Petersburg and Moscow—such as Princess Natal´ia Shcherbatova, Countess Anastasiia Sheremeteva, Elizaveta Glebova-Streshneva, and the Tomilov women—exchanged letters with friends and family members of both sexes in their native language.[138]

As prominent cultural figures launched a campaign to promote the use of Russian and diminish French influence, however, many contemporaries fretted that "even in the provinces, at times no one speaks Russian."[139] This conviction was particularly true in regard to women: the memoirist D. I. Sverbeev commented after his arrival in St. Petersburg that "all women of high society, with few exceptions, did not speak Russian and could not speak it."[140] Literary luminaries, most famously N. M. Karamzin and A. S. Pushkin, placed women at the center of the politics of language. Karamzin, in his seminal article "Why Are There So Few Authorial Talents in Russia?" (1802), argued that noblewomen's preference for French literature was to blame for the failure of his compatriots to achieve literary excellence, and that the solution lay in the cultivation of the style used by "society ladies" in their salons.[141] Although Pushkin felt equally at home in French as in Russian, he consistently disparaged women's use of the former. Prince Viazemskii reported that, upon asking the poet if he found a young woman intelligent, Pushkin responded, "I don't know, since I spoke with her in French."[142]

Male desire to instruct and control women's use of language was hardly a 19th-century innovation, nor was it confined to literary figures: Natal´ia Golitsyna learned Russian primarily to please her husband; letters from noblemen to their daughters attest to their unflagging attention to errors in both

---

[137] *Pis´ma E. M. Rumiantsovoi k ee muzhu, fel´dmarshalu grafu P. A. Rumiantsovu-Zadunaiskomu, 1762–1779* (St. Petersburg: I. N. Skorokhodov, 1888).

[138] RGIA f. 923, op. 1, ed. khr. 37 (1782–87); f. 1086, op. 1, ed. khr. 37 (1783–87; the letters of E. Ia. Tomilova's son, Aleksei, are also in Russian): ed. khr. 203a (1812); f. 1088, op. 1, ed. khr. 36 (1768–69); ed. khr. 43 (1759–60); GIM f. 47, op. 1, ed. khr. 6 (1776–86); RGADA f. 1263, op. 1, ed. khr. 2367 (1790); f. 1453, op. 1, ed. khr. 298 (1791–99).

[139] Quoted in Belova, "Povsednevnost´ russkoi provintsial´noi dvorianki," 275.

[140] Quoted in Berstein, "Avdot´ia Petrovna Elagina and Her Contribution to Russian Letters," 231.

[141] On the role of women in the debates over language, see, in particular, V. V. Vinogradov, "Russko-frantsuzskii iazyk dvorianskogo salona i bor´ba Pushkina s literaturnymi normami 'iazyka svetskoi damy,'" in *Iazyk Pushkina: Pushkin i istoriia russkogo literaturnogo iazyka*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Nauka, 2000), 213–58; and Judith Vowles, "The 'Feminization' of Russian Literature: Women, Language, and Literature in Eighteenth-Century Russia," in *Women Writers in Russian Literature*, ed. Toby W. Clyman and Diana Greene (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994), 35–60.

[142] Quoted in Vinogradov, "Russko-frantsuzskii iazyk dvorianskogo salona," 258.

French and Russian.[143] Count Mikhail Speranskii typically closed his letters to his daughter with observations on the errors in her latest communications. In a letter composed in 1818, he expressed particular exasperation with her grammar: "This is a common mistake of all Russian women; they cannot understand that the genitive case is not the dative."[144] Similarly, the poet Petr Viazemskii reproached his wife on a regular basis for both her grammar and stylistic shortcomings, while the husband of Pushkin's sister took her to task for her handwriting—to which she responded, "Really, I cannot write both for a long time and well; the pen is dull and I hurry."[145]

