

COVER PAGE

**Reading novels at the Winter Palace under Nicholas I:  
from the tsar to the stokers**

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**ABSTRACT**

How did the reading matter enjoyed by Nicholas I differ from that of one of his stokers? This article focuses on the novels enjoyed by a broad spectrum of readers living at the court of Nicholas I, from the tsar himself and the members of the imperial family to their servants. Based on archival sources such as the loan registers and the correspondence of the Tsar’s and the Palace staff’s libraries, we have investigated two cultural worlds, very different but nonetheless with the same passion for novels. This paper shows how, despite social and cultural differences, these two communities of readers actually often ended up reading the same authors and the same novels. What really distinguished them was not so much their consumption of different texts, but rather the way in which they read and interpreted the same books and, more generally, the different purpose that they attributed to reading. According to the position of the readers at court, and what they saw in the Winter Palace, whether

that was a political cabinet in which state ideology was discussed, a place in which the courtiers felt suffocated by hierarchies and etiquette, or a place where the servants could find books otherwise unobtainable, reading novels could constitute either a form of social control, or a form of escapism, or a school of good taste and proper behaviour.

### **Bio sketch**

Damiano Rebecchini is an Associate Professor of Russian at the State University of Milan. His research focuses on the History of Reading, the History of Education and the Court Culture in Nineteenth Century Russia. He was an Alexander von Humboldt fellow at the Centre Marc Bloch in Berlin. He is the author of *Il business della storia. Il romanzo russo sul 1812 fra ideologia e mercato* (Salerno, 2016) and co-editor of *Reading in Russia. Literary Communication and Practices of Reading, 1760-1930* (Milan, 2016), and of *Reading Russia. A History of Reading in Modern Russia* (Milan, 2019).

## Reading novels at the Winter Palace under Nicholas I: from the tsar to the stokers

In recent years, scholars have paid increasing attention to the political and cultural life of the Russian court<sup>1</sup>. In his influential book, *Scenarios of Power*, Richard Wortman analyzed the Russian court, with its ceremonies, parties and parades, imagining it as a stage on which “an ongoing theater of power” was played out<sup>2</sup>. This paper attempts to observe the court from a different perspective, asking what lay behind all those showy manifestations of court culture and ideology. Which books were read at court? What motivated the purchase and reading of those books? And, more generally, what purpose did reading serve at court? By analyzing the books read and the main reading practices at the Winter Palace, we gain insight into certain hidden mechanisms of court culture. By analyzing the space of the court not as a “theater of power”, but as an intimate reading room in which the members of the court exchanged ideas about the latest literary output of their time, the paper tries to shine a light on that mixture of desires and fears, of censorship and self-censorship that those books aroused in them, shaping more complex social and cultural identities than those manifested in their monarchic “theatrical masks”.

In this paper we focus especially on the reading of novels, both foreign and Russian, at the court of Nicholas I. Although reading novels, at that time, was certainly not the only form of court culture, which also included masked balls, concerts, theatrical performances, parlour games, etc., it accounted for a sizeable portion. Behind the most obvious purpose, as a form of entertainment, reading novels seems to have had a dual purpose at the court of Nicholas I: it enabled the courtiers to

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<sup>1</sup> Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy* (Princeton, 1995-2000); A.L. Zorin, *Kormija dvuglavogo orla: literatura i gosudarstvennaia ideologija v Rossii v poslednej treti 18.-pervoi treti 19 veka* (Moscow, 2001); Richard S. Wortman, *Russian Monarchy: Representation and Rule* (Boston, 2013); Richard S. Wortman, *Visual Texts, Ceremonial Texts, Texts of Exploration: Collected Articles on the Representation of Russian Monarchy* (Boston, 2014); Kirill A. Ospovat, *Terror and Pity: Aleksandr Sumarokov and the Theater of Power in Elizabethan Russia* (Boston, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 1, 4.

observe and analyze the social and psychological dynamics at play in Europe and in Russia and, at the same time, to model their own cultural identity. In addition, as we shall see, reading novels at court also had an indirect effect outside the palace, eventually influencing the tastes and behaviour of other groups of Russian society. In this sense, an apparently passive and intimate cultural practice such as reading novels, much less theatrical and conspicuous than numerous court ceremonies, effectively gave rise to distinctions and hierarchies that were conveyed to Russian society, turning the court from a reading room into a veritable social workshop.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. Intimate reading

At the beginning of the 19th century there was one place in Russia that seemed, at first sight, to provide the perfect conditions for reading novels: the Winter Palace. For those who lived or worked there and enjoyed such pleasures, the sheer number of books available was astonishing and, moreover, the funds available for new ones seemed to be limitless<sup>4</sup>. The huge collections of the Hermitage

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris, 1979), 59, 109-112, 249-258.

<sup>4</sup> On the book collections at the Winter Palace and the Hermitage, cf. V.V. Shcheglov, *Sobstvennye ego Imperatorskago Velichestva biblioteki i arsenaly. Kratkii istoricheskii ocherk. 1715-1915* (Petrograd, 1917); Zh. Pavlova, *Imperatorskaia biblioteka Ermitazha. 1762-1917* (Saint Petersburg, 1988); V. Durov, *Kniga v sem'e Romanovykh* (Moscow, 2000).

library, comprising 34 catalogues, one of which entirely devoted to novels, were at their disposal<sup>5</sup>. In addition, readers at the Winter Palace could borrow from the collection of eighteenth century novels available in Paul I's personal library<sup>6</sup>; or in that of Alexander I, put together by Frédéric-César de La Harpe; according to one Palace librarian, the latter contained "all the best there is in terms of modern works"<sup>7</sup>. Few other European courts could boast such a wealth and variety of reading matter. At court, moreover, readers in general, but particularly women, seemed to have ample leisure time, and none of the limitations imposed elsewhere by the censors of certain foreign works<sup>8</sup>.

In actual fact, however, as we shall try to show in this paragraph, even in this world, the choice and appreciation of any novel was the result of a complex series of negotiations between those with a different cultural and political capital, who tried to impose their own aesthetic, political and moral priorities on the readers. Even the simplest and most intimate reading of a novel was thus subject to checks, pressure and censorship, often unbeknownst to the readers themselves<sup>9</sup>.

In the early 1820s, it was as if the court of the Grand Duke Nicholas and Charlotte of Prussia, the daughter of Friedrich Wilhelm III, the future empress Aleksandra Fedorovna, existed in a parallel world. Before her marriage, Charlotte, who at the age of 12 had lost her mother, the famous Queen Louise, had been fascinated by the poetry of Goethe and Schiller and by the medieval and courtly romanticism reflected in works such as *The Magic Ring* by Friedrich de La Motte Fouqué, one of the novels that greatly influenced the Prussian court at that time<sup>10</sup>. Nicholas, however, busy as he was

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<sup>5</sup> As well as Catherine II's personal collection, they included those of the Berlin booksellers Nicolai and Zimmerman, Voltaire's library collections, those of the Galliani brothers and of Diderot. See Shcheglov, *Sobstvennye imperatorskie biblioteki*, 16-18. A description of the catalogues of the Hermitage library may be found in Arkhiv Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha (AGE), fond 1, opis' 1, 1837, delo 1 (Liste des catalogues de la Bibliothèque Imperiale de l'Hermitage).

<sup>6</sup> On Paul I's library, cf. AGE, f.1, op.VIt, d.6 (Catalogue des livres étrangers de la bibliothèque de S.M.I. Empereur Paul I). On novels, see in part. II.112-116.

<sup>7</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1836, d.1 (Kopii pisem), l.28. On Alexander I's large collection of novels, cf. AGE, f.1, op.VIt, d.10 (Catalogue systematique et raisonné des livres de la bibliothèque privé de S.M. l'Empereur Alexandre I), II.791-823.

<sup>8</sup> On the absence of censorship on foreign books at court, cf. the letter of the Court librarian Florian Gille to T.A. Brockhaus of May 18, 1840 in AGE, f.2, op.XIVzh, d.22 (Bibliothèque de S.A.I. Monseigneur le Grand Duc Héritier. Copies de lettres), part 1.

<sup>9</sup> On the correspondence of the imperial libraries see AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1836, d.1; 1839, d.1.

