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KARAMZIN, KANT, AND LAVATER — INTERSECTING BIOGRAPHIES

In his "Letters of a Russian Traveller" Karamzin left a detailed account of his visit to I. Kant in Königsberg on June 18, 1789. Published in 1791, his report is important as the first printed mentioning of Kant in Russian. Karamzin was looking forward to meet J. K. Lavater in Zürich, with whom he had already corresponded for three years, but Kant warned him of Lavater's excessive imagination, which let him believe in dreams and magnetism. Lavater's 'Schwärmerei' was above all attacked by the publishers F. Nicolai and J. E. Biester, whom Karamzin would soon come in touch with in Berlin. The young traveler was appalled by the caustic tone of the debate among philosophers, who considered themselves enlightened and ought to be tolerant toward dissenters. Aside from contemporary pamphlets, the correspondence between Lavater and Kant (published in 1900) and between Karamzin and Lavater (published in 1893) reveals their mutual respect, but also their profound differences in opinion.

Key words: N. M. Karamzin, Königsberg, I. Kant, J. K. Lavater, Enlightenment, F. Nicolai, J. E. Biester, J. M. R. Lenz, Magnetism, Lavater's correspondence with Kant and with Karamzin.

*I*n 1789, on the 18th of June, the twenty-three years old Karamzin arrived with the diligence from Tilsit at 7 o'clock in the morning in Königsberg [6, p. 19]. It was a Thursday, and on Friday the town got ready for the annual fair. Such fairs were held at the feast-day of the city's patron saint, and Königsberg's cathedral was consecrated not only to the Virgin Mary, but also to St. Adalbert, whose death in 981 is commemorated on the 20th of June.



The coaches stopped at the Post Office on the market square behind the Royal Castle in the Altstadt [1, S. 81]. Karamzin took lodging for one night “в трактире у Шенка”, the inn “Bey Schenck” owned by Johann Philipp Schenck in the Kehrwiedergasse [1, S. 29], just around two corners of the postal station. After eating at the *table d’hôte*, where the loud and coarse talking of Prussian officers and captains annoyed him, Karamzin hurried to pay his respects to Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) [6, с. 20–21], then a 65 years old bachelor living with a man-servant and a female cook at Prinzesin-Strasse No. 3, – a short walk from his inn.

Karamzin called Kant’s house a “маленький домик”, although it had two stories with five window axes. Built in the seventeenth century, Kant had bought it for 5,500 guilders from the widow of the painter Johann Gottlieb Becker (1720–1782), who had portrayed him, on December 30, 1783 [2, S. 102–103]. On the lower floor were Kant’s lecture room (for the professors taught in their homes) and the cook’s quarters, and on the upper floor the dining room, his bedroom and library as well as his study [4, S. 179]. Since Karamzin asserts in his *Письма русского путешественника* that “смелость города берет – и мне отворились двери в кабинет его” [6, p. 20], we may assume that taking the domestics by surprise he had stormed upstairs and knocked on the door of Kant’s study. He described the interior as sparsely furnished (“приборов не много. Все просто” [6, с. 21]), as is confirmed by other contemporaries [13, S. 254]. Kant’s study had only a desk, a chest of drawers, a few chairs, and two tables laden with manuscripts and books. The walls were so blackened by the candles and the smoke of Kant’s pipe that one could write with a finger on them [13, S. 316, 320]. A portrait, an engraving, of Jean Jacques Rousseau was the only decoration [4, S. 180–181].

Karamzin had approached the house with the late Moses Mendelssohn’s image in mind of the “alles zermalmende... то есть всесокрушающий Кант” [14, S. 2], and was perplexed to come upon a “маленькой, худенькой старичек, отменно белый и нежный” [6, с. 20]. A colored pencil drawing (Dresden, Kupferstichkabinett) by Veit Hans Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1764–1841) faithfully portrays the Professor of Logic and Metaphysics, how he looked in 1789. Kant spoke fast, with a low voice, and not intelligibly, so that Karamzin had to strain his ears [6, с. 21]. Further aggravating was for him the circumstance that Kant’s colloquial speech was using vocabulary and pronunciations of the local dialect [4, S. 60].