Nonetheless, contemporary preoccupation with the development of literary Russian in the early 19th century produced a novel tension in depictions of women and language. On the one hand, male intellectuals criticized women for their preference for foreign languages and their poor command of Russian; on the other, they identified women, who had escaped the influence of bureaucratic Russian and Church Slavonic, as custodians of traditional spoken Russian. Noblewomen were therefore perceived as simultaneously estranged from their native language and yet closer to Russian tradition. With no sense of self-parody, Karamzin and his followers singled out women's language as the "standard of literary and linguistic excellence"[146] because noblewomen possessed "refined taste," but also because they saw women as more closely allied with the "natural origins" of the Russian language.[147] Curiously, the Russian debate over the relation of women to language mirrored similar battles among French intellectuals in the 17th century: scholars associated the speech of society women with the purity of the French language, since it was unadulterated by the influence of Latin or by the patois of the lower classes. As in the Russian case, women were identified with the true "sources" of French.[148]

---

[143] RGADA f. 1395, op. 1, ed. khr. 206, l. 4 (1757); RGIA f. 923, op. 1, ed. khr. 43, l. 1 (1759).

[144] "Pis´ma Speranskogo," *Russkii arkhiv*, no. 7–8 (1868): 1169.

[145] I. A. Paperno, "O dvuiazychnoi perepiske pushkinskoi epokhi," *Trudy po russkoi i slavianskoi filologii,* 24: *Literaturovedenie* 358 (Tartu: Uchenye zapiski Tartuskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 1975), 149; *Mir Pushkina,* 2: *Pis´ma Ol´gi Sergeevny Pavlishchevoi k muzhu i k otsu, 1831–1838* (St. Petersburg: Pushkinskii fond, 1994), 128.

[146] Vowles, "The 'Feminization' of Russian Literature," 35.

[147] B. A. Uspenskii, *Iz istorii russkogo literaturnogo iazyka XVIII–nachala XIX veka: Iazykovaia programma Karamzina i ee istoricheskie korni* (Moscow: Izdatel´stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1985), 58–59.

[148] Dena Goodman, "*L'ortografe des dames*: Gender and Language in the Old Regime," in *Women, Gender, and Enlightenment*, ed. Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 199–201. On the debate over the tendency of Western civilization

The special relationship of noblewomen to their own and to foreign languages became a key component in the cultural mythology of the early 19th-century intelligentsia and persists in the interpretations of modern scholars. Lotman noted that, although institutions such as Smolnyi encouraged young Russian women to imitate the manners of European ladies, the years spent in childhood in the company of house serfs—particularly with their Russian nannies—provided young women with an alternative, more "natural" type of instruction that fostered the traditional values of the Russian peasantry in their young charges.[149] The historian A. V. Belova, quoting from Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin*, argues that noblewomen were noted for their preference for speaking French and their poor knowledge of Russian yet maintains that women played a key role in preserving and transmitting native traditions within the noble family.[150] In a similar vein, based on the letters of the Kurakin family, A. A. Alekseev argues that women's closer ties with peasant ritual made them "repositories of the linguistic past," although he also notes noblewomen's defection from Russian to French in the first half of the 19th century.[151] Thus scholars continue to perpetuate the view that noblewomen, unlike their male counterparts, did not act as "foreigners" and remained more closely bound to Russian tradition than noblemen. At the same time, the allegation that noblewomen had abandoned their native language for French by the beginning of the 19th century is a recurring theme in their work.

In the eyes of contemporaries, gender played the deciding role in the nobility's use—or misuse—of language. The habit of mixing French and Russian in a single letter, although widespread among nobles of both sexes, was associated with women: "Aren't you ashamed, my dear, to write a letter half in Russian and half in French?" Pushkin reproached one correspondent in 1822. "You aren't a [female] Moscow cousin" (*moskovskaia kuzina*). The conviction

to identify women with nature while reserving the realm of culture for men, see, in particular, Sherry B. Ortner's classic essay and later reevaluation of her thesis: "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" and "So, *Is* Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 21–42, 173–80. See also Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

149 Lotman, *Besedy o russkoi kul´ture*, 83–85.

150 Belova, "Povsednevnost´ russkoi provintsial´noi dvorianki," 276–77. Mary Cavender writes that the women of the Meshcherskii family continued to compose letters in French in the mid-19th century, whereas men were more likely to use Russian. See her " 'Kind Angel of the Soul and Heart': Domesticity and Family Correspondence among the Pre-Emancipation Russian Gentry," *Russian Review* 61, 3 (2002): 400.

