

ADAM DROZDEK

LEVSHIN VS. VOLTAIRE

Vasilii Alekseevich Levshin (1746-1826) was one of the most prolific writers and translators in eighteenth century Russia and he is primarily known today for his multivolume collections *Russian tales* (1780-1783) and *The evening hours or old tales of Slavic Drevlians* (1787-1788). He also wrote plays, operas, and published many compendia related to agriculture, hunting, maintenance of the country household, and the like. To a large extent, his work was published by Novikov and his cooperation went beyond strictly publishing: Levshin was a member of the Moscow circle of Rosicrucians, arguably the most spiritual wing of the Russian masonry.

Voltaire

Levshin expressed his views related to spirituality and religion most fully and in a somewhat systematic fashion in his polemic with Voltaire. The polemic was prompted by a letter from one Z. who wanted to know who is right, Voltaire or Rousseau. What was meant here was Voltaire's reflections on the earthquake of 1755 in Lisbon and Rousseau's critical response to them. The problem at hand is theodicy, the problem of God's goodness in the world full of evil and the problem of God's providential care for this world. Although Levshin stated that a fully satisfactory answer exceeded his powers, he nevertheless did not avoid expressing his opinion on the subject starting with a short answer: Voltaire is wrong (4/220).¹

(¹) *Письмо, содержащее некоторыя разсуждения о поэме Г. Волтера на разрушение Лиссабона, писанное В. Л[е]вш[и]н[ы]м к приятелю его господину З***. В Университетской типографии у Н. Новикова, Москва 1788, also in Т. В. Артемьева (ed.), Мысли о душе. Русская метафизика XVIII века. Наука, Санкт-Петербург 1996, pp. 220-254, and in А. А. Златопольская (ed), Вольтер:*

Voltaire wanted to show that God is not all-good and if He is, He is not omnipotent, or that He does not rule over the work He created; thus, no providence. Levshin's main problem was Voltaire's arrogance: he thought that his finite mind was able to penetrate designs of the infinite God, the God who is the Unknowable (*Непостижимый*) (6/221). It is just foolishness to speak about attributes and plans of the Unknowable when we only imperfectly can figure out attributes and plans of other humans (49/240).

It is enough to look around to see how Voltaire was wrong, enough to analyze with common sense what can be seen in nature (6/221). We do not even know the inner workings of nature. It appears that we are created to be virtuous and we are pilgrims in this world for whom it is enough to know what is close to them; do these pilgrims really have to know in detail the properties of the ground on which they walk? (222). If a person begins to scrutinize anything, then there is no end to it and the pilgrimage would stop.

To ponder upon unneeded things by which our inclinations do not improve nor morals become better nor [these things] are of any use for the society, is a diversion from the true path or a harmful delay on the needed way since instead we could do something useful. Supreme wisdom of the Creator protects us from such enterprises in that it limited our understanding. (9-10/223)

In this, Levshin was not siding with obscurantism, but he tried to point to limitations of even the most enlightened human mind that just should be aware of its limitations before trying to overreach itself.

Interestingly, human curiosity to know everything shows that human existence does not end with death since that would contradict the reason why the mind was given to humans, the mind which perfected itself over years (10/223). Also, when dying, all people expect future happiness. God put in each person a desire of the greatest understanding and happiness. It would be contrary to God's goodness to put in man such a desire which would only cause anxiety (53/241). God does nothing – the human mind in particular – just to destroy it,

pro et contra, антология. РХГА, Санкт-Петербург 2013, pp. 74-107; page numbers are from the original and from Artem'eva's anthology.

and the presence of such insatiable desire of knowledge and of happiness is for Levshin the most important proof of the immortality of the soul (54/242), the proof which was many times expressed in Russia and in Europe. The proof really relies on the goodness and omnipotence of God who does nothing in vain – the theological sentiment which was known also in the Antiquity – and thus it simply cannot be that the desire and hope for more knowledge and happiness was put into humans in vain, just to vex them.