<sup>10</sup> David E. Barclay, *Frederick William IV and the Prussian Monarchy 1840-1861* (Oxford, 1995), 29-30 Cfr A.Th. Grimm, *Alexandra Feodorowna Empress of Russia* (Edinburgh, 1870), 51-62.

with his military commitments, only really approached contemporary literature after being introduced to the Prussian princess. Following their marriage, in 1817, the couple enjoyed life ensconced in the small, intimate world of the Anichkov Palace, where novel reading marked some of the most crucial moments of their family life. “We would read books together such as *Corinne* and *Malek Adhel*,” the empress recalled in her memoirs, thinking back to the time when she was expecting the heir to the throne, “and I have fond memories of those months of peace that preceded the birth”<sup>11</sup>. Such novels projected their readers into exotic, southern lands, such as the Orient or Italy, offering them idealistic models of chivalrous behaviour. As well as *Corinne* by Madame de Staël and *The Saracen or Matilda and Malek Adhel* by Sophie Cottin, in the early 1820s their imaginations were captured above all by the novels of Walter Scott. Nicholas had met the Scottish poet in person during a trip to Edinburgh in December 1816 and, on his return, he began to read his novels<sup>12</sup>. In particular in 1820, after the tragic experience of a miscarriage that had endangered his wife’s life, Nicholas spent entire evenings reading Scott’s novels to the future empress. “It was in the wooden Constantine Palace that I spent six sad weeks, but lovingly cared for by my husband,” the Empress recalled, “at the time, Walter Scott’s novels were all the rage and Nicholas would read them to me out loud”<sup>13</sup>. Under the influence of the novels of de Staël, Cottin and Walter Scott, as well as that of the romantic writings of the poets Vasilii Zhukovskii and Thomas Moore, the imperial couple, by then sure of inheriting the throne, took their first steps into the theatre of power<sup>14</sup>. Sometimes they would dress up and impersonate the roles of the characters in those stories, as they did in a celebrated court party arranged for the young bride and groom in Berlin, in 1820; the couple took on the roles of Moore’s oriental poem *Lalla*

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<sup>11</sup> “Vospominaniia imperatritsy Aleksandry Fedorovny s 1817 po 1820,” *Russkaia Starina* 1896, vol. 88, No. 10: 36-37. Among her papers, Charlotte kept passages from de Staël’s novel that her mother had copied. See in particular a passage on marital love (De Staël, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, Paris, 1838, 623) in Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f.728, op.1, d.1329 (Neskol’ko nemetskikh stikhotvoreniĭ, skopirovanny korolevoi Luizoi Prusskoi), l.1

<sup>12</sup> L. Vyskochkov, *Nikolai I* (Moscow, 2003), 41.

<sup>13</sup> “Vospominaniia imperatritsy Aleksandry Fedorovny”, 59. Reading Walter Scott’s novels continued at least until the summer of 1822 when the couple read *Kenilworth* together. See *Zapisnye knizhki velikogo kniazia Nikolaia Pavlovicha, 1822-1825*, edited by M.V. Sidorova, M.N. Silaeva (Moscow, 2013), 80, 83

<sup>14</sup> On the aesthetic ideals of the court of Nicholas I, Cf. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 1, 262-263. On the influence of Zhukovskii’s poetry on the tsar and the empress cf. I. Vinitiskii, *Dom tolkovatel’ia* (Moscow, 2006), 197-198.

*Rookh* in a *live tableau*, which was to be recorded in their family history<sup>15</sup>. The fictional world of those works fed the chivalrous and medieval ideal of purity and morality that characterised Nicholas' "scenario of power". According to Wortman, his behaviour no longer mirrored the classical models admired by previous emperors, but was shaped by his romantic-medieval ideals: "Nicholas played the role of knight, shielding the delicate and beautiful damsel from reality. Alexandra played the frail, exquisite damsel"<sup>16</sup>. Madame Cottin's and Walter Scott's novels underlined this clear separation between the male sphere - the sphere of politics, decisions and command - and the female sphere - one of spirituality, poetry and comfort - a distinction that had been questioned by the previous sovereigns but which they had proposed as a model for their subjects on numerous public occasions<sup>17</sup>. This idealisation of those past worlds, helped the young couple to cope with their present<sup>18</sup>. In that totally ideal world, however, due to the pressure of the European market, there started to be ever more exceptions to the rule. The courtly "scenario" imagined by Nicholas I at the beginning of the 1820s was suited to the world that had emerged from the Holy Alliance of 1815. By the early 1830s, with the new European revolutions, such a world was evidently looking increasingly obsolete. The arrival at court in the early 1830s of numerous new French novels, which questioned that family and social model, contributed to revealing how fast European society was changing, thereby undermining the tsar's trust in his principles as the basis for stability in Europe. Reading novels in fact played an important role in raising awareness of Europe's new social dynamics.

To understand how that came about, we should first ask ourselves how the novels read at court were actually chosen and which criteria and measures of control lay behind those choices. The correspondence of the tsar's personal librarians, Karl Sayger and Florian Gille, draws a fairly detailed picture of reading at court<sup>19</sup>. And any suggestion that court readers enjoyed total freedom in the

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol 1, 262-264 ; Rolf Johannsen, Andrea Polaschegg, « Indien preussischblau - Das Hoffest *Lalla Rookh* im Schloss Berlin », *Macht und Freundschaft, Berlin – St. Petersburg, 1800-1860* (Berlin, 2008), 97-111.

<sup>16</sup> Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 1, 334.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 261

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Norbert Elias, *The Court Society* (London, 1983), 215-225.

<sup>19</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1836, d.1; 1839, d.1.

Winter Palace has to be contradicted<sup>20</sup>. In terms of costs, there is no doubt that the outlay for literary novelties for the court was high. In 1837, for example, a sum of 2000 roubles per year was allocated for purchasing "memoirs, novels and other light literature" and this sufficed for importing large collections of French and foreign novels<sup>21</sup>. However, as from the mid 1830s, given the extraordinary boom in books on offer, the librarians began to stress European booksellers with the court's need to cut down on its spending<sup>22</sup>.

At the beginning of his reign, in addition to receiving regular shipments from appointed European bookshops, Nicholas personally selected the works to be bought for himself and his family. He chose the titles either from bookstore catalogues, or based on the reviews that he read in magazines, especially the *Journal des Debats*<sup>23</sup>. According to the tsar's instructions, his librarian periodically compiled long lists of books, indicating the person to whom the works were to be sent (the tsar, the empress, the heir, the great duchesses, etc.). According to these requests, it appears that the tsar himself exercised some control over what the imperial family would read. For example, regarding the books for the empress, the librarian Gille wrote to Paris saying: "The shipments in question have two recipients: the Emperor and then Her Majesty the Empress", and he added: "the Emperor reserves the right to personally inform Her Majesty the Empress of everything that is published and that may be of interest"<sup>24</sup>. But even this apparently solicitous gesture concealed a form of control. Only in the 1840s did Nicholas grant his wife her own personal library, with its own

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<sup>20</sup> For example, in February 1837 the tsar decided that, except for the members of the imperial family, everyone else at court could only borrow those books by submitting a specific request to the Minister of the Court. Those readers' choices were thus subjected to an initial check. See AGE f.2, op.XIVb, 1836, d.1, l.28ob. (Letter from Gille to the Minister of the Court P.M. Volkonskii of February 16, 1837).

<sup>21</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1836, d.1, l.35. See also letter of April 5, 1839. Ibid., l.119ob. (Letter from Sayger to Volkonskii of April 2, 1837).

<sup>22</sup> Paris naturally enjoyed the lion's share of orders, but the booksellers of Munich, Berlin, Leipzig and Vienna periodically received sizeable orders too, albeit with some restrictions on the subjects dealt with. See AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1836, d. 1, l.172ob. No books, however, came from London: any English books came via Paris.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1836, d.1, ll.3, 23.

<sup>24</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1839, d.1, ll.134, 136.



independent administration. The forms of male control over reading matter frequently imposed on the Russian public persisted even at the Winter Palace<sup>25</sup>.

Nicholas had initially granted his appointed bookseller in Paris a certain degree of freedom, but soon the tsar was complaining, through his librarian, that the books "were chosen with little discernment or taste, and too much time elapsed between shipments"<sup>26</sup>. In 1841 Nicholas decided to change the way he procured books from Paris: "His Majesty now deems it necessary to appoint a person tasked with collecting the best works published in France in the field of art, science and literature"<sup>27</sup>. Following the example of Catherine II, Nicholas delegated this delicate task to a French "expert". His choice fell on Jean-Henri Schnitzler, a scholar from Strasbourg who had worked in Russia as a statistician between 1823 and 1828 and who had become the editor of the successful *Encyclopédie des gens du monde*<sup>28</sup>. Schnitzler was, according to Gille, a "learned man with both good taste and common sense" and, thanks to his statistical works, with a good understanding of the Empire<sup>29</sup>. "You will learn how to become the new Grimm of our time" the Tsar's librarian wrote to him encouragingly.<sup>30</sup>

But how to explain to someone unfamiliar with the Russian court, and a foreigner to boot, what the tsar and his entourage enjoyed reading? The Russian consul in France had asked for "all the information deemed necessary to make him aware of His Majesty's taste and needs"<sup>31</sup>. In September 1841, Schnitzler received instructions on the criteria to be followed when selecting books for the tsar. This is an interesting document because it describes the tsar's cultural priorities with a certain precision: "You will therefore have to send His Majesty: 1. Absolutely everything that is published

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Miranda Beaven Remnek, "« A Larger Portion of the Public » Female Readers, Fiction, and the Periodical Press in the Reign of Nicholas I", in Barbara T. Norton, Jehanne M. Gheith (eds), *An Improper Profession. Women, Gender, and Journalism* (Durham, London, 2001), 35.