Surprising is not only the fact that the young stranger, who arrived unannounced and, as he confessed, without any letter of recommendation, got



a three hours' private audience with the distinguished philosopher, but also that he was graciously received at a time, when Kant usually entertained lunch guests, often till 6 o'clock, and then went out for a walk [4, S. 164], – habits, he strictly adhered to.

In the course of the conversation, which ranged from China to the nature of man, Karamzin learned of two essays by Kant, which he had not seen yet, and whose titles his host jotted down for him. While the “*Critik der practischen Vernunft*” had only recently, in 1788, been brought out by Hartknoch in Riga and it was thus pardonable not to have been aware of it yet, the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* had already been published in 1785. When Karamzin praised Kant's metaphysics, he was referring to his *Critik der reinen Vernunft* of 1781 and his *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik* of 1783.

Kant remarked to Karamzin that his writings could not please everyone, as few were appreciating metaphysical subtleties. Even Wieland, whom Karamzin saw later in Weimar, scarcely racked his brains about Kant's metaphysics [6, c. 76]. Indeed Kant had been hurt that almost nobody had understood his *Critik der reinen Vernunft* [18, p. 9–10], therefore the admiration of the young Russian must have lifted his spirits. Karamzin did not doubt that as far as the philosophers were concerned, compared with Kant in Königsberg Plato was an infant [6, c. 212]. No wonder then that Kant readily expounded for the avid traveler the meaning of moral law and why according to reason there should be an afterlife [6, c. 20–21].

Since during his stay in Königsberg Karamzin discussed his itinerary with a French dentist and a group of Prussian officers, it can be taken for granted that he also mentioned his intention to go from here to Berlin and later on to Switzerland to Kant, especially as in the beginning Kant was chatting with him “о путешествиях” (the appropriate *pièce de conversation* with someone from a foreign land). Thus from Switzerland they came to talk about Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801), the influential, but controversial theologian in Zürich, whom Karamzin revered.

«Он [i. e. Kant] знает Лафатера, и переписывался с ним. ЛаФатер весьма любезен по доброте своего сердца, говорит он: но имея чрезмерно живое воображение, часто ослепляется мечтами, верит Магнетизму и пр[очее]’. – Коснулись до его неприятелей. ‘Вы их узнаете, сказал он, и увидите, что они все добрые люди’» [6, p. 21].

Kant never met Lavater personally, as he lived all his life in Königsberg and not for love or money would leave Eastern Prussia. Lavater in Zürich,



on the other hand, liked to travel, but never got farther east than Berlin and Barth in Swedish Pomerania. The closest contact between the two men occurred, when Kant commended the eighteen-year old Duke Friedrich Karl Ludwig of Holstein-Beck (1757–1816), who had been raised in Königsberg, to Lavater's protection. The young aristocrat left Königsberg in April 1775, arriving in Lausanne in July of that year [3, p. 84–88]. Passing through Zürich, he could give Lavater a first-hand report on the philosopher. Conversely, Holstein-Beck conveyed his impressions of Lavater in a letter to Kant on December 14, 1775 [5, S. 175]. He found the pastor of the Orphanage Church in Zürich most obliging, his conversation instructive, his manners polite and unceremonious. From far and wide people would flock to Zürich to see him and hear him preaching.