Investigation of nature provides also a theological argument concerning God's providential care. In Levshin's view, the world is the mirror of God's perfection (11/223). All phenomena form together an intricate, harmonious whole and removing just one phenomenon from nature, such as winds, or one element from underground, such as clay, would wreak havoc in the entire world. Thus, all parts of nature have been prepared by one wise and good Creator – one Creator since multiple creators, if there were such, would be in the way of one another (13-14/224). Humans can find everything they need on earth and underground. This is not in contradiction with the existence of other inhabited worlds, since by such an existence "God shows his supreme wisdom and his greatness in other creation and he cares about each inhabited world just as about ours" (15/225). Stars, which are fiery spheres (18/226), were not created in vain; they give light to innumerable inhabited worlds (19/227). Multiplicity of voices in a concert shows the skill of a composer so much so the multiplicity of worlds (15/225).

Also multiplicity of kinds of animals and plants point to one Creator (15/225). Levshin uses many examples of flora and fauna to show God's wisdom. Examples are drawn primarily from the massive work of Pluche, *Le spectacle de la nature* (1732), whose name Levshin mentioned in passing (50/240). All of it speaks about the unity of God, His perfections, power, wisdom, will, and goodness, and about the infinity of His attributes (18/226).

In the context of theodicy, a question is frequently asked, how about dangerous or destructive animals, for example, what is the use of insects that damage ships? (27/230). According to Levshin, 1. we know only a very small part of nature, whereby we cannot appreci-

ate the usefulness of what appears to us harmful.² 2. By the divine arrangement, harmful animals live in places in which humans do not live, whereby they become really harmful if humans unnecessarily venture to these places. 3. What is harmful can also be useful, e.g., skins of snakes that can be used to manufacture something.³ 4. Harmful animals are not invincible and they can always be defeated through human ingenuity; moreover, there are cures for their harms. 5. Insects that cause damage also produce fertilizer. Also, insects that damage ships forced people to go north to acquire tar, thereby bringing goods to people living there. In this way, the harm of the animal world leads to the expansion of commerce (28-29/231). God created on earth everything for humans; therefore, even what appears to be harmful was also created for human benefit. God's intention in all creation is to provide, enlighten, and instruct. In realization of this lies human wisdom (31-32/232).

“God made man the Tsar on earth over all other creation and gave him reason allowing him to rule” (37/234). “Man is the center of God's works on earth, he is their destination, on him is centered their union”. Without man on earth, the union of creation would fall apart (38/235), on earth, that is, not in the universe. The world would fall apart if animals had more reason than they have. The crow would like other food, an ox would throw off its yoke. Everything God created is good. Evil is either needed for the union of the entire good whole or is not evil at all and only humans do not see its moral and natural usefulness. Humans were provided with defense against all evil and thus evil is the result of their neglect of caution that God put in them (45/238). And to directly address Voltaire's ruminations, Levshin said that the inhabitants of Lisbon disregarded signs; it was not the first time high buildings collapsed there causing death, narrow streets hampering escape being a contributing factor, and yet the in-

(²) “You [man,] have a finite mind [...] / [And when] judging about things you do not see their end/purpose, / And not knowing their beginning/principle and you talk about the means / And want to conclude how this of that happened”, Василий Левшин, *Нравоучительныя басни и притчи*. Типография при театре у Хр. Клаудия, Москва 1787, p. 66.

(³) “Often people take what is good to be evil”, as concludes one of his moral tales, *ivi*, p. 3.

habitants did not take any precautions from this happening again (47/239).

“God wanted to create beings which could become like Him and could participate in His happiness”. Such beings would have to have reason and will – and only man on earth meets this condition (59/244). God allowed humans to understand what is evil and wants them to strive for good and to stay away from evil to be like Him, without which participation in His happiness is impossible. God acts in humans to bring them closer to Himself, to unite them with Himself. In this endeavor, conscience is an indispensable contributing factor; conscience, which is a faculty independent of reason and will (63/245), is in a person “a supervisor and judge from whom nothing is concealed; in his heart it is written what is good and evil; his actions are judged by his own conscience which accuses him and judges” (64/246) and this judge acts according to the universal law which is inscribed in each human being (65/247).

Levshin stated that he wrote his treatise in the defense of the Christian law. He referred also to the Scriptures, although indirectly, through a lengthy quotation from Euler. He was convinced that our Savior came to earth to prompt our souls to salvation.