<sup>26</sup> AGE f.2, op.XIVb, 1839, d.1, l.86 ob. (Letter from Gille to Volkonskii of August 23, 1841).

<sup>27</sup> AGE f.2, op.XIVb, 1839, d.1, l.99ob. (Letter from Gille to Schnitzler of September 13, 1841)

<sup>28</sup> On Jean-Henri Schnitzler Cf. *Grand dictionnaire universel de Pierre Larousse* (Paris 1875).

<sup>29</sup> AGE f.2, op.XIVb, 1839, d.1, l.96 (Letter from Gille to Spies of September 13, 1841). See also AGE, f.2, op. XIVzh, d.22, part 1 (Letter from Gille to Schnitzler of June 9, 1841). Cf. J.H. Schnitzler, *Essai d'une statistique générale de l'Empire de Russie* (Paris, 1829); Idem, *La Pologne et la Russie* (Paris, 1831); *La Russie, la Pologne et la Finlande* (Paris, 1835).

<sup>30</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1839, d.1, l.135

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., l.86ob, 87.

on military arts, including lesser manuals and brochures for training soldiers; 2. With regard to science and literature: good works on history and politics, the publication of which arouses general interest, as well as books on geography, statistics, etc. Scientific or other publications on public works (...). Works on administration, finance, political economy, public morality, hospital, hospice and prison improvement, etc. Satirical writings, brochures, memoirs, etc"<sup>32</sup>. In the list, literature comes last: "Regarding literature: only good works, those in which the doctrines of healthy literature (*d'une saine littérature*) are explained" the tsar's librarian recommended. And added: "Also send all the latest novels (*les romans du jour*), but take note! Only new and original publications." And he recommended: "His Majesty does not disdain looking at this production as long as it contains a grain of salt (*du sel*), but he does not want any of that literary fodder that is born and dies within the space of a day"<sup>33</sup>. On the subject of poetry, the librarian is even more drastic: "As a general rule, regarding poetry, do not buy *anything*, or at least nothing but the exceptions that confirm the rule"<sup>34</sup>. Even more restrictive information was sent to Munich in August 1842 regarding the selection of German books: "As for *literary works* proper, do not send *anything*. There is a certain type of literary fodder that does more harm than good (*une pâture littéraire d'une nature plutôt malfaisant*) but which is fairly popular, and which Paris is entitled to procure for us. German imitations will not be tolerated"<sup>35</sup>.

The metaphors that the Tsar's personal librarian used to describe his master's literary interests, all linked to the world of food (salt, fodder, healthy, harmful), underlined how pernicious and dangerous those books might have appeared at court, but in fact gave no clear indications about purchasing. Sometimes Gille clearly stated the tsar's interest in a certain satirical and humorous French genre: "Send small, humorous and caustic works like *Les Guèpes*, the physiologies of the student, the artist, etc. (which have already been sent), works that are a Parisian specialty and can only be conceived in Paris," wrote the librarian, emphasizing the tsar's interest in a wide variety of

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<sup>32</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1839, d.1, l.100 (Letter from Gille to Schnitzler of September 13, 1841).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. l.100ob.

<sup>35</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1839, d.1, l.173 (Letter from Gille to Viollet of August 22, 1842).

expressions of French social life<sup>36</sup>. And again: “Do not forget that, exhausted as he is by his burden of work, His Majesty the Emperor adores looking at caricatures, humorous works, satirical pamphlets, playful and funny books that keep coming out in Paris.”<sup>37</sup> These indications help us to understand some of the sources that shaped the tsar’s and the Russian court’s idea of French society. *Les Guêpes*, for example, a very popular satirical magazine that had been published by Alphonse Karr since 1839, painted a merciless picture of recent French political and cultural life, attacking in particular the most prominent figures of the July Monarchy<sup>38</sup>. And yet, in general, the instructions were decidedly too generic to help Schnitzler select novels, given France’s prolific output.

To further enlighten Schnitzler, the librarian turned to Empress Alessandra Fedorovna: "Her Majesty told me (...) that she would like to know everything a woman of taste (*une femme de goût*) could find interesting in today's novels."<sup>39</sup> The empress was appealing to a concept, that of good taste, which was, to her mind, natural, evident and unchangeable, whereas to the mind of a French publisher such as Schnitzler, good taste would have been something that varied according to the country, the social group and the moment. Certainly one of the criteria for choosing a novel, in the eyes of the empress, would have been its novelty value: « Her Majesty wished to point out that she receives novels from Paris well after they have arrived in St. Petersburg itself and that she only knows about them by hearsay. Now, Monsieur, novels in general are like oysters: inedible the very next day. The only merit of these types of books is their novelty, their freshness. So this needs to be rectified accordingly »<sup>40</sup>. What was at stake for the empress was the chance to be the first to have those symbolic objects that enabled her to impose her own cultural superiority on the other Petersburg salons. The empress’s opinions, reported by the librarian, clearly reveal some of Alexandra Fedorovna’s aesthetic hierarchies. While, for example, the courtly and oriental romanticism portrayed in the novels of the 1810s and 1820s (La Motte Fouque, Cottin, De Staël, Walter Scott, etc.) was

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<sup>36</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1839, d.1, ll. 99-100ob. (Letter from Gille to Schnitzler of September 13, 1841).

<sup>37</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1839, d.1, l.137 (Letter of January 31, 1842).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Derek P. Scales, *Alphonse Karr, sa vie et son œuvre, 1808-1890* (Geneva, 1959).

<sup>39</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1839, d.1, l.136 (Letter from Gille to Schnitzler of January 31, 1842).

<sup>40</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1839, d.1, l.136ob.

welcome at court, the same could not be said about the new French romantic novels of the « frénétique » school of the early 1830s (the first novels of Hugo, Janen, Balzac, Sue, Soulié, etc.), which appeared to threaten the values of the old regime<sup>41</sup>. The librarian had pointed out: “Her Majesty would not want to rest her eyes on the *ideal ugly (laid idéal)* that has become the *ideal beautiful* of some, regrettably famous, writers.”<sup>42</sup> With the expression *ideal ugly* the empress was clearly referring to the French Romantic movement (Hugo had appealed to it in his famous 1830 preface to *Hernani*) and in particular to the early novels by the members of the “frénétique” school (Hugo, Janen, Balzac, Sue, et.c). Their first novels focused on criminals, convicts awaiting death, executioners, prostitutes, and urban, low-life, corrupt or impoverished social environments. It is clear that the empress instinctively realized that this new “frénétique” trend spelled danger for the values which upheld the court and the Russian monarchy. The preferences of the French bourgeois public were starting to clash with the aesthetic standards of the Russian court. To help Schnitzler in his choice of novels, Gille therefore suggested that he: “should regularly consult some high-society Parisian lady known for her spirit and taste, so that she can guide you in choosing these novels.”<sup>43</sup> And he added “I believe that Madame Meyendorff’s salon (...) could be your Sibyl’s cave.”<sup>44</sup>. She would be the one advising Schnitzler about which authors to follow and which to avoid.

The lists of books requested directly by the tsar in the mid-1830s show a wide range of views and interests: we find French medieval courtly romances, Renaissance erotic literature and eighteenth-century libertine novels, many contemporary French novels, alongside numerous books on numismatics and weapons and, above all, copious French memoirs on the Revolution and the Empire<sup>45</sup>. Nicholas’s most intimate readings certainly comprised a rich collection of erotic libertine

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<sup>41</sup> On the reception in France and in Russia of the “immoral” *frénétique* literature cf. A. Glinoe, *La littérature frénétique* (Paris, 2009); N.A. Drozdov, *Frantsuzskaia ‘neistovaia slovesnost’ v russkoi retseptsii 1830kh godov. Dissertatsiia na soiskanie uch. stepeni kandidata filologicheskoi nauk* (Saint Petersburg, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1839, d.1, l.136 (Letter from Gille to Schnizler of January 31, 1842).