Karamzin was correct though that the two scholars had corresponded, but their exchange had taken place thirteen to fifteen years earlier. As far as preserved, Lavater had written to Kant from Zürich twice in 1774 and once in 1776, and Kant had sent a long epistle on the difference between Christ's teaching and the written record thereof to Lavater from Königsberg on April 28, 1775 [5, S. 141–142, 157–159, 167–172, 177]. Lavater had first approached Kant under the pretext of asking his help in redeeming a young Swiss guy, who got recruited into the Prussian army in Königsberg. He had extolled Kant as his favorite writer, as the friend of Herder, as one who was so human and with whom he was sympathetic in many a way ("mein Lieblingsschriftsteller Kant, Herders Freund [...], der so sehr Mensch, Mensch ist, [...] mit dem ich in manchem sympathisire"). He had reproached the philosopher for being silent in this new time, asking, whether he had become dead to the world? As a matter of fact Kant had not published for eight years and would not do so till his *Critik der reinen Vernunft* in 1781. Lavater had also sought Kant's opinion about faith and prayer, in which endeavor he had been thoroughly mistaken. Kant considered it a crime to flatter God and to make confessions out of fear of dying [5, S. 167–168]. He was known to state that it would open the floodgates to *Schwärmerei*, i. e. excessive enthusiasm or sentimentality, if one were to talk to something Invisible [13, S. 96]. When Lavater realized that he had asked the wrong person, he waited nearly an entire year, before thanking Kant for the "informative suggestions" ("lehrreichen Winke"), from which he was dissenting in some pieces ("obgleich ich anders denke in einigen Stücken..."), regretting – twice – not to have time to write more [5, S. 177]. This ended their correspondence.



So what happened in the dozen years afterwards that led Kant to such a negative judgment about Lavater, and who were Lavater's enemies, whom Karamzin would get to know and who according to Kant were all decent people?

Most likely Kant was referring to the proponents of the Enlightenment Nicolai and Biester in Berlin. Indeed, on his second day in Berlin, the 1st of July, 1789, Karamzin was to call on the author and bookdealer Friedrich Nicolai (1733–1811), who lived across the street from his hotel. He greeted Nicolai as “the friend of Lessing and Mendelssohn”, who had advanced the German literature in Russia. Nicolai in turn welcomed him with such courtesy as Karamzin would never have expected from a “Немецкого Ученого и книгопродавца” [6, с. 36–37]. Nicolai had been involved in a nasty controversy in 1787 and 1788, in which among other things he had accused Lavater of “so very fertile imagination and so very oppressed reason” (“so sehr erhöhte Einbildungskraft und so sehr niedergedrückter Vernunft” [15, S. 134]).

Johann Erich Biester (1749–1816) was the librarian of the Royal Library and also the editor of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, to which Kant a number of times contributed. He was a devoted and loyal friend of Kant's. Yet Karamzin was disgusted by Biester:

...признаться, сердце мое не может одобрить тона, в котором Господа Берлинцы пишут. Где искать терпимости, есть ли самые Философы, самые просветители — а они так себя называют — оказывают столько ненависти к тем, которые думают не так, как они... Лафатер есть один из тех, которых Берлинцы бранят при всяком случае; и есть ли он у них не совершенный Иезуит, то по крайней мере мечтатель. Я к Лафатеру не пристрастен, и обо многом думаю совсем не так, как он думает; однакожь уверен, что его Физиогномические Фрагменты будут читаемы и тогда, когда забудут, что жил на свете почтенный Доктор Бистер. Но оставим их [6, с. 38].

By the summer of 1789 Karamzin had exchanged letters with Lavater for three years. Lotman included them in his 1984 edition of the *Письма русского путешественника* [6], plus four later notes from 1789 till 1790. Lotman printed them in the original German as well as in Russian translation, the five answering letters from Lavater, however, only in Russian translation. This is especially regrettable in the case of Lavater's letter of June 16, 1787 [16, с. 23], because in the *Письма*, Karamzin quoted (in Russian) a passage from it that he read to a student fellow traveler (in the