In an interesting closing argument, Levshin stated:

Even if I am mistaken, even if it is in vain for me to revere the Christian law, even if my soul is not immortal and there will be nothingness after my death, even if my faith is illusory, I will believe without a doubt and I will be rewarded since I find great fortification in enduring the griefs of this life by having hope in my expectation. What will I lose if there is nothing after death? but if there is [...] how much do I win only for the small [price of] constraining my passions and when the win over myself is so beneficial also in this life. (78/252)

Consciously or otherwise, Levshin used here a version of Pascal’s wager: we lose very little if we live according to the divine commandments, just this short life, and if there is no afterlife, but we gain eternity if afterlife is real.

Providence

The anti-deistic treatise is rather unique among the many works of Levshin; however, some sentiments expressed there can also be found in his other writings.

In *The most recent voyage* Levshin presented Narsim who believes that the stars are not just like nails “driven into the vault by the hand of the omnipotent artist. Foolish mortals! How little you understand about the goodness of creation!”. They are immense suns. People think that all of it was created just for humans. Through Narsim, Levshin scathingly criticized this fairly popular view in his time, the view also expressed by the official church: “What pride!” (13.139).⁴ Not for humans shine millions of suns. There are innumerable inhabited earths and in comparison with their inhabitants we are like flies. The supremely perfect reason did not create all of it just for humans (140). With this view, Levshin set himself against official Orthodoxy that combatted the view of the plurality of the world.

In his description of a dream of a fantastic voyage to the moon, theological issues come up in conversations of the narrator Narsim and the old Lunarian/Selenite Frolagii. Since Lunarians turned out to be just like humans (150), the physical similarity is also reflected in the similarity of their worldview and their lifestyle. The Lunarians believe in the Creator of all (156). However, the details of creation have been lost to them with time. They do not know who was the first man and how exactly the moon was created (161). The moon was once part of the earth, but they do not know how it separated from it (162). The Lunarians live according to the natural law “written with indelible letters in our souls”, and thus, no written laws are needed (14.5): “everyone knows that one should love God as a benefactor”, thereby staying away from troubles (6). On the other hand, people on earth spoiled perfect original order through their pride and departure from God. They introduced idolatry (15.16) and instead of glorifying the Almighty, who gives fruit from earth, they worshipped the sun (18). The first root of evil was the pride of reason and thus

(⁴) Василий Левшин, *Новейшее путешествие. Сочинено в городе Белеве*, in “Собеседник любителей российского слова”, (1784), vol. 13, pp. 138-166, vol. 14, pp. 5-33, (1809²), vol. 15, pp. 5-33, vol. 16, pp. 35-47.

defiance of laws (19). People thought that there was no limit to their knowledge. Not seeing their blindness, they taught others thereby spreading error (33). It appears that in Levshin's view, a restoration of the godly life could be accomplished by (re)introduction of the simple way of life of the Lunarians: no laws, no temple, just trusting the natural law written in the heart. Although the world is all damaged, there is one place on earth where paradise exists, and it is easy to guess that for Levshin this was Russia with the embodiment of wisdom on the throne expressed in her laws set down in the *Nakaz* (41). Thus, a lofty voyage to the moon ends with a rather tawdry panegyric of the monarch of the land of plenty (40) whose rule should be everywhere imitated (47, see the appendix).⁵

Levshin's strong belief in God's providence is rather strongly expressed in his tales.

In sixteen volumes, Levshin retold stories of the many heroic exploits of the figures known from traditional Russian folk-tales. The stories are full of supernatural deeds of knights-errant frequently endowed with enormous strength and unusual courage. Importantly, they lived by a code of honor which required them always to hold on to virtue, defend the weak, and defend women in distress (1.73)⁶ – and so they did, bringing up virtuous life to be their primary concern.⁷ Among other things, virtue manifested itself in mercy, and, for

(⁵) A suggestion has been made that some statements in Levshin's panegyric have "satirical shades of meaning" and contain some "implicit criticism" (115), even "scathing irony" (116), Ю[лия] А. Ростовцева, *Утопия В. А. Левшина "Новейшее путешествие, сочиненное в городе Белеве". Между eutopia и utopia*, "Вестник Омского государственного педагогического университета", (2017) no. 3 (16), pp. 115-116. On the other hand, the panegyric is considered simply "an exalted praise of the great Empress", Л[ариса] В. Омелько, *Масонские идеи в прозе В. А. Левшина 1780-х годов*, in В. И. Сахаров (ed.), *Масонство и русская литература XVIII – начала XIX вв.* УРСС, Москва 2000, p. 58.