<sup>43</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1839, d.1, l.136.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, l.136ob. Elisabeth Meyendorff was the daughter of the Dutch Ambassador to Petersburg Wilhelm d'Hogger and wife of Baron Aleksandr Meyendorff, a senior official at the Russian Ministry of Commerce serving in Paris in the second half of the 1830s. In her Petersburg years, in the mid-1830s, she had been in contact with Grand Duchess Elizaveta Pavlovna, but also with Viazemskii and Pushkin.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1836, d.1; AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, 1839, d.1.

novels, which the tsar was not averse to sharing with his wife<sup>46</sup>. Titles included works such as *Vie voluptueuse entre les capucines et les nonnes*, *Le talisman de la volupté ou la relique de Sainte-Thérèse*, *Les délices du cloître ou la nonne éclairée*, *L'origine des cons sauvages*, *Thérèse philosophe* ecc<sup>47</sup>. With their pornographic scenes these novels delegitimized the Catholic Church, the authorities and the traditional values that upheld French society before the revolution<sup>48</sup>. While reading these stories, as well as a series of licentious memoirs about the French court in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Nicholas and Aleksandra came face to face with the moral degeneration of the French élite before the French Revolution. Remarking on one of those memoirs, *L'oeil de boeuf*, Nicholas first confessed to his wife that certain licentious scenes had aroused him: “thank you for this book, which is exactly my favourite sort of reading” he wrote to Aleksandra, who had sent it to him; only to conclude bitterly about the lack of morals at Versailles: “really difficult to imagine how there could have been an era of that kind, it’s something that is hard to understand”<sup>49</sup>. Mixed feelings of attraction, curiosity and scorn are evident in the Russian imperial couple’s reactions to those scenes: “I don’t know how you can read them without becoming aroused,” writes Nicholas to his empress, “reading them brings fire to my loins. But what times, what behaviour!”<sup>50</sup> The inevitable link between such moral degeneration and the revolution would not have been lost on them.

The contemporary French novels that began to appear at the Russian court in the early 1830s depicted a side of French society that the courtiers at the Winter Palace had hitherto ignored: the world of city slums and the provincial bourgeoisie, a world in the throes of both great dynamism and inner turmoil. Despite the court’s reservations about the novels of the “frénétique” school, reservations instantly echoed by most of the Russian conservative critics, those works effectively

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<sup>46</sup> See f.i. Nicholas’s letter to the empress dated October 20, 1827 in GARF, f.728, op.1, d.1460 (Pis’ma Nikolaia I k imp. Aleksandre Fedorovne, 1826-1828), l.56ob.

<sup>47</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVv, d.130 (Opis’ materialam eroticheskogo sodержaniia iz biblioteki Zimnego dvortsa), ll. 1-5. For testimony of Nicholas’s purchase of these erotic books, see f.i. AGE, f.2, op.XIV B, 1836, d.1, l. 33ob., l. 65 ob., 88ob.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York, London, 1996), 85-114.

<sup>49</sup> G. Touchard-Lafosse, *Chroniques de l’Oeil-de-Boeuf*, 8 vols., Paris, 1829-1833. Cf. letter of Nicholas I to the Empress of October 12, 1830 and October 15, 1830 in GARF, f.728, op.1, d.1555 (Pis’ma Nikolaia I k imp. Aleksandre Fedorovne), part 1, ll.96, 108.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. l.103ob.

seem to have intrigued readers at court, considering the success enjoyed in France<sup>51</sup>. As early as June 1831, probably reacting to the news published in the *Journal des Debat*, the librarian wrote to Paris: "You could add to your shipment the two or three original publications that recently came out in Paris: the novel (if you can call it a novel) by Mr. E. Sue; Balzac's *Scenes from Private Life*, but try not to exaggerate and among the novelties only send us those works that are, as they say, memorable, like *Nôtre Dame de Paris*"<sup>52</sup>. In just a few lines, Gille offered a full picture of the distinctions the Russian court made of its tastes on the subject of contemporary French novels: *Nôtre Dame de Paris* by Victor Hugo was already considered "memorable", Balzac's *Scenes from Private Life* were appreciated, while the librarian was uncertain whether Eugène Sue's first marine novels, collected in *Plick et Plock*, were dignified enough to even be classed as novels<sup>53</sup>. Similar opinions often repeated in the highest spheres of the State soon reached the ears of the censors and conditioned what the Russian public read. The censor Aleksandr Nikitenko wrote that the Minister for Education "has ordered not to allow the publication of Victor Hugo's *Nôtre Dame de Paris*. And yet he praised it highly. The minister believes it is too soon for us to read such books."<sup>54</sup>

After the publication of *Scènes de la vie de province* (which included *Eugénie Grandet*), in which the "excessive" features of the "frénétique" aesthetics had disappeared, giving way to a ruthless analysis of the social and psychological dynamics of French society, Balzac's reputation at the Russian court appeared to have been consolidated: "It would be very pleasant for us to receive *Bertrand et Raton*, Mr. Scribe's latest and humorous work. And I would say the same of Balzac's *Scenes of private life in the province*," wrote the librarian in March 1834<sup>55</sup>. In 1836, Nicholas suggested to his wife that she might enjoy one of Balzac's early novels, *Annette et le criminel*, which

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<sup>51</sup> On the reactions of the Russian critics to the novels of the French "frénétique" school see Drozdov, *Frantsuzskaia 'neistovaia slovesnost' v russkoi retseptsii*, 31-126.

<sup>52</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVzh, d.22, part 1 (Letter from Gille to Warée of June 6, 1831).

<sup>53</sup> On Sue's *Plick et Plock*, see A.S. Pushkin's strongly negative opinion in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1941), vol. 14, 166.

<sup>54</sup> A. Nikitenko, *Dnevnik* (Leningrad, 1955), vol. 1, 140.

<sup>55</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVzh, d.22, part 1 (Letter from Gille to Warée of March 9, 1834). *Bertrand et Raton, ou l'art de conspirer* (1833) by Scribe is a comedy that "satirizes the stupidity of political conspiracy, the vanity and greed of the French middle class" during the 1830 revolution. Cfr. Stephen S. Stanton, "Scribe's "Bertrand et Raton": A Well-Made Play", *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Nov., 1957), 58.

he found “increasingly interesting” and “decidedly charming”<sup>56</sup>. And yet suspicions and fears about that type of novel, which had risen from the ashes of the July revolution, were still deep-rooted at court: “If a novel meets with the approval of people of taste, you can be sure that it will also make us happy to receive them”, wrote the librarian in 1834, “but even though we are part of the literary movement that has been going on in France for some years now, I can assure you that we are far from sharing this tendency to flights of imagination (*dévergondage d’esprit*) from which some of your young writers like Soulié, Alexandre Dumas, etc. seem to suffer. We do not want these crude and cynical reflections (*élucubrations féroces*), these galvanizing books (*livres galvaniques*), such as *Angèle*, *Thérèse*, etc. Here, no more than in France, I think, healthy readers do not want to hear about it”<sup>57</sup>. Such aesthetic opinions concealed precise political attitudes. *Angèle*, for example, was a pièce by Alexandre Dumas published in 1833, set during the 1830 revolution, which exemplified the loose amorous behaviour and political cynicism that dominated French society during Louis Philippe’s reign<sup>58</sup>. Contemporary British novelists, apart from Walter Scott, were decidedly little sought-after, but for example in January 1840 Nicholas asked the Parisian booksellers for Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby* in French<sup>59</sup>. Despite the disturbing spectacle of social mobility that they portrayed, those novels were avidly read at the Russian court.

Judging by his correspondence with the empress, the tsar not only recommended Balzac but also displayed a marked predilection for the satirical novel genre epitomized by Paul de Kock, the cheerful, light-hearted and sometimes spicy bard beloved of the Parisian bourgeoisie. In September 1842 the tsar wrote to his wife: “I’ve read a novel by Paul de Kock, entitled *Moustache*, which

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<sup>56</sup> GARF, f.728, op.1, d.1555, part 7 (1836), l.64ob. (Letter from Nicholas to the Empress of August 30, 1836).

<sup>57</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVzh, d.22, part 1 (Letter from Gille to Warée of March 9, 1834).

<sup>58</sup> About the ‘danger’ of Dumas’s novels for Russian society, see f.i. Nikitendo’s diary (April 1836): “Pavlov, a civil servant, killed, or almost killed, Actual State Councillor Aprelev as the latter was returning from church with his young bride (...) The public rose in wrath against Pavlov as a ‘base murderer,’ and the minister of education imposed an embargo on all French novels and stories, particularly on the works of Dumas, considering them the real culprits”. A.V. Nikitenko, *Dnevnik v trekh tomakh*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1955), 183.