original German, of course) on the way to Meissen on July 13, 1789 [6, c. 57, 470]. Apparently for over two years he had carried this precious document in his “записная книжка”. As it turns out, Lotman did not transcribe the autographs, which were probably inaccessible to him during the Cold War, but used the Karamzin-Lavater correspondence as discovered by F. Waldmann and published by the Imperial Academy of Sciences in 1893 [16], (ironically the year, in which Kant’s house in Königsberg was demolished). There Lavater’s letters to Karamzin are printed in the original German too. In addition there is also a long note that Lavater had enclosed for Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz (1751 – 1792), who had stayed with Lavater in 1777 and was by then, in 1787, Karamzin’s roommate in Moscow [16, c. 11, 63–67]. Apparently Karamzin was unaware that Lenz had studied with Kant in Königsberg from 1768 till 1771, as he did not bring up his name during his conversation with the philosopher in 1789. Since Karamzin’s stay in Königsberg was unplanned, there would have been no reason for Lenz, – leaving his deplorable mental condition aside, – to impress this biographical detail on the Russian traveler.

Compelled by affection and respect, Karamzin had first written to Lavater, in perfect German, from Moscow on August 14, 1786 [16, c. 3, 5, 7, 9]. His style has been characterized as “enthusiastic, rather long, too full of dots and dashes, exclamation points, and rhetorical questions” [7, p. 21]. Longing for a response with the “sentiments of his heart” (“Empfindungen meines Herzens”), Karamzin did not hear from Zürich until eight months later, as the mailing had taken this long. Lavater advised him to read his *Brüderliche Schreiben an verschiedene Jünglinge* (Winterthur, 1782; second edition 1787), which Karamzin promised to do “a thousand times” [16, c. 11, 21]. However, one wonders, whether the unctuous exhortations to pray and to believe in Jesus Christ were to his taste.

Encouraged by Lavater to send him one or two concrete queries, in his second letter of April 20, 1787, Karamzin posed the problem, how our soul is linked to our body, – whether the soul affects the body directly or indirectly [16, c. 17]? He was yearning to understand his own self, how to be more certain of his existence. To his dismay Lavater replied, that nobody “under the moon” could tell, what body and soul were in themselves, and that he was not brooding over the influence of the so-called soul on the so-called body [16, c. 23, 25].

Karamzin reacted with disbelief that the author of the *Physiognomischen Fragmente* [8], who had studied how someone’s character was expressed in his facial features, would not find it necessary to know, how the soul influ-



enced the body [16, c. 33]. Lavater's subsequent long silence pained him so much that he shed tears, whenever he was looking at Lavater's bust and the two letters he had received from him so far [16, c. 35].

At last Lavater briefly apologized in March of 1788 that he had simply been drowned in paper work; moreover Karamzin's questions were not easy to answer [16, c. 37]. Elated, in his last letter from Moscow before his departure for Germany, written on March 15, 1789, Karamzin asked Lavater about nothing less than the universal purpose of mankind [16, c. 47]. Lavater dealt at length with the question "Über Zweck des Daseyns" five months later, on August 19, 1789 [16, c. 49, 51], and the following year even printed his reply in his newly founded Berlin journal [6, c. 121; 10, S. 13–15], which shows how seriously he took his young friend.

In the same letter of March 1789 Karamzin also inquired about magnetism [16, p. 49], which he knew Lavater had investigated. Clearly then, Kant's remark that Lavater believed in magnetism had not astonished him. The Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) had been propagating "animal magnetism" as a healing device, but most scientists rejected his theories. Lavater had been introduced to magnetism and hypnotic sleep in Geneva in 1785 and had tried the cure on his wife and together with his physician brother on other patients as well [9].

How magnetism was ridiculed exactly in the year of Karamzin's travel through Germany, is illustrated by Mozart's opera "Così fan tutte", composed in 1789. In act I Despina uses a giant magnet to resuscitate the pretending "Albanians", the disguised lovers of Dorabella and Fiordiligi. And because he was born in Königsberg and had attended Kant's lectures in 1792, one should also remember E. T. A. Hoffmann's (1776–1822) story "Der Magnetiseur" of 1814, in which Mesmerism is even depicted as satanic.

