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FONVIZIN, RUSSIA, AND EUROPE

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The works usually referred to as the Travel Letters are those which Fonvizin composed during his journey to Germany and France in 1777-78 and his visit in Germany and Italy in 1784-85. The letters from the first journey are approximately evenly divided between those addressed to his family in Moscow and those sent to Count Peter Panin, also in Moscow. The letters from the second journey consist almost entirely of missives to his family, with only two surviving letters addressed to Peter Panin. The letters to his relatives are more chattily intimate, the epistles to Panin more formal.

The content of the travel letters is understandably heterogeneous. Fonvizin writes about nearly everything which might have some relevance to the travels upon which he is embarked. These include comments on the vicissitudes of travel at that time; remarks on his own health and that of his wife (the first journey was undertaken largely for the purpose of curing her of a tapeworm, a process which Fonvizin summarizes with some care); descriptions of the cities and architectural monuments which they have visited (although he has little to say of the natural beauties of the countryside); accounts of meetings with local dignitaries; observations on the local population; generalizations about the national characters of the people they were visiting; comparisons

after he had resigned from government service, the Fonvizins again travelled abroad, this time to Germany, Austria, and Italy. In the later 1780's they went abroad on a few other occasions, though now primarily for the sake of Fonvizin's health: he suffered a paralytic stroke in 1785 from which he never truly recovered. The travel letters and journals which he kept during his trips constitute a valuable record of the immediate reactions of an intelligent Russian to the Western Europe of his day. Those reactions are the subject of this seminar paper.

"Fonvizin, Russia, and Europe" is a chapter of a short monograph designed as an introduction to Fonvizin's life and writings. Until 1974 there were virtually no separate works on Fonvizin at all in English, although several books have been published on him in Russian, and a few in Western languages other than English.

References in parentheses within the text are to D. I. Fonvizin, Sobranie sochinenii, ed. G. Makogonenko, two volumes, Moscow-Leningrad, 1959. English translations of extensive excerpts from the travel letters may be found in Harold B. Segel, ed., The Literature of Eighteenth-Century Russia: A History and an Anthology, New York, 1967, I, 304-51. A good discussion of the travel letters may be found on pages 75-84 of Hans Rogger's National Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century Russia, Cambridge, Mass., 1960.

of foreign cultures with Russian culture; and so forth. Cast in an easy colloquial style, they set off to advantage the mind of an intelligent and interested eighteenth-century Russian who undertook an unmediated investigation of contemporary Western European culture. Fonvizin's reactions to what he sees are very personal, and his letters represent a break with the impersonal Neoclassical tradition: they paint a portrait of a strong personality unafraid to picture himself as he is. Even now the travel letters remain very much worth reading as a chronicle of the contact between a remarkable Russian and European civilization of the eighteenth century.

It is not wholly clear that Fonvizin designed his letters for general circulation originally, although he evidently intended to include some of them in his Collected Works of 1788. In the back of his mind at the time he may have considered printing the letters he sent to Panin. Pigarev assumes that Fonvizin intended these missives as a "unique sort of literary work in epistolary form,"[1] and N. S. Tikhonravov has dubbed them a "satirical journey," to distinguish them from the "sentimental" journeys of a Lawrence Sterne, or a Nikolay Karamzin.[2] Certainly Fonvizin's letters do not share the Sentimentalist and allegorical elements of Nikolay Radishchev's Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow (published in 1790), a summons to radical social reform lacking many points of contact with the Russian reality from which it sprang. Karamzin's Letters of a Russian Traveler (published during the 1790's) cover some of the same geographical territory as Fonvizin's, but the author views Western Europe through rose-colored, Sentimentalist glasses, and can hardly bring himself to say anything unfavorable

about the people or places he encounters. Much of Karamzin's time was devoted to visiting great figures of literature and scholarship, such as Immanuel Kant, in whom he discerned only good. Although he never ceases to be a Russian, neither does the gentle Karamzin display any wish to set himself apart especially from those whom he met.