<sup>59</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIVb, d.1, l. 19 ob. (Letter from Sayger to Labenskii of January 17, 1840).

Wolkonsky gave me, it's quite amusing, but not as much as those that I used to read to you when you were pregnant".<sup>60</sup>

In the novels of Balzac, Kock and Dickens, the social mobility typical of Europe at that time must have appeared to the tsar in all its complexity, inevitability and danger. The lists of the novels that the empress received from her husband in the mid-1840s testify to an extraordinary circulation of such novels at court, dozens of titles by novelists such as Sue, Frédéric Soulié, Paul Lacroix, Paul Féval, George Sand, Charles de Bernard, and especially Balzac and Dumas<sup>61</sup>. Despite the tsar's attempts to protect his court, despite his awareness of the pernicious (*malfaisante*) character of those novels, the impression was that the court was prey to Parisian tastes<sup>62</sup>. And from the mid 1830s a new type of novel began to seem particularly noxious to Nicholas and his court: the French romantic psychological novel. A novel such as *Les confession d'un enfant du siècle* by Alfred de Musset, full of suffering, disenchantment and a spirit of self-destruction, was strongly deprecated by the court, much as Lermontov's *A Hero of our Time* would be a few years later: "Musset's *Les confessions d'un enfant du siècle* , which you sent us this winter, is one of those works that we do not want. It is one of those bad publications that will not appeal to us," wrote the librarian to the Parisian booksellers<sup>63</sup>.

An uneasy mixture of attraction and disquiet seemed to bind these royal readers to the new contemporary French novels. Their attraction stemmed from the awareness that those were the works that Paris, the cultural capital of Europe, had crowned with success; their disquiet was due to an uneasy feeling that those novels were proof of the fragility of the present political situation in Europe,

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<sup>60</sup> GARF, f. 728, d.1904 (Pis'ma Nikolaia I k imperatritse Aleksandre Fedorovne, 1842), part III, l.35ob. And yet the tsar did not indiscriminately praise Kock's novels. On the subject of *Un tourlourou*, for example, he wrote: "I find it the worst, because in addition to the usual dullness, it is all rather implausible and features low-life characters who are too exaggerated to be natural". GARF, f.728, d.1555, part VIII, l.56ob. (Letter from Nicholas to the Empress of September 25, 1837).

<sup>61</sup> Between 1844 and 1847, at least 2 novels by Sue circulated in Aleksandra Fedorovna's apartments; 3 by Countess Dash, by Joseph Méry and by Théodore Foudras; 4 by Bernard, 5 novels by Soulié, Lacroix, Féval and Sand; 9 Balzac novels and 20 by Dumas. Cf. AGE, f.2, op.XIVe, d.12 (Livres rendus à Monsieur le conseiller d'état Gille).

<sup>62</sup> For a description of how the empress hid her reading of a forbidden novel by Dumas from her husband, see S. Durylin, "Aleksandr Diuma-otets i Rossiia", *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* (Moscow, 1937), XXXI-XXXII, 514-516

<sup>63</sup> Letter from Gille to Warée of 14.5.1836, in AGE, f.2, op.XIVzh, d.22, part 1. On the censors' attitude to Musset's novel see I. Aizenshtok, "Frantsuzskie pisateli v otsenkakh tsarskoi tsenzury", *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* (Moscow, 1939), XXXIII-XXXIV, 818-819



a fragility that could undermine the social order on which the Russian monarchy itself rested. In this sense, the reading of French novels on the part of the tsar and his entourage helped foster the nationalistic spirit of state ideology as from the mid 1830s. At the same time, the image that Nicholas tried to promote of himself publicly as a medieval knight, faithfully defending the sacred principles of the Holy Alliance in Europe, was falling apart in front of his very eyes. From medieval knight, as he wrote to his wife in 1834, he was starting to feel like the Errant Knight “I will feel myself turning into Don Quixote”<sup>64</sup>. So, to protect Russian society after the 1848 revolutions, the tsar decided to resort to one of the few measures he had at his disposal: significantly higher duties on foreign novels<sup>65</sup>.

## 2. Shared readings

Are there any differences between the publications read by the tsar and those of other men at court? Which novels were most frequently read by most of the court readers? And to what extent did such readings influence the tastes of Russia’s high society? For a long time, the majority of courtiers were allowed to borrow books from the new and up-to-date library that the poet Zhukovskij, with the ample funds placed at his disposal, had put together for the Heir to the throne<sup>66</sup>. Thanks to that library’s loan register, today we can, at least partially, reconstruct the reading habits of a large group of people. Altogether they numbered around 80, including members of the imperial family, high court officials, ladies-in-waiting, a significant group of tutors to the Heir<sup>67</sup>. Their requests cover the period ranging from 1827 to 1855, but were particularly frequent up until 1837, before the great Winter Palace fire.

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<sup>64</sup> GARF, f.728, op.1, ed.1555, part V, l.74ob. (Letter from Nicholas to the Empress of October 3, 1834).

<sup>65</sup> See the following order from the Tsar of June 25, 1848: “His Majesty the Emperor ordered that all books imported from abroad into the Russian Empire should be subjected by Customs to a 5 silver kopek duty for each individual volume (...) Novels and *povesti* are subject to an extra 5 silver kopek duty”. AGE, f.2, op.XIVa, 1848, d.19 (Po predpisaniiu g. ministra imperatorskago dvora), ll.1-1ob.

<sup>66</sup> On the formation of this library D. Rebekkini, “V.A. Zhukovskii i biblioteka prestolonaslednika Aleksandra Nikolaevicha (1828-1837)”, *Zhukovskii. Issledovanija i materialy*, vol. 2, (Tomsk, 2013), 77-89

<sup>67</sup> AGE, f.2, op.XIV ZH, d.21 (Bibliothèque de son Altesse Impériale Monseigneur le Grand Duc Héritier. Livre de notes. Sortie et rentrée des ouvrages prêtés). On this see also Damiano Rebecchini, “Letture al Palazzo d’Inverno (1829-1855). La lettura come fatto sociale”, in Antonella D’Amelia (ed.), *Pietroburgo capitale della cultura russa* (Salerno, 2004), 291-334.

It was a very mixed group of readers, both in terms of their nationalities and of their cultural level. They borrowed books in German, English, Polish and Latin though, of course, French predominated, while requests for Russian books were rare. Despite their very diverse national backgrounds and reading skills, and the wide choice of books available, the novels they requested were often the same and, most interestingly, they were often borrowed along with memoirs.

The genres most frequently consulted were, in fact, contemporary French memoirs and novels and, to a lesser extent, some French light dramas, in particular Eugène Scribe's plays. Historical works were also frequently consulted, while borrowing books of poetry was not very common. The importance of these genres at the court of Nicholas I should not surprise us. As Norbert Elias pointed out, court culture is above all a culture of conversation and the works that the court prefers are those, such as memoirs, novels and light dramas, which best suit a salon situation<sup>68</sup>. The most popular memoirs among the readers at the court of Nicholas I between the end of the 1820s and the 1830s include, for example, those by Louis Bourrienne, Louis-François Bausset, Madame de Campan, John Brown, Emmanuel Las Cases and Louis Philippe de Ségur<sup>69</sup>. They were mostly recently published memoirs that offered different points of view about the tumultuous period of the French revolution and the Empire, with special attention paid to Napoleon's court and his private life<sup>70</sup>. When reading such works, the court readers tried to understand and give some sense to a past that was still present and very vivid in their minds.

The courtiers' choice of novels differed little from that of the tsar. Court readers focused on quite a limited number of novels that seemed to pass from hand to hand, as they read them almost simultaneously. There was great interest in classical novels such as Cervantes's *Don Quixote* in

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<sup>68</sup> Elias, *The Court Society*, 105-106.