151 A. A. Alekseev, "Iazyk svetskikh dam i razvitie iazykovoi normy v XVIII v.," in *Funktsional´nye i sotsial´nye raznovidnosti russkogo literaturnogo iazyka XVIII v.*, ed. V. V. Zamkova (Leningrad: Nauka, 1984), 82, 95.

that men made a deliberate choice to use French or Russian, depending on the emotions expressed or the social setting, while women were guilty of indiscriminately mixing the two languages, persists in contemporary scholarship, as does the notion that men were more likely to correspond with women in French and among themselves in Russian.[152] In fact, men were as guilty as women of using several languages in a single letter: in his letters to his daughter Count Suvorov commonly made use of Russian, French, and German as the spirit moved him;[153] the correspondence of Prince P. A. Viazemskii and A. I. Turgenev was conducted in Russian but with liberal excursions into French.[154] Although guilty of this practice on occasion, particularly when writing to foreigners, Princess Dashkova cited an instance of composing a letter "partly in Russian and partly in French" as an example of her feverish state and the "incoherence" of her mind in the weeks before the palace revolution in 1762.[155] Scholars offer conflicting assessments of whether French was the language of emotion, of "intimate and spiritual life"[156]—and thus associated with the feminine—or that of "ritual intercourse," philosophy, and official correspondence—and hence the purview of men.[157] In a letter to a friend, Lotman himself puzzled over the meaning of Pushkin's famous passage in *Evgenii Onegin* where the poet remarks that Tat´iana spoke Russian badly and that the latter language was inadequate for expressions of sentiment. Did Pushkin wish to say that Russian was the language of everyday life, and therefore inappropriate for the composition of love letters, or that Russian, with its echoes of Church Slavonic, was too lofty for communications that

[152] Quoted in Lotman, "Russkaia literatura," 365. Irina Paperno's assertion that the male use of French and Russian was deliberate, whereas women mixed the two languages at random (Paperno, "O dvuiazychnoi perepiske pushkinskoi epokhi," 149) is not supported beyond the narrow range of letters she cites. Her choice of the letters of M. A. Moier, who incessantly switched from Russian to French to German (see *Utkinskii sbornik: Pis´ma V. A. Zhukovskogo, M. A. Moier i E. A. Protasovoi* [Moscow: A. I. Snegireva, 1904]), is far from representative of the letters of Moier's contemporaries.

[153] "Pis´ma i zapiski kniazia Italiiskogo, grafa A. V. Suvorova-Rymnikskogo, 1787–1800," *Russkii arkhiv*, no. 7 (1866): 929–1030.

[154] *Ostaf´evskii arkhiv kniazei Viazemskikh* 1 (St. Petersburg: Graf S. D. Sheremetev, 1899). See also "Pis´ma Speranskogo," 1757–58.

[155] *The Memoirs of Princess Dashkova*, 65.

[156] E. P. Grechanaia, "Frantsuzskie teksty zhenshchin aristocraticheskogo kruga (konets XVIII–nachalo XIX v.) i vzaimodeistvie kul´tury," *Izvestiia Akademii nauk: Seriia literatury i iazyka* 58, 1 (1999): 33–44; Lotman, "Russkaia literatura," 359.

[157] Paperno, "O dvuiazychnoi perepiske pushkinskoi epokhi," 148, 152; Todd, *The Familiar Letter as a Literary Genre in the Age of Pushkin*, 140–41. Paperno argues that in the early 19th century, Russian was the language of unregulated, intimate expression, as does Mary Cavender ("Nests of the Gentry: Family, Estate, and Local Loyalties in Provincial Tver´, 1820–1860" [Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1997], 72).

touched on ordinary life?[158] In his later lectures on noble culture, he argued that women enjoyed the freedom to compose official letters in French, while after 1825 men were bound to address the tsar and high officials only in Russian—a generalization that has yet to be put to the test.[159]

The arguments of both schools suffer from overwhelming reliance on the letters of a small group of literary figures. These conflicting assessments nonetheless demonstrate that language choice became more self-conscious or, in Lotman's terms, semiotically charged among a subset of the elite in the second quarter of the 19th century than it had been in the post-Petrine era. The coding of language by gender, at the very moment when both the autocracy and patriotic intellectuals were actively promoting the use of Russian, lay at the heart of Mukhanova's apology to her brother for her choice of language. The unease that Mukhanova and Sheremeteva displayed when they wrote in French was, therefore, less the product of feelings of alienation when they failed to write in their native language than it was a response to the gendering of language choice by male authority.[160]

Conclusion

In his essays on noble culture, Lotman himself, in effect, singled out cultural bilingualism as an attribute of noble life, maintaining that location and circumstances prompted nobles to choose between Russian custom and European behavior and that both could assume semiotic significance.[161] Yet the letters of Russian nobles highlight the extent to which social practice deviated from Lotman's model of a "consciously theatrical" elite world characterized by the polarity of Russian tradition and European culture—a concept

---

[158] Iu. M. Lotman, *Pis´ma, 1940–1993* (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul´tury, 1997), 556.