Karamzin became face-to-face acquainted with Lavater, when he spent sixteen days in Zürich in August of 1789. He inscribed Lavater's *Fremdenbuch*: "Nicolas Karamsin in Moscau in dem Hause des Herrn Pleschtscheew auf Twerskaja, den 12ten Aug[ust]" [11, S. 127]. He had been disconcerted not to be as effusively received as he thought he deserved. After initial embraces, Lavater had gone about his business, leaving Karamzin alone to look at books in his cabinet [6, c. 106–107]. Also the following day Lavater did not bother about his Russian disciple, as he was beleaguered by visitors and alms seekers. Then on the third day (the day Karamzin signed the *Fremdenbuch*) Lavater invited him to an outing in a nearby village, but the seven and a half kilometers' hike over a steep mountain in the summer heat utterly tired Karamzin [6, c. 110]. On the sixth day, Lavater proposed that



Karamzin should translate selected works of his into Russian. Karamzin agreed by handshake, but remained skeptical whether such a publication would find any readers in Russia [6, c. 115–116]. Nevertheless till the end of 1790 Karamzin kept asking for the excerpts to be translated into Russian in his *Московской Журнал*, but Lavater did no longer pursue the project. Despite the frustrations, Karamzin's esteem of Lavater had grown steadily. Eventually he had seen him daily, dined and promenaded with him, and he had admired his pastoral care.

Karamzin had missed one Sunday sermon by Lavater, when he was returning too late from his excursion to the Rheinfall at Schaffhausen, but he heard him preaching from the pulpit of the Petri Church the next Sunday, August 24, 1789 – and was not impressed. According to him, the entire sermon could have been summarized in only one sentence. He mocked Lavater's routine to prepare his sermons during a single Saturday evening hour, which should not be difficult, if they all followed this same model [6, c. 123].

Lavater's literary bequest is kept at the Zentralbibliothek Zürich [12]. He saved not only the hundreds of letters he received, but also manual copies of those he sent out. According to the Zürich inventory there survive at least 13 letters (not 11 as in the Waldmann / Lotman editions) by Karamzin to Lavater, and 6 (not 5) letters by Lavater to Karamzin. Also Lavater's secret diaries are archived there, still unpublished. They range from June 1786 to January 1789 [17, S. 127], i. e. they end half a year before Karamzin's arrival in Zürich, so that unfortunately they contain nothing about the Russian traveler.

Understandably there is no trace of the Königsberg episode in Kant's papers, except that allegedly Kant had entered Karamzin's name into his “карманную книжку” [6, c. 21]. Kant and Karamzin never corresponded. The only records of their encounter are the *Письма русского путешественника*. Printed in 1791, in the February issue of volume I of the *Московской Журнал*, they are the very first mention in print of Kant in Russian.

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КАРАМЗИН, КАНТ И ЛАФАТЕР – ПЕРЕСЕЧЕНИЕ БИОГРАФИЙ

В «Письмах русского путешественника» Карамзин подробно описывает свое пребывание у Канта 18 июня 1789 года. Его запись, опубликованная в 1791 году, важна тем, что имя великого немецкого философа впервые упоминается в русской печати. В разговоре с Кантом Карамзин говорил о долгожданной предстоящей встрече



в Цюрихе с И. К. Лафатером, с которым он переписывался уже три года. А Кант предостерег его, указывая на чрезмерное воображение Лафатера, вследствие чего он верит снам и магнетизму. «Мечтательность» Лафатера еще резче осуждают издатели Ф. Николай и И. Е. Бистер, с которыми Карамзин вскоре познакомится в Берлине. В переписке Лафатера с Кантом, опубликованной в 1900 году, и с Карамзиным, опубликованной в 1893 году, при всей разнице во взглядах чувствуется и обоюдное почитание.

Ключевые слова: Н. М. Карамзин, И. Кант, И. К. Лафатер, Ф. Николаи, И. Э. Бистер, Я. М. Р. Ленц, магнетизм, Просвещение.