<sup>69</sup> Particularly on the reading of court memories, cf. D. Rebeekini, "V.A. Zhukovskii i frantsuzskie memuary pri dvore Nikolaia I (1828-1837). Kontekst chteniia i ego interpretatsiia", in *Pushkinskie chteniia v Tartu* 3 (Tartu, 2004): 229-253.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, the following opinion of Nicholas I in a letter to the empress on Constant's memoirs: "I have almost finished Constant, the fourth volume is of great interest and you will enjoy it; it also talks about the moment of the emperor's separation from Josephine", GARF, f.728, op.1, d.1555, l.73 (Nicholas's letter dated 5 October, 1830). *Mémoires de Constant, premier valet de chambre de l'Empereur, sur la vie privée de Napoléon, sa famille et sa cour* (Paris, 1830)

French translation, Fénelon's edifying *Les aventures de Télémaque*, and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which were not only borrowed by young readers. Maria Edgeworth's novels still seemed to appeal, while the classic sentimental novels - from Richardson to Rousseau to Goethe's *Werther* - no longer aroused any interest. What *did* arouse considerable interest, on the other hand, above all among members of the imperial family, were *Atala* and *René*, by Chateaubriand, an author whom the tsar had personally met in the early 1820s. But the most popular vein of all were contemporary historical novels, which passed from hand to hand among readers at the court and fed a collective fictional imagination. For example, between 1829 and 1834, Walter Scott's novels were requested 22 times by such diverse readers as members of the imperial family, tutors and ladies-in-waiting. Scott's most requested titles were *Quentin Durward* and *Ivanhoe*. Alongside Scott's novels, also historical novels by Heinrich Zschokke, Jean Ch.L. de Sismondi, and Alfred de Vigny were greatly appreciated. Balzac's novels were borrowed 9 times between 1833 and 1836, by readers such as the influential Madame Iuliia Baranova, the court doctor Patrick Crichton and several court ladies. Among Balzac's novels, as well as the *Scènes de la vie privée* series, they were fascinated by *Le père Goriot*. Only one reader, the Marshal of the Court, borrowed Stendhal's novel *Red and Black*, but his *Promenades dans Rome* were in great demand. Of course, French contemporary novels were not the only popular ones, but, alongside Walter Scott's, they certainly made up the majority of loans. Court readers seemed particularly attracted to historical and adventure novels, set in fascinating places and featuring brave and uncomplicated characters. During his reign, Nicholas I had significantly tightened court etiquette, imposing strict and detailed rules regarding dress, ceremonies and court behaviour.<sup>71</sup> Judging by the novels that they borrowed from the libraries, court readers appear to have felt the need for action and escapism, perhaps to make up for the constrictions of their life at court with some fictional "cut and thrust". The wild Scotland of the highlanders, chivalric, medieval England and Richard the

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<sup>71</sup> Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 1, 321-332.

Lionheart's crusaders evidently provided them with the adventures they longed for<sup>72</sup>. Those same novels that had contributed to shaping Nicholas's initial scenarios of power enabled his courtiers to escape from the obligations imposed by their tsar.

The impression of the court enjoying a limited but widely shared culture in terms of novels is reinforced if we abandon for a moment our usual picture of a solitary reader shut away in a room silently absorbed in a book. Quiet reading was but one of the court's reading practices and apparently not the main one. If we compare the life of a courtier with that of a St. Petersburg state official or of a provincial nobleman, we can see that the residents of the Winter Palace had fewer opportunities for isolation<sup>73</sup>. The daughter of the poet Fedor Tiutchev, Anna Tiutcheva, realised this when she arrived at court as a lady-in-waiting to Maria Aleksandrovna in 1853. She was immediately struck by the endless number of ceremonies, church services, celebrations and other duties in which she was required to take part, even in the country estates. The members of the court, she wrote, "never have the chance to immerse themselves in reading, conversing, or reflecting (...) In the end, this society life, out in the country, when you only return to your room to change your clothes, is deadly dull and stultifying. We have no opportunities to read on our own or to engage in anything in particular"<sup>74</sup>. Parlour readings with a large number of participants were one of the main forms of entertainment, along with theatre and home games, at the court of Nicholas I. At the Winter Palace, these readings took place in the Gold Drawing Room in the evening, and lasted till well after 11 p.m.. There were often as many as ten regular guests, including some members of the most aristocratic families. It was they who acted as go-betweens between the court and Russia's high society, spreading the opinions, tastes and idiosyncrasies of the court in St. Petersburg and Moscow. And yet, for several years already, cultural centers had sprung up in the salons and circles of both cities that threatened the

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<sup>72</sup> On the influence of chivalric ideals and "court-romantic tendencies" on the European courtiers, cf. Elias, *The Court Society*, 216-221.

<sup>73</sup> On the free time that St. Petersburg officials and provincial landowners enjoyed in the 1830s, cf. W. Bruce Lincoln, "The Daily Life of St. Petersburg Officials in the Mid Nineteenth Century", *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, n.s. 8 (1975): 87-88; Katherine Pickering Antonova, *An Ordinary Marriage. The world of a gentry family in provincial Russia* (Oxford, 2013), 105-118.

<sup>74</sup> A.F. Tiutcheva, *Pri dvore dvukh imperatorov. Vospominaniia. Dnevnik*, (Moscow, 1928), vol. 1, 95, 166.

hegemonic role of the court<sup>75</sup>. Tiutcheva, for example, who came from Moscow's slavophile circles and took part in the salon readings in the Winter Palace in the last years of Nicholas I's reign, drew an ironic picture of them: "We meet at nine o'clock in the evening", wrote the court lady, "the Empresses usually sit at the table with certain elderly ladies, such as Princess Saltykova, Countess Baranova, Countess Tizengauzen. Count Shuvalov and Count Apraksin have attended these evening gatherings since they were first established (...). Shuvalov sits down with his novel, neither the title nor the author of which anyone else has ever heard, and in a monotonous, nasal voice, drones on about a tangle of murders, kidnappings, poisonings, ambushes, betrayals, hangings, declarations of love, reasonings, dialogues, curses, spells and catastrophes of all kinds, which are supposed to embody the appeal of the nineteenth-century novel of intrigue (...). This has been going on repeatedly every day since the court first came into existence and will continue to repeat itself for as long as it continues to exist"<sup>76</sup>. This practice of reading favoured certain narrative structures more than others, emphasizing certain stylistic components better than others. It excluded sentimental prose, which requires a more intimate form of reading, but also historical or philosophical prose, which requires greater concentration and the possibility of more complex logical connections. Salon reading favoured the novel genres, such as historical novels, maritime and adventure novels, and dramatic genres, *vaudevilles*, comedies, light dramas, all with compelling plots. In the light of this kind of fragmentary, distracted, often interrupted reading, foreseen by the new serialized *feuilleton* novels, even the success of more democratic works, such as Sue, can be understood: "At court they greedily read *The mysteries of Paris* – wrote lady Aleksandra Smirnova - the Emperor listened to the Louve episode with tears in his eyes"<sup>77</sup>. Sue's novel, conceived for a bourgeois audience, but immediately adopted by the Parisian proletariat as its manifesto in 1848, moved one of Europe's most reactionary sovereigns to tears.

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. apart from the classic works of M.Aronson, S.Reiser and N.Brodskii, also I. Murav'eva, *Salony pushkinskoi pory* (St. Petersburg, 2008).

<sup>76</sup> Tiutcheva, *Pri dvore dvukh imperatorov*, vol. 2, 76-77.

<sup>77</sup> A.O. Smirnova-Rosset, *Dnevnik. Vospominaniia*, (Moscow, 1989), 14.

Shared readings could outline different communities of readers within the restricted space of the court. Generational and gender distinctions were particularly relevant. In 1838, Empress Aleksandra Fedorovna remarked to lady Smirnova, who was reading *Indiana* by George Sand to her, about a female character: "Ma chère," she said to her in French, "you understand that she loves a doctor. Even if he were as handsome as Adonis, he is still a man who prescribes purges"<sup>78</sup>. Smirnova commented: "What an aristocratic vision of love! Nowadays, love is blind, and even Russian ladies, after reading all of Ms. Sand's novels, have assimilated her way of seeing, and they travel round Europe with Italian clerks in tow as their lovers without so much as a pang of conscience"<sup>79</sup>. It was precisely with George Sand that a new model of female behaviour penetrated the Russian court and high society. And yet, despite the increasingly widespread affirmation of alternative values and models of behaviour to those upheld in the Winter Palace, court readings still appeared to exert some influence on the tastes of Russia's high society. Tiutcheva wrote in her diary: "Everywhere they will know and repeat that the two Empresses spent three nights a week, and even some mornings, for two months, listening to this awful novel (...) Here they are unaware that none of their gestures goes unnoticed, that everything is made public and is attributed a particular meaning"<sup>80</sup>. So even the most intimate readings at court were shared, at least by one part of Russian society.

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<sup>78</sup> Smirnova-Rosset, *Dnevnik*, 235-236.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Tiutcheva, *Pri dvore*, vol. 2, 180-181.