[159] Lotman, *Besedy o russkoi kul´ture*, 57–58. In their role as estate owners, noblewomen maintained an unflagging correspondence with the managers of their estates and, in the course of legal battles over inheritance and land disputes, submitted petitions or wrote to high officials on their own behalf. Virtually all of this correspondence survives in Russian. For numerous examples, see Marrese, *A Woman's Kingdom*, 171–237.

[160] This was also the case with Russian women writers: although a significant number of women composed their memoirs or literary works in Russian, authors such as Zinaida Volkonskaia were roundly criticized for publishing their work in French. See Alessandra Tosi, "Women and Literature, Women in Literature: Female Authors of Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century," in *Women in Russian Culture and Society, 1700–1825*, 39–62.

[161] This is especially apparent in "Russkaia literatura na frantsuzskom iazyke" (1992): 350–68. As Maxim Waldstein observes in his article on the tensions and ambiguities of Lotman's cultural politics as a Russian intellectual in Estonia, Lotman "was an heir to the intelligentsia's tradition of interpreting Russian national culture as inclusive and catholic." See Waldstein, "Russifying Estonia? Iurii Lotman and the Politics of Language and Culture in Soviet Estonia," *Kritika* 8, 3 (2007): 589.

that itself was a construct of the late 18th century. The authority of European culture in post-Petrine Russia by no means led members of the elite to forfeit knowledge of their native language or national feeling: the letters of nobles such as the Urusov family were not only composed in Russian but constituted a veritable exercise in Official Nationality, with endless references to religion and devotion to the tsar, alongside lamentations on the difficulty of finding adequate French tutors in the provinces.[162] Young noblemen such as Ivan Shcherbatov wrote to his sister in French yet also requested that the latter send him a subscription to the journal *Poliarnaia zvezda;* eventually, he abandoned this habit and addressed her only in Russian, the language he used with his father.[163]

Moreover, even nobles who were immersed in European culture perceived no opposition between their assimilation of foreign customs, manifested in their frequent recourse to foreign languages, and their allegiance to traditional forms of Russian culture. Sergei Glinka observed that Princess Dashkova united the "mind of a Russian woman" with that of one who was "completely European."[164] Lina Berstein's remark about the 19th-century salon hostess, A. P. Elagina, applies equally to Russian nobles of both sexes in the pre-reform era: "There was no conflict between [her] first-rate European education and her acute feeling of belonging to Russia."[165] Both native Russians and foreign observers noted that, in the homes of many nobles, one could find, in the words of the memoirist F. F. Vigel′, "the skillful combination of all the pleasantness of European life with the simplicity, the traditions of Old Russia."[166]

As a result, by the late 18th century various aspects of European culture—including the use of French—had become second nature to many nobles. In 1840, Prince Mikhail Volkonskii could write without irony in French to object violently to his estranged wife's plan to educate their daughter abroad: "My father's heart revolts against the thought of being separated from my dear child, and the feelings of a Russian who loves his country will not permit me to consent to her receiving her education outside her country."[167] Among

[162] RGADA f. 1616, op. 2, ed. khr. 8, 10, 24.

[163] RGADA f. 1289, op. 1, ed. khr. 800, l. 40, ll. 112–18 (1822–26).

[164] S. N. Glinka, "Katerina Romanovna Dashkova," *Russkoe slovo* (April 1861): 9.

[165] Lina Berstein, "Women on the Verge of a New Language: Russian Salon Hostesses in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," in *Russia—Women—Culture*, ed. Helena Goscilo and Beth Holmgren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 217.