Fonvizin's approach could scarcely have been more different. His mocking eye detects the weaknesses and illogicalities in all with which he comes in contact; he sharpens conflicts instead of eliding them. The eminent nineteenth-century critic Apollon Grigorev put it well when he remarked that the reader of Fonvizin's travel letters is most impressed by the "appropriateness and malicious justice of his comments."[3] For Fonvizin was a satirist, and his tended to be a jaundiced eye. It was so jaundiced, in fact, as to repel some of his biographers. Leone Savoj has denounced his travel writings as chauvinistic,[4] and Fonvizin's first biographer, Peter Vyazemsky, criticized him severely. As an adept of things French, Vyazemsky was particularly incensed by Fonvizin's critical attitude toward that nation, and decided that Fonvizin had not really been the sort to benefit from foreign travel: "A Russian born and bred," the critic wrote, "when abroad he was somehow constrained and out of place." And what Grigorev interpreted as the "malicious justice" of his general approach, Vyazemsky saw as something quite different: "Fonvizin's malice (zloslovie) is cold and dry: it reeks of the preaching of the overinflated orator, convinces no one, and simply causes us to regret that even a brilliant mind can suffer its eclipses."[5]

In order to bolster his case against the object of his

researches, Vyazemsky showed that Fonvizin had borrowed several passages in his letters from a book of 1751 by C. P. Duclos, well known in the France of that time, entitled Considérations sur les moeurs de ce siècle. Duclos was a keen observer of the French national character, an unsystematic sociologist with a gift for the accurate and epigrammatic generalization, and Fonvizin no doubt found him intellectually congenial. Vyazemsky, however, accused Fonvizin not only of something bordering on plagiarism, but even of intellectual dishonesty in pirating principally passages in which Duclos had negative things to say of his countrymen, while ignoring his positive evaluations of them.[6] Recently Alexis Strycek has demonstrated that Fonvizin borrowed more extensively from Duclos than Vyazemsky knew, but he also points out that all the borrowings occur at the beginning of one particular letter,[7] and also are taken from early chapters of Duclos' book. The letter in question, written from Aachen in September of 1778 to Panin, begins with a lengthy and rather formal disquisition on the French national character. Fonvizin must have been reading Duclos at the time and, finding his pithy formulations informative and entertaining, wove them into the fabric of his essay. There may have been a certain element of intellectual dishonesty in this exercise, but Fonvizin was not writing a scholarly treatise, and he delimited his borrowings strictly. Even if it could be shown that many of the memorable formulations scattered through his letters had been purloined, this would only slightly reduce the general interest they hold for today's reader. Strycek also shows that Fonvizin's account of his visit to the French Academy owes much to a newspaper report of the same event; and that Fonvizin

took portions of his Italian letters from the description of an Italian journey published in German in 1781.[8] It is almost certain that further investigation would show Fonvizin borrowed from still other contemporary sources, much as Karamzin borrowed and paraphrased widely in his Letters of a Russian Traveller.[9] Travel letters were among the most eclectic of genres; one could make observations on the most varied subjects in them, and incorporate the most varied materials into them. It is not too astonishing that, in doing so, Fonvizin sometimes crossed the line of what we would now consider permissible. But, despite Vyazemsky, this gives us no license to denigrate the value of his travel letters.

France and Russia

France was the country whose culture most exercised Fonvizin's imagination. This was quite understandable, since France enjoyed cultural supremacy in the Europe of that day, and especially over Russia, where the aristocracy frequently spoke French as its first language. As a Russian "born and bred," in Vyazemsky's phrase, Fonvizin wished to examine French culture on its home grounds. The authority he gained from a visit to France would, he hoped, enable him to bring intelligent Russians to a more critical appreciation of French culture.

Fonvizin believed that his countrymen suffered from a distorted view of France, as he had demonstrated by his attack on Gallomania in The Brigadier. Nothing was worse, he thought, than blind and unquestioning allegiance to a foreign culture over one's own. In his travel letters he argued that every culture has its strengths and weaknesses, and that Russian culture could hold its

own by comparison with Western European cultures.

Fonvizin probably felt a certain moral obligation to be loyal to his national culture. As David Welsh points out in his study of eighteenth-century Russian comedy, Fonvizin's old associate Vladimir Lukin had argued that there was a definite linkage between admiration for a foreign culture and susceptibility to immoral influences,[10] and Fonvizin probably tended to agree with him on this point. A Russian Gallomane was despicable enough if he stayed in Russia, Fonvizin thought, but he would encounter sure ruin if he visited France itself before he was morally and spiritually prepared. Thus in a letter of 1778 Fonvizin remarks that a father should never permit his son to visit Paris until he is at least 25 years of age. The city, he said, resembled the "plague," one which damaged its victims more morally than physically: it was capable of transforming a young man who otherwise might have developed into an honest citizen into a "giddypate incapable of doing anything" (II, 477). During their sojourn in Paris the Fonvizins had met most of the Russian colony, and the writer made this prognosis on the basis of observation. Most of the Russian Parisians, he said, made "day out of night and night out of day," abandoning themselves to the pleasures of gaming and sexual adventure. He knew of only two Russians who had escaped this Parisian "plague," and who were therefore, slightingly, termed "philosophers," which undoubtedly meant merely that they rejected the dissipated way of life of their deracinated compatriots (II, 439).