### 3. Reading matter for the servants

In the Hermitage archive, we could find no trace of any correspondence between the court and Russian booksellers. Both the Heir's and Nicholas's personal libraries contained Russian books, albeit in a far smaller quantity than French and German books, and the number of Russian novels was very limited<sup>81</sup>. This does not mean, of course, that Russian novels were not read at court. In June 1828, for example, Aleksandra Fedorovna, read Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin* and described it to her husband as a "delicate painting of the St. Petersburg world"<sup>82</sup>. In addition to novels by Balzac and Kock, Nicholas mentioned reading Mikhail Zagoskin's historical novel *Iurii Miloslavskii* and Bulgarin's *Dimitrii Samozvanets*: "I think I have told you," he wrote to his wife, "that I finished *Miloslavskii* and yesterday I read about Godunov's farewell in *Dimitrii Samozvanets*, so it is historically doubly interesting"<sup>83</sup>. The tsar often tended to read Russian literature with the same aesthetic canons that he had learnt reading European novels. His impression of Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* is an example of this: "I believe that Mr. Pushkin would achieve his goal if, with the necessary deletions, he turned his comedy into a *povest'* or a historical novel à la Walter Scott"<sup>84</sup>. In the same way, the tsar's opinion about Lermontov's *A Hero of our Times* was based on an interpretative model that he had formulated after reading contemporary French novels: "It is the same emphatic representation of those despicable characters populating contemporary foreign novels", he had written to the Empress in June 1840<sup>85</sup>. Here too, the tsar's tendency to censure encouraged him to focus his attention on the moral effect of the work. "Such novels ruin your character. Indeed, even

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. AGE, op.XIV B, d.10 (Bibliothèque privée de de Sa Majesté l'Empereur. Livre d'Entrée). For example, in 1842, a total of 437 works (1157 volumes) joined Nicholas's personal library, but only a few dozens of these were Russian, and their number did not rise in the following years either.

<sup>82</sup> "Je lis Onegin par Pushkin, chose délicate comme peinture du monde de Petersburg". GARF, f.728, op.1, d.2390 (Pis'ma **imeratrity** Aleksandry Fedorovny k Nikolaiu I, 1826-1828), part I, l.118 (Letter from the Empress to Nicholas I of 13 June, 1828).

<sup>83</sup> Letter from Nicholas I to Aleksandra Fedorovna of 7 March, 1830, GARF, f.728, op.1, d.1555, part II (1830), l.8ob. On the reading of Zagoskin's *Kuzma Miroshchev* see in GARF, f.728, op.1, d.1904, part III, l.35ob (Letter from Nicholas to Aleksandra Fedorovna of 18 September, 1842).

<sup>84</sup> Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 7, 415.

<sup>85</sup> E.V. Tarle, "Teodor Shimen", *Dela i dni. Istoricheskii Zhurnal* 1921, vol. 2, 189. See also B. Eikhenbaum, "Nikolaj I o Lermontove", in Id., *O proze. Sbornik statei* (Leningrad, 1969), 423-426.

if you read them with a sense of annoyance, deep down they leave you feeling oppressed, and you become accustomed to thinking that the whole world is made up of such people, whose deeds, even the best ones, are carried out for false or abhorrent reasons. And what is the outcome of this? Hate and contempt for humankind!”<sup>86</sup>. That reading thus confirmed his decision to send Lermontov back to the Caucasus, where the writer was to end his life in a duel.

If reading Russian novels in the loftiest court circles in the 1830s and 1840s was more of an exception than a rule, the same cannot be said for the palace staff<sup>87</sup>. A partial explanation for the tsar’s limited purchases of Russian literary works may be linked to the large number of books that the Emperor received as gifts. At Nicholas I’s court, forms of patronage persisted well into the first half of the nineteenth century. Many Russian novels entered the Palace libraries as books donated by their authors, who were often rewarded by the court. And this circumstance made the tsar’s literary taste a key factor for influencing Russian literary output. Between 1826 and 1840, the tsar was presented with as many as 53 Russian literary works in prose (not to mention poems)<sup>88</sup>. After being presented at court, most of these ended up in the hands of the servants working at the Winter Palace. This was not a coincidence, but rather the result of a precise strategy on the part of Nicholas, who aimed to train even the most humble servants to become readers loyal to the monarchy. In April 1836, for example, the Minister of the Court ordered a librarian to send him a list of all the works presented as gifts to the Tsar from 1826 to 1836, so as to make a selection of those suitable for the servants’ library at the Winter Palace<sup>89</sup>. The list included 30 Russian novels, above all historical novels. The underlying idea of this measure was that if those books had been presented to the Tsar, they were obviously in line with the monarch's ideology and, after a quick check, could be made into good reading matter for his servants.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> On the servants as readers in 18th Century Russia and Europe, cf. V. Shklovskii, *Matvei Komarov, zhitel' goroda Moskvy* (Leningrad, 1929), 78; Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel. Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London, 1972), 52; Daniel Roche, *Le Peuple de Paris* (Paris, 1981), 207-209, 218-219.

<sup>88</sup> AGE, f.1, op.VIt, d.24 (Katalog podnesennykh knig), ll. 1-5.

<sup>89</sup> AGE, f.1, op. I, 1836, d.25 (Kopii pisem Rossiiskoi Ermitazhnoi Biblioteki), ll.1-4ob.



At that time, the servants' library at the Hermitage already boasted its own history<sup>90</sup>. It had been set up by Catherine II in 1776 for her servants in the hope that it would "preserve them from worse habits"<sup>91</sup>. At the end of her reign, the library already numbered 4,360 books, and by the end of Nicholas I's reign it had reached 18,655<sup>92</sup>. The library's correspondence gives us an idea not only of the interests of those who served at the Palace, but also of the significance that the tsar attributed to this library<sup>93</sup>. It was a library covering a wide range of themes. The literary section offered a great choice and very many novels<sup>94</sup>. In 1838 to the librarian's request to increase the library's budget, the Minister of the court responded with a refusal "because the library is significantly integrated with books presented by the authors to his Majesty the Emperor"<sup>95</sup>. In addition to subscribing to the magazines *Syn Otechestva*, *Biblioteka dlia chteniia* and the newspaper *Sanktpeterburgskie Vedomosti*, purchases for the servants' library included religious books, history, geography, handbooks and travel books, some *pièces* and many novels, all in Russian. For example, in the early 1840s, besides various copies of novels by Zagoskin, Bulgarin, Zotov, Sollogub and Vel'tman, they also bought Lermontov's *A Hero of our time*, Gogol's *Dead souls*, and the Russian translation of Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. Poetry collections were not very numerous, but Pushkin's *Complete works* could be found as well as a volume of poems by Lermontov. In 1841 there was a proposal to buy 21 new novels, including 4 translations of Paul de Kock and E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Serapion Brethren*, but the librarian asked to remove Kock's novels and Hoffmann's work: "they can be replaced with other useful books, works produced by Russian writers"<sup>96</sup>. Checks and other forms of censorship in force at the higher levels of the court were even stronger and more explicit here. The choices aimed

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<sup>90</sup> On the "pridvornosluzhitel'skaia biblioteka" or "rossiiskaia biblioteka" of the Hermitage, cf. Shcheglov, *Sobstvennye ego imperatorskago Velichestva Biblioteki*, 18-20; Pavlova, *Imperatorskaia Ermitazhnaia biblioteka*, 61-62, 66; "Vysochaishego dvora sluzhiteli". *Livreinyi kostium kontsa XIX-nachala XX veka v sobranii Ermitazha* (Saint Petersburg, 2014), 74-77.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. "Vysochaishego dvora sluzhiteli", 74.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. AGE, f.1, op.I, 1838, d.25.

<sup>94</sup> According to the 1833 revision, more than 70 novels had already gone missing from the section that featured Russian works published between 1766 and the 1830s, lost or stolen by their readers. See AGE, f.1, op.I, 1838, d.25, ll.32-45.

<sup>95</sup>, AGE, f.1, op.I, 1838, d.25, l.18ob. (Letter from N. Dolgorukii to Sayger of November 11, 1838).

<sup>96</sup> AGE, f. 1, op.I, 1838, d.25, l.75.

to form a reader perfectly in line with the official ideology. For example, earlier on, the Minister of the Court had insisted on purchasing Karamzin's *History* in Smirdin's edition: "It is a cheap edition designed specifically to ensure that this work reaches all the classes, and I believe it is urgent for this book to be in a library designed for the court's servants"<sup>97</sup>.

But who were this library's readers? One of the loan registers recorded the requests of more than 300 court servants.<sup>98</sup> Most were footmen, stokers, doormen, chefs, bellboys, some junior clerks at the Office of the Court (copyists or accountants), and other types of servants and workers in force at the palace. The servants at the Winter Palace were a privileged category, with a special status (*pridvornosluzhitelskoe soslovie*)<sup>99</sup>. Most importantly, their jobs were hereditary. For reasons of security, Catherine had established that no other personnel should be employed at court other than the members of this particular group. In 1826 Nicholas had confirmed that he had ruled out the possibility of "replacing vacant posts with peasants" and that those places were "exclusively reserved for the children of court servants".<sup>100</sup> In addition, the tsar had specified that "only good looking persons could serve at court"<sup>101</sup>. Given their frequent participation in court life, they often established a special relationship of trust and gratitude with their masters<sup>102</sup>. So, on the one hand, it was a privileged group, who were often in close contact with their masters and enjoyed special privileges; on the other, these servants did not live in the palace but in housing in the city where they were in touch with the popular urban world. In contact with this world, their literary tastes and preferences could not help being absorbed into the urban culture.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 1.15.