[166] F. F. Vigel′, *Zapiski*, 2 (Moscow: Zakharov, 2003), 743. Mary Cavender notes a similar observation on the part of Baron Haxthausen during his travels through the provinces. See Cavender, *Nests of the Gentry*, 201.

[167] RGADA f. 1366, op. 1, ed. khr. 357, ll. 30–31.

nobles who had been socialized in two languages and cultures, the use of French was often as semiotically insignificant as the cigars smoked at Ryleev's "Russian" dinners.[168] Indeed, even in the wake of violent debates over the definition of the Russian literary language, inventories of family papers strongly suggest that the usage of French as the language of written communication escalated among the nobility in the 19th century and coexisted with the full participation of their authors in Russian culture and civic life.[169]

Rather than regarding the fruits of a European education as cultural estrangement, Russian nobles operated in a range of linguistic and cultural registers without feelings of self-consciousness or undermining national sentiment. In this regard, they shared much in common with their compatriots in the West. From the 17th century on, French became the language of much of the German nobility, not to mention being the *lingua franca* of polite society and international relations in much of Europe.[170] Until 1844, Hungarian nobles often communicated in Latin, while upper-class Hungarian women frequently read and wrote more fluently in German than in Hungarian; as a result, 19th-century women playwrights in Hungary wrote primarily in German.[171] Like her Russian contemporaries, Countess Anna Potocka evinced no conflict between her patriotic feelings and her immersion in a "foreign" language: although she praised Napoleon for restoring "our national flag, our language, our institutions" after the French army invaded Poland, she composed her memoirs in French and even expressed her longing to be a Frenchwoman.[172] Cultural borrowing was not a Russian peculiarity but a

[168] Citing examples of nobles who learned Russian as a "foreign" language after the War of 1812, Lotman himself notes that the meaning of the "natural" and "artificial" could change over time (*Besedy o russkoi kul´ture*, 188).

[169] For some examples in which well over 50% of 19th-century letters survive in French, see RGADA f. 1273; f. 1290; f. 1287; f. 1445; f. 1453; f. 1609. The diary of Sof´ia Shcherbatova exemplifies this tendency: she composed her journal in French but included numerous newspaper clippings that testify to her interest in current debates over the state of the peasantry, Russian law, and education (RGADA f. 1289, op. 3, ed. khr. 78, ll. 103–6).

[170] Leslee Poulton, *The Influence of French Language and Culture in the Lives of Eight Women Writers of Russian Heritage* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2002), 12–13; Jeanet, "Frantsuzskii iazyk v Rossii XVIII v.," 68.

[171] István György Tóth, *Literacy and Written Culture in Early Modern Central Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000), 130–45; Anna Fábri, "Hungarian Women Writers, 1790–1900," in *A History of Central European Women's Writing*, ed. Celia Hawkesworth (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2001), 93–94, 107.

[172] Anna, Countess Potocka, *Memoirs of the Countess Potocka*, trans. Lionel Strachey (New York: Doubleday and McClure, 1900), 183, 201.

means of defining social status throughout much of Europe into the 19th century.[173]

A reading of the correspondence of nobles of both sexes—both "remarkable" and "ordinary"—exposes the limits of Lotman's model of everyday behavior as an analytic tool to describe the evolution of noble identity in the 18th and early 19th centuries. It also underscores the need for historians to examine the genealogy of Lotman's work and to question why cultural borrowing has been represented since the late 18th century as particularly problematic in a Russian context. Indisputably, the cultural bilingualism of the Russian nobles introduced an element of choice into their cultural identity. Yet there is little to indicate that either men or women of the post-Petrine elite consistently equated Russian tradition with "natural" behavior while experiencing European manners and morals as "foreign" or "artificial." It was, in fact, the thorough assimilation of European cultural norms that prompted educated Russians at the end of the 18th century to embark on a prolonged search for "Russian tradition" and to indict their predecessors as "foreigners" in their own country. In the final analysis, Lotman's interpretation of the poetics of everyday behavior reveals less about the reception of European culture by the Russian nobility in the post-Petrine era than it reflects the enduring power of the national mythology of its descendants, the 19th-century intelligentsia.

450 East 83rd Street, Apt. 23B
New York, NY 10028 USA
michelle.marrese@aya.yale.edu

[173] On the appropriation of foreign wares and skills in 17th-century England, see Linda Levy Peck, *Consuming Splendor: Society and Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).