On the other hand, Fonvizin also thought that the poison of Gallic culture could, in appropriate dosages, have a tonic

effect upon the young, at least upon those who were fundamentally morally stable. At least he so argues in an often-quoted prescription for dealing with the young who exhibit signs of estrangement from their native land:

> If any of my youthful countrymen who have solid good sense should become indignant over the abuses and confusions prevalent in Russia and in his heart begin to feel alienated from her, then there is no better method of converting him to the love he should feel for his Fatherland than to send him to France as quickly as possible. Here he will quickly discover that all the tales about the perfection of everything here are absolutely false...(II, 467).

If we wonder how the same treatment may produce such divergent effects on different individuals, the key to this prescription must surely be the requirement that the young man possess "good sense." Most of the Frenchified Russians then resident in Paris lacked this entirely. They were there for the wrong reasons, and devoted their time to the frivolous life.

Fonvizin visited France, not in order to associate with other Russians, but to learn how the French actually lived in their own land. To be sure, he entered upon this task with some anti-French inclinations. Thus, in his first letter from Montpellier in 1777, he describes his departure from Germany and his arrival in his first French city, Landau: "When we rode into the city we were assaulted by a horrid stench, which left us in no doubt that we had entered France" (II, 418). That stench -- both physical and

moral -- never left the Fonvizins' nostrils entirely during their visit.

Fonvizin took a lively interest in the standard French tourist attractions, including architecture and also local ceremonies, both political and religious. He was willing to give credit where he thought it due, as when he commented on the excellence of French roads (II, 418). But he was most concerned with analyzing the character of the French people, those approaches and attitudes typical of the leading culture of his day.

As a visitor Fonvizin was a first-hand observer of French hospitality: how well they fed themselves, how well they entertained their guests. He found the economies which the French practiced absolutely astonishing. Once, he reported, when out for a walk in Montpellier he dropped in unexpectedly at the home of a certain Marquise who was among the city's wealthiest women, only to discover her dining in the kitchen with the servants in order to spare the expense of kindling a fire in the dining room, since they had no guests (II, 431-32). Although Fonvizin realized that firewood was relatively expensive in France, he did not believe that cost justified such unusual procedures. And then even when the French had guests, they tended to be unacceptably tight-fisted: they did not pass dishes around the table lest the guests take too much, or leave bottles of wine on the table, since the guests were then tempted to drink excessively. Fonvizin's vision was so poor he could not see what to request from the other end of the table, and thus he ordinarily "got up from the table hungry" (II, 431). Fonvizin acknowledged the excellence of French cuisine, but French hospitality could not stand comparison with the Russian.

Then too, he was astonished to discover that the table linen in the best French homes was filthy, much worse than that to be found even in rather impoverished Russian residences. When he inquired as to the reason for this, he was informed that, since one did not eat napkins and tablecloths, there was no need for them to be clean, an "absurd conclusion," in Fonvizin's words (II, 429).

Observation convinced Fonvizin that the French were extraordinarily self-centered, both individually and collectively. "Friendship, family, honesty, gratitude" -- all these things had no meaning for them, he decided. They ignored the deeper virtues, and attended only to what lay on the surface. "External appearance substitutes for everything else here," he wrote. "Be polite, that is don't contradict anybody in anything; and be pleasant, that is, rattle off anything that comes into your head: these are the two rules you must follow in order to be un homme charmant" (II, 444). Everywhere in France Fonvizin perceived only spiritual emptiness and the lack of any true social concern. Allied to this personal self-centeredness was a cultural self-centeredness, which expressed itself in total disinterest in any foreign cultures. Despite the high level of French culture and the easy availability of information, Fonvizin observed, "many people hear [from us] for the first time that there is such a place as Russia in the world and that we Russians speak a different language than they do" (II, 423). Even the pro-French Karamzin later found the French just as ignorant of things Russian, although he did not become so upset about it as did Fonvizin.

Fonvizin also discovered that French ignorance extended to many areas other than geography. He found the French sadly lacking

in intellectual curiosity and in factual information. And the common people, he said, were ignorant idlers ready to believe any faker with a sense of style: "On every street you can find a group of people surrounding some charlatan who is pulling tricks, selling wondrous medicines, and entertaining the idiots with jokes" (II, 428). In short, Fonvizin declared, the common people in France were "lazy" and "very coarse" (II, 429). "I think," he wrote at another point, "that there is not a nation in the world which is more credulous and has less common sense" (II, 433).

