CHAPTER V

FONVIZIN'S LETTERS FROM ABROAD

Two important works preceded Karamzin's historic contribution to the genre. Denis Fonvizin's *Letters from the Second and Third Journey Abroad* (1777–78, 1784–85)¹ and Alexander Radishchev's *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* (1790) were unique and innovative within the limited context of eighteenth century Russian literature. Both writers took outspoken and controversial stands on extra-literary subjects. The former critically evaluated France and foreigners in general, while the latter excoriated Russia's peculiar institution of serfdom. Their ideas were espoused and developed by future generations.

Fonvizin and his wife went to France partly to seek a cure for her tapeworm (the author speaks of her medical progress in the correspondence with relatives) and no doubt they were also motivated by curiosity.² They spent a winter in Montpellier which was famous for its doctors and then proceeded to Paris. Fonvizin's letters to his sister and to Peter Panin,³ the brother of the illustrious statesman, Nikita Panin, are, despite the choleric tone that ranges from subtle irony to rhetorical indignation, masterpieces of expository prose. They are

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¹ The second journey to France and the third journey to Italy inspired the most voluminous and interesting correspondence. The first journey was an official mission to Germany, and the fourth, to Carlsbad, was undertaken to restore the author's own severely damaged health.
² The Slovar' russkix svetskix pisatelej (1845) gives as the reason behind Fonvizin's trip to France the author's fear of the consequences of a gibe at Potémkîn. Also unlikely is the hypothesis advanced by Makogonenko (N. Novikov i russkoe prosveščenie XVIII veka, Moscow-Leningrad, 1952, p. 385) and others to the effect that F. was engaged in secret diplomatic negotiations against England after the outbreak of the American Revolution. Although he did meet Ben Franklin, the American ambassador to France, there is no direct evidence that he discharged any important diplomatic mission in Paris. For wishful thinking on this point see L. Kulakova, Denis I. Fonvizin, Moscow-Leningrad, 1966, p. 75.
³ From 1766 Fonvizin had been working as N. Panin's trusted Secretary in the Foreign Ministry. Fonvizin ably supported his protector's liberal ideas with his pen.
written in colloquial Russian quite different from Karamzin’s equally conversational but self-consciously mannered prose.

Fonvizin’s letters are entirely authentic and were not necessarily meant to comprise a separate and finished literary work. The author did, however, intend to publish the Panin correspondence in a 1788 edition of his collected works. By this time he had so antagonized Catherine with his attacks on her autocracy that she forbade publication of this edition. Only two of the Panin letters were published during the author’s lifetime.

Artistically the letters to his sister (and relatives) are the best; since they contain Fonvizin’s most personal and spontaneous reactions. The tone of the Panin letters is formal and businesslike. Both correspondences reflect a single preoccupation: to depict France as it really was. And far from being impressed by what he saw, Fonvizin is careful to point out, wherever possible, the superiority of things Russian.

He writes his sister from Paris: “I have profited a great deal from traveling. Aside from improving my health, I have learned to be more indulgent toward those inadequacies that offended me in my own country. I have seen that in every land there is much more bad than good; that people everywhere are people, that fools abound everywhere ....” In other words you can be just as happy in one’s own country as anywhere else so long as “your conscience is clear and reason guides imagination and not imagination reason.” (From a similar passage in a letter to Panin from Paris, 20/31 March, 1778.)

Yorick, despite his partiality for imagination, expresses very similar thoughts about the advantages of staying home in his “Preface in the Désobligeant.” Sterne would nonetheless have placed Fonvizin in the category of “spleenetic travelers.” Untouched by the influence of Sentimentalism, Fonvizin’s perspective is totally that of the enlightened rationalist who sees it as his duty to condemn superstition, ignorance, sham and corruption wherever he detected them. He was unimpressed with France and Italy; in fact we not only detect a strong dose of the philistine in him, but we sense that he may well have formulated the “message” of the letters long before the actual

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4 According to K. Pigarev, all the letters, “or rather satirically colored travel sketches—were intended not merely for the addressees, but also for a broader circle of readers.” Tvorčestvo Fonvizina (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1954), p. 130. The point is that Fonvizin knew that his letters would be read by friends, acquaintances, and other interested people.