(⁶) References are made to Levshin's *Русские сказки, содержащая Древнейшие повествования о славных Богатырях, Сказки народные и прочие оставшиеся через пересказывание в памяти Приключения*. В универсипепской типографии, у Н. Новикова, Москва 1780, vols. 1-4; 1783, vols. 5-10.

(⁷) Cf. Любовь А. Курышева, *Повести о богатырях в "Русских сказках" В. А. Лёвшина: сказочно-историческая модель повествования*. Наука, Новосибирск 2009, pp. 60-61.

instance, it was possible for them to say, “We will give our debt to virtue by forgiving him [evildoing Rukman] our insults/hurts” (4.7) and they could agree with Vsemila when she said that “vengeance executed in enemies is a mean affair, and forgiveness of a fault is the duty of virtue itself” (3.105). “Virtue always brings reward” (6.62), in particular, “there is always an end of misfortune; one has only to know how to endure and virtue will in the end triumph” (7.205). The certainty of such a reward stemming from virtue is based on the belief of the providential goodness of the gods. Except for a few pieces satirizing some mores of Russia of Levshin’s times, most fables, retold and authored by Levshin himself, take place in pre-Christian times. Levshin frequently spoke about various pagan divinities, but he also often spoke of the divine sphere rather generally as the heavens, fate, or just the gods. The heavens and the gods are invariably benevolent and when speaking about them, Levshin endowed them with Christian characteristics, in particular, with providential care, which, arguably, is the most important divine attribute in Levshin’s tales. An enchanted book says that Gassan should always trust in the gods (2.182). The goddess Didiliia/Dzidzileyla states, “the Gods can never be unjust and mortals are wrong when they ascribe them cruelty. Regulations of their providence are always leaning toward the good of man and only evil people conclude about them according to their inclinations” (6.115). Zvenislav experiences hardship not as revenge for offending the goddess, but because he was destined for higher things and marriage would only make him weak (115) and he would forget about his duty to help others. The gods incited in him love for Alzana so that he would look for her and on his way he would do a lot of good, thereby fulfilling “plans of destiny” (116). In a dream, good spirit Dobrada told Tarbels that the gods caused all his hardship so that “the years of adulthood made you better able to know the price of marriage and to protect you from frivolity” (132); heavens’ providence “subject us to misfortunes so that we purify ourselves through them from vices” (142). For this reason, “it is a godless error (7.173) of the unfortunate to think that the heavens rejoice over our suffering! We ourselves inventing the cause of our misfortunes place the blame on them” (174). The statue of Chernobog (Black God) said to Roksolan,

All that the mortals consider to be the wrath [of the gods] is just a tool that leads them to improvement. The gods consider people to be their children and the fact that the mortals consider to be the extreme misfortune is only the path through which they lead them to happiness. Misfortunes teach them to see actions that have bad consequences. (9.82-83)

Such a trust should strengthened a person even in the face of death. Before his execution (from which he was later rescued), marquis Klorand said,

my innocence and faith fortified me to look at human life as a chain of misfortunes and to consider death as the gate through which I enter the kingdom of peace and wellbeing. [...] The justice of Divine fate cannot be measured by visible surface since the judgment of heaven, although it is inaccessible to human reason, is always just and does not have to give an account why it sends hardship to man (8.196)

and “What it [fate] determines – one cannot hide from it / And can only arm oneself against it by patience”.⁸

Levshin the Rosicrucian

It appears that Levshin had an unshakeable belief in God’s goodness and the universal divine providence which touched all God’s creation, Orthodox believers or otherwise. Does this indicate his equally unshakeable allegiance to the Orthodox church?