Unlike the lower classes, the French upper classes were at least capable of camouflaging their intellectual emptiness with a certain flair. Unfortunately, a little further probing laid bare the superficiality of the French mind. The French esteem wit (ostrota), he decided, more highly than sense (razum), and therefore were not truly concerned with truth (II, 472-73). Everyone has an opinion which he articulates with impressive confidence, but ordinarily this is merely the opinion of the person to whom the Frenchman is speaking, and with whom he considers it bad form to disagree (II, 473). Fonvizin experimented amusingly with this trait of the French mind. For instance, when the subject of freedom came up, he recalled,

> I would begin my remarks by saying that, as far as I could tell, this basic human right was religiously observed in France; whereupon I would ecstatically be told que le Francais est né libre, that this right is their genuine good fortune and that they would die rather than permit it to be infringed upon in the slightest. After

> listening to this, I would start to talk about various inconveniences I had encountered and would little by little expound the notion that it would be a good thing if freedom were something more than a mere empty phrase. And then those same people ... would immediately say to me: O monsieur, vous avez raison! Le Francais est écrasé, le Francais est esclave. And they would thereupon fall into an absolute ecstasy of denunciation...(II, 463).

Fonvizin considered this intellectual instability a judgment on French culture: it showed that the French simply skimmed along the surface of things, and lacked any deep convictions. This trait also emerged, he thought, in the French love of swindling and deception, which depend upon verbal facility. "They consider deception the right of intellect," he wrote (II, 481): deception was a species of intellectual competition in which the shrewdest and most unprincipled contestant won. Like most other people, the French deceive for the sake of money, but they would not resort to genuinely foul crimes. They will murder only if they are starving, he thought: "once a Frenchman has enough to eat he won't murder anyone, but will be satisfied with swindling others" (II, 481).

Unlike Karamzin, who admired most of the great intellectual figures whom he met during his journeys, Fonvizin adopted a bilious view even of the greatest French writers and intellectuals, those with world-wide reputations. Fonvizin claimed to have encountered virtually all the leading French intellectuals except Rousseau. Many of the well-known French philosophers visited the Fonvizin residence,, he reported, and thus he had the opportunity to observe

them carefully. Upon reflection, he found them almost all "worthy of contempt." Their chief traits of character were "arrogance, envy, and deception"; they spent their time denigrating others and lauding themselves (II, 443-44). Fonvizin could hardly discover words sufficiently strong to express his distaste for French intellectuals he had encountered. Almost the only dispensation he granted from this blanket condemnation was to Antoine-Leonard Thomas, author of the "Eulogy of Marcus Aurelius" which he had himself translated. Fonvizin thought Thomas' "humility and honesty" appealing, while his fellows displayed only "arrogance, falsehood, love of gain, and despicable flattery." Philosophers, he concluded, appear to derive little personal benefit from their philosophy (II, 476).

The immorality which the French exhibited in the intellectual sphere was even more rampant in the area of sexual mores. At one point Fonvizin composed a small essay on Parisian mistresses, or prostitutes. At the theater and at home, he said, immoral women were covered with diamonds and enjoyed all the perquisites of wealth, to the point where honest women sought to wear as little jewelry as possible. When society went driving on holidays, all the finest carriages were occupied by prostitutes. Paris was a city in which the immoral prospered, while people of any principle starved. The entire place was simply a sink of iniquity, a Sodom and Gomorrah (II, 446).

On the whole, Fonvizin took a rather dim view of France and things French. A leitmotif of disillusion -- perhaps not wholly sincere -- runs through the travel letters. "I was never so mistaken in my life," he wrote from Paris in March of 1778, "as in

my ideas about France" (II, 441). The propaganda of the Russian Gallomanes on behalf of the "earthly paradise" had affected even Fonvizin's thinking. Now that he had walked the streets of that "paradise," he could evaluate it realistically. Indeed, Fonvizin perhaps overdid his criticism of France as a means of correcting the distorted Russian perception of France: exaggerated propaganda required an exaggerated critique as a counter.

A characteristic of France which both Fonvizin and Karamzin noted was the co-existence, cheek by jowl, of the bad with the good, the foul with the pure. Paris provided the greatest example of this: "at every step when I find something quite excellent, there will always be something right next to it which is bad and barbaric" (II, 439). There were facets of French life which deserved praise, and Fonvizin wrote of them, although he was always prepared to terminate that exposition in order to comment on something "bad and barbaric." He considered many of the French provincial cities scarcely worth seeing even once, but the capital was another matter. Paris was an "entire world;" with its size and population it occupied a unique place among cities (II, 438). The playwright was entranced by the cultural riches which the city offered to visitor and native alike.