<sup>98</sup> AGE, f.1, op.I, 1839, d.39 (Kniga dlja zapisyvaniia knig, vydavaemykh iz Ermitazhnoi biblioteki). The number of readers is an estimate based on the 1836 loan register. According to Pavlova, in 1848 library numbered 680 readers. Cf. Pavlova, *Imperatorskaia biblioteka Ermitazha*, 74.

<sup>99</sup> According to an edict issued by Catherine II in 1794, although servants were not free people but serfs, they did not have to pay taxes (*podati*), they had no obligations (for example, military service), and, under particular conditions, they could aspire to the lower ranks of a courtier's career. See "*Vysochaishego dvora sluzhiteli*", 26-27

<sup>100</sup> I. Zimin, *Detskii mir imperatorskikh rezidentsii. Byt monarchov i ikh okruzhenie* (Moscow-Saint Petersburg, 2013), 437.

<sup>101</sup> "*Vysochaishego dvora sluzhiteli*", 28

<sup>102</sup> Nicholas himself left dispositions in his will in favour of his waiters and coachman. See "Zaveshchanie Imperatora Nikolaia I", in *Imperator Nikolaj Pervyj* (Moscow, 2002) 257.

One of the loan registers from the servants' library that we analysed bears the dates 1836 and 1839 on its cover but, given the large number of texts borrowed by each reader, the register probably recorded the readings over a broader time span<sup>103</sup>. It was always male readers who requested books, but it is likely that they also borrowed them for their wives or daughters, as some titles seem to suggest. The very wide variety of books borrowed by these readers is surprising, ranging from religious books to drama, from historical biographies to the lives of saints, from *lubok* romances to the newspaper, but with one particular feature: the prevalence of novels. There was probably no other place in Russia where servants had such a choice of novels at their disposal. A few examples: in 1839 Arkadii Bubnov, a stoker, borrowed 2 volumes of *Plutarkh dlia prekrasnogo pola*, the historical narration *Bitva Zadonskaia*, the novel *Susanna*, the novel *Tainstva chernoi bashni*, *Povesti o Sovestdrade* and Karamzin's *Works*.<sup>104</sup> Bubnov's appetite for reading could not have been more varied, embracing various types of popular narrative from different historical periods, ranging from the seventeenth century picaresque narrative *Povesti o plute Sovestdrade* (Russ. Edit. 1781), to two early nineteenth century novels of different genres, such as Radcliffe's gothic novel *Tainstva chernoi bashni* (Russ. Transl. 1812) and the sentimental novel *Suzanna ili nagrazhdennoe postoiianstvo* by the German Auguste Lafontaine (Russ. Transl. 1818). In *Plutarkh dlia prekrasnogo pola*, Bubnov found a French collection of biographies of great historical female figures from the ancient and modern world (Russ. Edit. 1816-1817), with the addition of a "Gallery of celebrated Russian women", from Sofia Alekseevna to Catherine II and Princess Dashkova, that featured models of female behaviour. And, last but not least, Bubnov borrowed contemporary works such as the historical narration *Bitva Zadonskaja* (1825) by one of Moscow's commercial novelists, Ivan Gur'ianov. Another stoker, Sergei Datskii, borrowed a biography of Peter the Great, a biography of Catherine II, the Gothic novel *Tainstvennaja, or Kavkazkoe mshchenie* and the translation of Eugène Sue's

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<sup>103</sup> AGE, f.1, op.1, 1839, d.39.

<sup>104</sup> AGE, f.1, op.1, 1839, d.39, l.26.

*Mathilde*.<sup>105</sup> Yet another stoker, Aleksei Dmitriev, took out a novel entitled *Neschastnaia zhenschina*, *The life of Saint Sergius* and *The life of Lycurgus*<sup>106</sup>. The porter T. Vasil'ev focused on novels published in the most recent years and took out several Russian and foreign historical novels from the 1830s: two of Ivan Kalashnikov's historical novels, with extensive historical and ethnographic descriptions of Siberia; two historical novels by Ivan Lazhechnikov; Aleksandr Vel'tman *Koshchei Bessmertnyi*; two novels by Walter Scott in translation, *Rob Roy* and *Count Robert of Paris*; *Han of Iceland* by Hugo; Karamzin's *History* and a *History of Peter the Great*; lastly, two very recent Russian novels with a contemporary setting, *Pan podstolich* by Foma Massal'skii and *Chudak, ili chelovek kakikh malo* by Ivan Vanenko<sup>107</sup>. *Pan padstolich* was a regional novel (*uezdnyi roman*), that is a work that aimed to provide, as the author states in the introduction, a whole range of geographical information about Lithuania and Belorus held together by a thin fictional plot. The other novel taken out by Vasil'ev, *Chudak, or chelovek kakikh malo* by Vanenko, is about Moscow's society life. It is the story of a rich, aristocratic young man, simple and feeble, who looks for a wife in vain and is made fun of by frivolous vixens and cynical matchmakers. For a servant, it was a cynical lesson on the rules of aristocratic love life.

In general, besides some of the *lubok* chivalric romances (the most popular of which being *Guak*) and religious literature works, the books borrowed by servants basically represented all the novels published in Russian in the previous eighty years. The most popular titles included the translation of Lesage's *Gil Blas*, Auguste Lafontaine's *Susanna*, brigand novels, some books by de Kock, Hugo's *Han d'Islande*, Scott's *Count Robert of Paris* and, among the Russians, *Kamchadalka* by Kalashnikov and *Kliatva pri grobe Gospodnem* by Nikolai Polevoj, *Pan Podstolich* by Foma Masal'skii, *Chudak* by Vanenko. Among the Winter Palace stokers, there were even those who read *The sorrows of young Werther*, of course in Russian<sup>108</sup>. The most obvious difference, apart from the

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 1.64.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 1.34.

<sup>108</sup> See the readings of the stoker Vasilii Ivanov, AGE, f.1, op.1, 1839, d.39, l.83.

language, between the books chosen by the readers of the Heir's library and those chosen by the servants, was what these two groups considered to be the "latest craze": for the readers at court they were the European novels of the last two to three years, whereas for the servants, they were the Russian novels published over the previous eighty years.

From an overall viewpoint, it is striking how a great number of novels and authors were enjoyed by readers of both the Heir's and the servants' libraries: Paul de Kock's novels were read by both the Tsar and his stokers; Walter Scott and Victor Hugo seemed to have been popular with most of the court readers as well as with their servants. In their choice of novels, the differences between the more cultured members of the Winter Palace household and those much less cultured were less marked than we had expected. Both the highest dignitaries and the lowliest stokers shared the same passion for reading European novels, which does not appear to know significant linguistic or social barriers. Much more so than the theatre, the novel is the genre that brought such different communities closer to each other, and that enabled readers with such different positions and linguistic skills to share a similar cultural experience. Yet, for every type of novel, each group appears to have had their favourite authors: Zagoskin and Bulgarin seemed to be much less in vogue among servants than Kalashnikov, Lazhechnikov and Polevoj. By the same authors, the two groups seemed to prefer different titles: servants favoured Walter Scott's *The Count of Paris* to *Quentin Duward* or *Ivanhoe*; among Hugo's works, they mostly read *Han d'Islande*.

Most importantly, what changed significantly between the reading enjoyed by the highest courtiers and by their servants, in addition to the language, were their reading practices, their horizons of expectation and the readers' interpretative skills. Although they often read the same novels, these three factors determined a different aesthetic and ideological rendering of the same texts. While Walter Scott's novels or contemporary French novels were read by the tsar and his courtiers after a quantity of French memoirs about the French revolution and the period of the Empire and, therefore, tended to acquire special political and social significance, those same novels were projected by the

servants against a fanciful, legendary background, made up of their many readings of *lubok* courtly romances, the picaresque or sentimental novels of the past decades, thereby fulfilling the purpose of entertaining and providing a diversion from their daily grind. According to the position of the readers at court, and what they saw in the Winter Palace, whether that was a political cabinet in which state ideology was discussed, a place in which the courtiers felt suffocated by hierarchies and etiquette, or a place where the servants could find books otherwise unobtainable, even reading novels could constitute either a form of social control, or a form of escapism, or a school of good taste and proper behaviour.