We learn very little about Levshin’s attitude toward the official Russian church. However, he occasionally appears to reveal his feelings concerning the clergy. In his tales, priests are not always the most virtuous characters. The archpriest of Perun predicted “many misfortunes; however, fate made him a liar [...] since [prince] Vladimir soon accepted the true law and with his brother skillfully finished off (*отделал*) Perun” (1.145; the statue was dragged by a horse and beaten, according to the *Primary chronicle*). Another priest, the father of Prelepa, out of shame, to cover her very earthly pregnancy, said that she had “a secret relation (*обхождение*)” with the god Popoenz/Perkun (1.187); out of reverence, people brought gifts to him

(⁸) Василий Левшин, *Нравоучительныя басни...*, cit., p. 23.

and the priest only regretted he had only one daughter (191). Priests sometimes treated better those who brought good gifts, although before the gods all people should be equal (10.235). Such statements could be considered as testimonies of the true color of the pagan priesthood. However, Levshin did not stop there. In *The adventures of Prosvet*, a tale filled with speaking birds, but taking place in contemporary Russia, a siskin in its peeping endeavors saw a wife cheating on her husband with a priest (6.177) and the husband under the pretense of prayer was cheating on his wife (178). Also, in his description of the social system of the Lunarians, Levshin did not see any room for the priesthood. In a way, the heads of families fulfilled that role. The unreliability of the clergy and the hypocrisy of people may have led Levshin away from the official church, but the demand for inner spiritual fulfilment may have led him to the circle of Novikov.

Novikov was an adamant Rosicrucian, which with other members of their masonic brotherhood – to mention only Schwartz and Gama-leia – aimed at the spiritual revival of Christian faith. That may have been appealing to Levshin, who himself joined a masonic lodge. To a moderate extent, his masonic convictions are reflected in his writings, particularly in his earlier publications. The strongest expression can be found in the *Russian tales*, where in the middle of his *Adventures of Liubimir and Gremislava*, completely unrelated to the tale, he inserted a 50-page description of a gallery in the academic orchard with statues, basically, an astronomical display (8.74-123).⁹

There was there a globe (75) with the sun above it with the number 140 indicating how much larger it is than the earth (76). The sun makes full revolution in 27 days. It covers 935 diameters of the earth in 1 hour (77). The sun is the true element of the unique fire which can nowhere be found now in genuine form, which is why the sun is partially solid fire and partially liquid fire sea (79). The gallery showed six statues (80). One silver statue depicted the moon on 2 bulls, on one leg it was written, 29 days, 12 hours, 40 minutes, on another, 27 days 7 hours, 42 minutes, and the glass head was 42 smal-

⁹) Cf. Виктор Шкловский, *Чулков и Левшин*. Издательство писателей, Ленинград 1933, p. 173.

ler than the earth; rivers, seas, forests were depicted on it (81). Mercury stood on a cock and a snake (83). It revolves in 6 hours. A copper statue of Venus stood on a swan and a dove (84). Steel statue of Mars stood on a goat and a wolf (85). Jupiter, out of tin, stood on an eagle and of a deer. It determines the fate of people according to the ancients (89). It has its own light and 4 moons (91). Sixth, a lead statue of Saturn (93). Some sages say that what is the stomach in man, so is the earth in the planetary system; also brain – the moon, heart – the sun, liver – Jupiter, lung – Mercury; kidneys – Venus, gall – Mars, spleen (96) – Saturn. In all globes, there was earth, air, fire, and water in various proportions (97, 115). The overseer of the exhibition said he did not reject the view of Pythagoras and Xenophon that there was life on all planets and inhabitants of large planets had proportional height with bodies unlike human (98). Comets may also be inhabited (99). They were made by the Creator, but not as signs of imminent disasters (100). The sun is the center of the solar system, not the earth (101). The sun seems to move just as the land seems to move and the ship stands still on the sea. All things on earth are attracted to its center by the magnetic (!) power (102). There are over 100,000 stars in the Milky Way, each created for a purpose “just as the smallest fiber in the human body” (104). Innumerable stars considered immovable so far (105) move imperceptibly. There are suns among them (106). The supremely wise Creator created harmony among celestial bodies so that each one has its purpose. “Supremely wise Creator made in it [the world] perfect harmony so that there is nothing that would not have its purpose”. The ancient likened the world to the harmony of the 7-string lyre: “because man received from God rational soul to think about it and [because] he is the first string among them, there is nothing more honorable for him than making himself penetrate these mysteries in which we can be astonished by the omnipotence of our Creator” (107). These seven strings of the lyre of the world are fire, air, earth, water, vegetation, animals, and man. Heaven is the principle/beginning, perfection, and image of all fuller harmonies in which 7 orbs of planets depict 7 strings (108). There is harmony also among elements: fire is twice subtler than air, 3 times subtler than and once sharper than water, etc. (111). Telescopes show on the moon mountains, forest, also animals and people, so we should