Prominent among those cultural riches was the theater, which Fonvizin was quick to visit. His general impression was that French comedy had attained the highest possible level, while tragedy was more inferior than he had anticipated (II, 440). A short time later he returned to the subject of the theater, saying that "anyone who has not seen comedy in Paris has no idea of what comedy is" (II, 445-46). The actors formed such a perfect ensemble and

interacted so ideally that a person who had once seen French comedy could never be satisfied with anything else. But then French music subsisted on an incredibly low level. He had never heard such "goats" of singers before, and his wife kept cotton with her to stuff in her ears as soon as a French chorus broke into song (II, 425).

The French as a people also had some positive traits. Fonvizin particularly approved of their devotion to their country and the Crown. The lowliest chimney-sweep, he said, was "ecstatic if he should happen to see his king;" the French were totally devoted to their Fatherland, and would not abandon it under any circumstances. The finest thing in which the French might instruct Russians, Fonvizin said, would be "love for the Fatherland and their monarch" (II, 443). These observations, incidentally, fit poorly with the claims of some Fonvizin specialists that he sensed the coming French Revolution.

Fonvizin also observed that the French valued scholarship and learning very highly, and said there was not in France "a single scholar who is not provided for" (II, 443). True, he had a low opinion of the scholars in question, but he could only praise the French for their respect for learning.

In the numerous other comments he made about the French and their culture, Fonvizin adhered to the overall view that France, like any other country, was a mixture of good and bad, but focused his attention primarily on the latter. Early in his visit to France, before he had seen Paris, he summarized his approach in a passage which will apply very well to all his foreign sojourns:

> In short, all the travellers are lying unconscionably when they describe France as an earthly paradise. Without question there are many good things here, but I'm not sure at all whether there aren't more bad things. At any rate, up to now my wife and I still believe it is infinitely better to live in St. Petersburg (II, 420).

Germans, Italians, and Others

France intrigued Fonvizin more than any other foreign country, and it was the object of his journey of 1777-78. In 1784-85 his objective was Italy, which he was interested in more for its art treasures than for any other reason. Germany was merely a country through which he passed in order to arrive somewhere else. Despite his family origins, and despite the fact that German was the first modern foreign language he had studied, he wrote less about Germany than about Italy or France. Those comments on Germany he did record indicate that his attitude toward the Germans was roughly the same as his attitude toward France, or toward Italy. In 1777, for instance, on his way to Montpellier, he stopped for a time in Leipzig, a city he found well supplied with "scholars." To him, however, they seemed more like pedants: some were puffed up with pride solely because they could converse in Latin, others spent their time in abstract philosophizing lacking any connection with the realities of this world, and all this to the point where "Leipzig proves without any question that scholarship does not engender intellect" (II, 454).

During his visit of 1784, Fonvizin was out of sorts. Whereas

he had complainted of France's filthiness, now he carped at the astonishing cleanliness of German cities: "all the streets and houses here," he said, "are so clean that it seems like an affectation" (II, 511). In late August of 1784 the Fonvizins arrived in Nürnberg, chronicling their adventures in a journal which they described as a record of their "voluntary suffering." From Leipzig to Nürnberg, they claimed, they had wrestled with "hellish roads, dreadful food, and beds infested with bedbugs and fleas." "Here," they concluded, "everything is generally worse than in our country: the people, horses, the land, the availability of food -- in short, everything in our country is better, and we are better people than the Germans are, too" (II, 508). Quite possibly there was a substantial dose of fleeting irritation in that often-quoted passage, but it is only a stronger variant of the judgment which Fonvizin usually passed on foreign cultures.

He might have said much the same thing of the Italians. When on their way to Italy in 1784, the Fonvizins stopped in Bozen (present-day Bolzano), where they experienced a foretaste of the Italian way of life: "Dirty stone floors; filthy linen; bread that beggars wouldn't eat in Russia; and clean water that we would consider slops" (II, 519). In the midst of the magnificent heritage of the Italian architectural past, Fonvizin reported, they would constantly encounter the most miserable Italian beggars suffering from extreme poverty, a situation which he attributed to the weakness of government authority (II, 545). "The old men especially are almost naked, emaciated with hunger, and usually plagued by some sort of repulsive illness," he wrote (II, 523). As in France, the barbaric and dreadful existed side by side with the exquisite;

their intermingling seemed almost a rule of Western European life.

The Fonvizins spent most of their time among the cultured Italian upper classes, whom they found quite as miserly as the French, and even less interesting as conversationalists. Fonvizin reported having been invited to a large dinner at the home of a wealthy banker and blushing on his behalf, since "his formal dinner was incomparably worse than what we had every day at the inn" (II, 528). Social life was unbelievably boring, in Florence at any rate. Hardly two out of a hundred were capable of carrying on an intelligent conversation, and only a few displayed enough initiative to play cards as a means of passing the time (II, 528).

If social life was less interesting in Italy than in France, the moral level of society was lower as well. "Here the wedding day is the day of the divorce," he wrote, for the notion of marital fidelity was in total disrepute throughout Italy. Social custom decrees that as soon as a woman marries she must acquire a lover, a "true knight," who will devote all his waking hours to her. Consequently, a wife ordinarily sees her husband only when it is time to retire, which can be rather a trial for married couples in love with each other. As a result, Fonvizin wrote, "there are neither fathers nor sons" in Italy (II, 531-32).

In general Fonvizin considered Italians the most boring people he had visited, boring and tightfisted. They were accomplished swindlers as well. He told one interesting anecdote on this topic. When he was in Florence, he said, and the word spread that he was purchasing paintings and art objects, he was summoned to the splendid palace of a well-known Marquis, who showed him a painting supposedly by Guido Reni and available for 1,000 gold pieces (chervonnyi).

Not being very expert on Italian painting, Fonvizin requested and received permission to have the picture appraised. His appraisers told him that it was certainly not a Guido, and was worth at most five or six gold pieces. Upon returning the painting, Fonvizin informed the Marquis of the appraisers' opinion, which quite infuriated him. But then just before Fonvizin left Florence, the Marquis sent word to him that, "out of friendship," he would part with the picture for ten gold pieces (II, 534)! Fonvizin thought it amazing that a nobleman would stoop to such base deception, but also found the incident in some ways typical of the Italians.

Fonvizin's view of the nationalities with which he had less to do than with the French, Italians, or Germans, was equally negative, as a rule. For instance, he found Poland -- like Germany, a way-station to somewhere else -- a curious and foreign land, for all that the Poles were brother Slavs. Even the Polish upper classes were in the grip of the most fantastic superstition: they were constantly seeking to exorcise possessed individuals. As in France, the Catholic clergy bound the people to such superstition: the entire country was controlled by priests and Jews, as far as Fonvizin could see (II, 414). Despite Roman Catholic influence in Poland, public morality left much to be desired. "Quite frequently," he wrote, "you will find a husband in public with two women, the one he is now living with and the one he has just divorced," since divorce was extraordinarily easy to come by in Poland (II, 416). Fonvizin found many aspects of Polish life quite strange. Polish women, for example, dressed just as they liked, wearing caps or turbans or building their hair up into an

"entire tower" on their heads. He and his wife could not reconcile themselves to the sounds of the Polish language, and spent their time at the theater giggling instead of attending to the play (II, 416). During their trip of 1777-78, incidentally, they very commonly reacted by laughing at things to which they were not accustomed. On their second journey, in 1784-85, they seem to have accepted cultural differences with more aplomb.

Slavophile or Westernizer?

As the nineteenth century wore on, there arose in Russia two great currents of thought on the question of the relationship between Russia and the West. The so-called "Westernizers" argued that Russia and her culture belonged in the European context, that Russians and West Europeans shared the same essential characteristics, and that, since Russia had developed more slowly than Western Europe, she would traverse the same historical path while benefiting from the errors of those who had preceded her. The Westernizers applauded the drastic reforms of Peter the Great as both necessary and historically desirable.

The "Slavophiles," in contrast, argued that Russia had a distinct historical destiny, differing in essence from that of Western nations. Catholic Western societies were based upon force or the threat thereof, whereas Orthodox Slavic societies were founded upon love and mutual cooperation. Russia, they maintained, should isolate herself from the diseases of Western culture in order to provide an example for the world. The Slavophiles believed that Peter the Great had done violence to Russian culture by wrenching the

country from its true historical moorings.

Fonvizin dealt with many of those same problems which would agitate the Westernizers and Slavophiles many years later. He treated them in detail both in his travel letters and in some of his other writings, including his "Questions" put to Catherine in 1783 (his final question on that occasion was: "In what does our national character consist?", to which Catherine replied: "In the rapid and quick comprehension of everything, in exemplary obedience, and in receptivity to all virtues granted man by the Creator" [II, 275]).