conclude that it is similarly on other planets (113). “There is nothing more perfect in harmony than man himself”. Man is truly a little world [microcosm], the most perfect creation. The heart is constantly active, like the sun (114), blood animates everything, eyes are like the stars, and bones are like mountains (115). “The most perfect beauty can be only in the soul remains in an amazing harmony which with the body, just like the planets of our [Solar] system” (122).

In this description, Levshin used masonic symbolism, which, was taken from earlier tradition. For example, in the alchemic tradition, the moon is associated with silver, Mars with iron, Jupiter with tin, Saturn with lead, Mercury with mercury, and copper, “the most beautiful metal”, apparently with Venus.¹⁰ In this tradition, “man (the microcosm) is the tangible endpoint of all creatures, in whom all the seeds of the universe are present and perfected in him and which cannot be destroyed”; “man (the microcosm) is the focal point of the entire universe (the macrocosm)”.¹¹ “Man is the most noble and the most perfect creation of God and thus is called the small world [microcosm] or a summary of it all, since he includes and has folded together in himself and mysteriously united with him the powers, virtues, faculties and attributes of the entire nature, heaven, stars, animals, earthly plants and minerals”.¹² The plurality of the inhabited worlds “can be clearly demonstrated by considering the power and glory of the living God”¹³ and masons spoke about God as the Creator of worlds.¹⁴

(¹⁰) Georg von Welling, *Opus mago-cabbalisticum et theosophicum in which the origin, nature, characteristics and use of salt, sulfur and mercury are described in three parts* [1719]. Weiser Books, York Beach 2006, pp. 74, 75, 78, 79; cf. Robert Fludd, *Mosaicall philosophy: grounded upon the essentiall truth or eternal sapience*. Humphrey Moseley, London 1659, p. 215, and A. Ω. [Abraham von Frankenberg], *Gemma magica или магический драгоценный камен*. [Москва 1784 (1688)], pp. 164-165. Elagin, a mason, explicitly mentioned Welling and Fludd whose writings he studied, И[ван] П. Елагин, *Повесть о себе самом*, “Русский архив”, (1864), no. 1, col. 108.

(¹¹) Georg von Welling, *Opus mago-cabbalisticum...*, cit., pp. 29, 36.

(¹²) A. Ω. [Abraham von Frankenberg], *Gemma magica...*, cit., p. 184.

(¹³) Georg von Welling, *Opus mago-cabbalisticum...*, cit., pp. 122-123, 169, 395, 405-409.

(¹⁴) “Магазин Свободно-Каменьщической”, 1 (1784), no. 1, pp. 45, 121.

It is interesting that although Levshin's astronomical gallery is filled with alchemical and masonic symbolism, it in no wise sacrifices scientific knowledge to make a spiritual point. In fact, this knowledge is used to show the majesty of God and the intricacies of the world embodied in this knowledge point to the supreme wisdom of God. Although the masonic astronomical gallery is put in the middle of tales full of miraculous events, it does not use miracles as a way of accentuating God's providence and greatness. Levshin even tried to rationalize miraculous events of the tales. At one point, in *The tale of Bulat*, an old man stamped on the floor and a table with food appeared; he knocked on the table and there was some more food on it (9.24); he explained that it was not due to sorcery, since most of it was based on natural principles. Spirits (who were under the sorcerer's control) are unable to violate

the course and order of nature. The Gods themselves never use their power to violate its workings since what they once created should not be violated. All that appears to us to be miraculous is the consequence of the human reason. People devoted to the investigation of nature arrive by it to its first principles whereby they foresee what is to happen, use such cases and amaze people by what will happen and others consider them to be sorcerers. (25)

Human reason "exceeds all other gifts",¹⁵ but it has to be kept in check. As Levshin stated in his discussion of Voltaire, the pride of reason led to the fall of man. On the other hand, reason by its discoveries of the intricate mechanism of nature leads to the appreciation of the power of the Creator, and thus to the serious concern about the afterlife. However, it is also important for the earthly existence: "the gifts of reason, these light beams that elevate the soul" are "the source of all useful knowledge" which becomes the source of "the enlightenment of people that becomes the foundation of greatness, riches, and the power of the Government".¹⁶

(¹⁵) В[а]с[и]л[ий] Левшин, *Загадки, служащая для невинного разделения праздного времени*. Печатаны при Императорском Московском университете, [Москва] 1773, p. 32.