Fonvizin was interested in the problem of national character, both Russian and Western European, and, as the Marxist thinker Georgy Plekhanov once noted, in the question of "what should be the relationship of Russia to the West on the basis of the Petrine reforms."[11] As a satirist, he took a jaundiced view of whatever society he was examining at the moment, which means we must clarify Fonvizin's attitude toward Russia herself, especially as it was expressed in his travel letters.

We have already seen that Fonvizin ranked France, Italy, and Germany below Russia. He thought Western moral standards to be lower than those prevalent in Russia, partly because Western religious values were less profound than those of the Orthodox. Still, if Fonvizin ranked Russia above Western Europe in these regards, he nevertheless did not rate his native land very high in absolute terms. Russia still fell far short of the ideal. He expressed this most unambiguously very late in his travels, after his stroke of 1785, when his anti-Russian sentiments were at their strongest. In 1787, upon returning from the spas of Austria, the Fonvizins

arrived at the gates of Kiev, where they met a young lad who offered to guide them to an inn. A thunderstorm came up just as they approached the inn, and they pounded vainly at the gates for an hour seeking admission as the rains descended. Finally the owner appeared and asked who was there. The boy, seizing the opportunity, cried "Open up: these are relatives of Prince Potemkin's!" Thereupon the doors instantly flew open and they entered the courtyard. "And here we knew," Fonvizin concluded, "that we were back in Russia" (II, 570-71). The combination is instructive: Russian laziness and unwillingness to put oneself out for travellers in distress, galvanized by a bold lie into immediate accommodation. Though Fonvizin spoke humorously as he recorded this tale, it was a serious instance of some of the more unattractive workings of the Russian mind.

The questions Fonvizin addressed to Catherine in 1783 embrace a mixture of political and social topics, if by "social" we mean points having to do with the national character. His queries imply that Russians love to quarrel about things which ought to be obvious; they contract debts without thinking; they have nothing to talk about in society; they attach no stigma to those who contribute nothing to society; they cannot write properly; and they tend to initiate projects with great enthusiasm which in short order evaporates. The question concluding the entire series ("In what does our national character consist?") may be an indication to the reader that many of the preceding questions pointed to Fonvizin's notion of the Russian character. His penultimate question, moreover, indicated his concept of the proper relationship between Russia and the West: "How might we

eliminate two contradictory and equally harmful prejudices: the first, that in our country everything is bad and everything abroad is good; and the second, that abroad everything is bad and everything in our country is good?" (II, 275).

The phrasing of this question implies that the true relationship between cultures was a complex one. Neither Western Europe nor Russia enjoyed a monopoly on virtue: as he wrote in 1778, "I have seen that in any country there is much more bad than good, and that people are people everywhere" (II, 449). In the final accounting the individual is the measure of the society in which he lives. Before long Fonvizin arrived at a form of cultural internationalism, which he articulated most succinctly in a letter of September 1778 analyzing the French character in some detail. "Worthwhile people," he wrote then, "no matter to which nation they may belong, form a single nation among themselves" (II, 480). Such individuals recognize one another instantly, as Fonvizin had recognized Thomas, and should support and sustain one another. They also realize that they are in a tiny minority anywhere: as Fonvizin claimed, one could spend years in Italy without ever encountering an honest man (II, 533). Here the phrase "honest man" is equivalent to "worthwhile people," those schooled in the ways of virtue who form the "single nation" to which Fonvizin believed he belonged. An individual's happiness depended upon his inner being, and not in general upon the social milieu in which he found himself. "If anybody tries to tell you that Paris is a center of entertainment and merriment," he wrote to his relatives from the French capital in 1778, "don't believe him. ... A person who lacks resources within himself will live the same life in Paris as in

Uglich. Four walls are the same everywhere..."(II, 444-45).

Although he is not very consistent, Fonvizin displays a tendency to define a national character in terms of negative traits, and to subsume positive traits of national character into the composite picture of an international of virtuous people. He dwells in more detail on those aspects of the French and Italian character which seemed to him ridiculous or contemptible; and when he did discover individuals who embodied admirable national traits, he had an inclination to admit them to the "single nation" of "worthwhile people."

Fonvizin did not hold that there were no differences between national cultures and national characters, for he thought there were; but most of the differences emerged in Russia's favor, so that a good Russian was well advised to stay at home. In so holding he articulated and presaged some of the cultural arguments which would engross Russian intellectuals several decades later. One passage from the travel letters is particularly interesting in that connection:

> It really is true that intelligent people are rare everywhere. If here [in Western Europe] people began to live before us, then at least we, at the beginning of our life's path, may mold ourselves in the form we wish to, and avoid those inconveniences and evils which have taken firm root here. Nous commençons et ils finissent. I think that a person who has just been born is more fortunate than one who is at the point of death (II, 493).

Aside from the more general questions of historical understanding which this passage raises, Fonvizin's formulation is an amalgam of

the positions which the Slavophiles and Westernizers would adopt at a later time. Fonvizin articulates the Westernizing idea that Russia would tread the same historical path as the West, but with a chronological lag, and thus would benefit from the previous experience of the West. But concurrently Fonvizin brings in the proto-Slavophile notion of the collapse of the West, the idea that Russian is coming into the world at a point when Western societies are in some sense "dying." And if Fonvizin's loyalty to the traditions of Peter the Great links him with the Westernizers, his insistence on the overall moral -- if not material -- superiority of Russian culture unites him with the Slavophiles. Consequently, he cannot be claimed completely justifiably by either camp as its spiritual ancestor.

Finally, Fonvizin's internationalist spirit emerges in his travel writings through his keen interest in those arts -- music, but especially painting and architecture -- which establish communication between cultures even while allowing them to retain their national characteristics. During his trip to France in 1777, Fonvizin was apparently just beginning to acquire that expertise in art which he required for his commercial dealings. At that time he considered the art and architecture of France magnificent: "I am no connoisseur of painting," he wrote then, "but I have been standing for half an hour at a stretch in front of pictures in order to inspect them thoroughly" (II, 419). When he travelled to Germany and Italy in 1784-85, he had greatly improved his knowledge of art, and his reputation as an art buyer accompanied him everywhere. The gallery in Florence, he wrote, was splendid, and he had had several pictures copied for his own use (II, 529).

For him, St. Peter's in Rome was the height of human cultural achievement: "Anyone who has seen it cannot be astonished by anything else in the world in the area of the arts" (II, 531). During another paean to St. Peter's, by the way, Fonvizin expressed the view that the art of antiquity was incomparably superior to the art of modern times ("What taste, what intellect they had in former centuries," he exclaimed). St. Peter's stood as an exception to this rule, but this was partially because its architect had imitated the art of the ancients in many particulars (II, 538). But even in his admiration for the arts, Fonvizin always retained his humor and sense of perspective. "We live only with paintings and statues," he wrote from Italy in 1784, "and I'm afraid I may turn into a bust myself" (II, 535).

This, then, was what Fonvizin required of his native culture and in foreign ones: taste, intellect, moral standards. He tried to approach foreign countries without preconceived notions, although he did declare he had been badly misled by propaganda in favor of France. Taste, intellect, and moral standards were qualities both of an individual and of a culture, and Fonvizin realized they were not to be found anywhere very frequently. Still, he was predisposed toward his native land culturally, and toward the past historically. Perhaps nations and cultures at their inception are more likely to adhere to lofty standards than they are later, when they have succumbed to the sins of adulthood or sunk into senility. As a young culture Russia could learn from the West, but she should do so without concluding that she was in any way inferior to it. The future belonged to Russia, Fonvizin believed. The West was exhausted morally, materially, and spiritually; it was

living off the accumulated capital of its past. Russia was no ideal -- a fact of which no one could have been more conscious than the author of The Minor -- but it displayed the moral and intellectual vigor necessary to set an example for the world.

FOOTNOTES

1. K. V. Pigarev, Tvorchestvo Fonvizina, Moscow, 1954, p. 131.

2. N. S. Tikhonravov, "D. I. Fon-Vizin," in Sochineniia N. S. Tikhonravova, Moscow, 1898, vol. III, part 1, p. 120.

3. "Vzgliad na russkuiu literaturu so smerti Pushkina," in A. Grigor'ev, Literaturnaia kritika, Moscow, 1967, p. 171.

4. Leone Savoj, Saggio di una biografia del Fon-Vizin, Rome, 1935, p. 73.

5. P. Viazemskii, Fon-Vizin, in Polnoe sobranie sochinenii kniazia P. A. Viazemskogo, St. Petersburg, 1880, V, 75,80.

6. Ibid., pp. 87-88.

7. A. Strycek, Denis Fonvizine, Paris, 1976, pp. 359-61.

8. Ibid., pp. 361-62, 473-75.

9. See V. V. Sipovskii, N. M. Karamzin, avtor "Pisem russkogo puteshestvennika," St. Petersburg, 1899, pp. 238-362.

10. David J. Welsh, Russian Comedy 1765-1823, The Hague and Paris, 1966, pp. 49-50.

11. Chapter on Fonvizin in G. V. Plekhanov, Istoriia russkoi obshchestvennoi mysli, Moscow-Leningrad, 1925, III, 93.