(¹⁶) [Василий Левшин], *Вечерние часы, или Древняя сказка славян древлянских*. В Типографии Компании Типографической, Москва 1787-1788, vol. 3, pp. 16-17.

In sum, Levshin embraced the rationalism of Voltaire, his appreciation of knowledge and accomplishments of human reason, but he saw its limitation and rejected Voltaire's pride, his rejection of the divine providence, his pretense that he knew what was the proper course of the universe, his desire to dictate the ways of God concerning how the universe should be governed.

Appendix: Catherine II

As it was customary among nearly all Russian authors of the times, we find in Levshin's writings frequent praises of the monarchical rule, the praises which were not particularly concerned about the facts on the ground.

A monarch should direct all his efforts to the good of his subjects. God does not make someone a monarch for himself "but so that he would be a man for the entire society" (8.20). In *The tale of Balamir*, Alavar, a friend of the prince Balamir, said, "a sovereign who did a lot should not think he did enough, since such thinking can easily lead to no action" (10.7). "A sovereign who did all according to his power should think that he is only at the beginning of his work" (8). This, to be sure, refers also to the female sovereign. "Women cede to men only in respect to physical strength, but as to spiritual [strength], nature did not make any difference" (9). Under the rule of queen Milosveta, a foreigner (15) – incidentally, just like Catherine II – "laws [as in the *Nakaz*], care, generosity and supreme wisdom surpassed the abilities of a mortal" (13). However, there is nothing more difficult than being a monarch (5.205). Therefore, people should do their best to enhance the monarchical rule. "Even an innocent man should suffer with joy and consider it to be his honor when he becomes an offering for reconciliation of the throne with people" (8.197). Even if the throne is the source of suffering. In *The story of Zaoleshanin*, Miroslav remained loyal to the prince (5.199) after she committed suicide when the prince tried to violate her (195) and blamed it all on evil advisors of the prince (200). Would, for instance, Novikov, Matseevich or Radishchev endorse this sentiment?

Even purely entertaining and often frivolous plays of Levshin are not free of praises of Catherine. In *Rejoicing Kaluga and Tula*, Catherine is pronounced as the cause of the happiness of Russia (act 1,

scene 5) and *The king on the hunt* revolves around a perfect king loved by all people, the only cause of the prosperity of his people. Ivan heard in the city that people spoke well about the king since he fed the poor, built schools in cities, defended the fatherland, expanded it without spilling blood, issued wise laws, loved his subjects as his children, rewarded merits, punished vices, and punished evildoers with forgiveness. Maksim summarizes the royal approach to the rule: mercy softens hearts; the sword hardens them (3:4). Just in case, someone might not get it, at the end of the play, the choir sings a song, which is an acrostic spelling the name, *Ekaterina V[toraiia]* (or *V[elikaia]*, 3:11).

In all this, it must be added that the Rosicrucians vowed the loyalty to the monarch. It was not of much help in Catherine's persecution of Novikov and his circle.

ABSTRACT

Vasilij Alekseevič Levšin (1746-1826) è stato uno dei più prolifici scrittori e traduttori della Russia del Settecento e oggi è conosciuto in primo luogo per le sue raccolte di racconti in più volumi. Egli ha scritto anche un pamphlet in cui difende la cura provvidenziale di Dio dagli argomenti di Voltaire, da questi usati in occasione del terremoto di Lisbona del 1755. Levšin abbracciò il razionalismo di Voltaire, ma rifiutò l'alterigia dello scrittore e filosofo francese e la sua pretesa di sapere quali fossero le giuste direzioni dell'universo. Levšin era anche membro del circolo moscovita dei Rosacroce e tracce delle sue vedute massoniche possono essere rinvenute nei suoi scritti.

