

K. N. Batiushkov, “An Evening at Kantemir’s” (1816): Translation, Introduction and Notes by Marcus C. Levitt

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Abstract:

Konstantin Batiushkov’s “An Evening at Kantemir’s” (*Večer u Kantemira*, 1816) is unique as a work of literature, a document of Russian intellectual history, and a cultural and artistic manifesto. The “Evening” takes its cue from the popular Enlightenment genre of “dialogues with the dead,” although Batiushkov brings together people who were contemporaries rather than widely separated historical figures, as was usual. In it, the poet Antiokh Kantemir (1708-44) challenges Montesquieu’s argument from *The Spirit of Laws* that Russia’s harsh climate has resulted in its alleged lack of civilization. Batiushkov was rewriting history with hindsight, and one of the charming aspects of the work is its slightly humorous and lightly ironic play with anachronism, as Batiushkov presents Kantemir as marvelously prophetic of the later successes of Russian literature. Typical is his interlocutor’s statement that “It is easier to believe that the Russians will storm Paris” than that Russia could produce a Lomonosov. Batiushkov himself was with the troops that took Paris in 1814, and the recent Russian victory was surely on readers’ minds as they read this piece. “An Evening at Kantemir’s” attempted to integrate the “new” Russian literature with the eighteenth-century “classicist” literary and Enlightenment tradition. It also illustrates Batiushkov’s faith in poetry as a fundamental way to advance the cause of national progress.

Keywords:

Batiushkov, Kantemir, Montesquieu, Lomonosov, Russian poetry, Enlightenment

Introduction

Konstantin Batiushkov’s “An Evening at Kantemir’s” (*Večer u Kantemira*, 1816) is remarkable as a work of literature; as a document of Russian intellectual history; and as a cultural and artistic manifesto. To start with its special generic nature, the work was published in Batiushkov’s *Opyty v stikhakh i proze* (2 vols., 1817), and the term “*opyt*” is quite apt for this unusual work.¹ “*Opyty*” could mean “essays,” in the sense of Montaigne’s *Essais* (which Batiushkov quotes in the epigraph to the first volume); it also suggests “trials, experiments, assays” (derived from the Late Latin *exagium*, “weighing, testing on the balance”).² As an essay, “An Evening at Kantemir’s” challenges Montesquieu’s argument that Russia’s harsh climate has resulted in its alleged lack of civilization. The “Evening” also partakes of the classical genre “dialogue of the dead” that was revived by French Enlightenment figures such as Fontenelle and François Fénelon, and became popular in

¹ For a short recent biography of Batiushkov, see Igor A. Pilshchikov, with T. Henry Fitt, “Konstantin Batiushkov: Life and Work,” *Russian Virtual Library*, accessed Nov. 11, 2021, https://rvb.ru/batyushkov/bio/bio_eng.htm. This is a revised version of the article that appeared in Crystine A. Rydel, ed., *Russian Literature in the Age of Pushkin and Gogol: Poetry and Drama*, (Detroit: Brucoli Clark Layman; The Gale Group, 1999), 20-37.

² The Russian *opyt* adds the possible nuance meaning “experience, skill” (in OCS and other Slavic languages, the root meaning of the verb *pytat’* is to ask or to beg, while in modern Russian it means to torture).

Russia.³ Of particular relevance in this case are the dialogues by Batiushkov's great uncle and mentor, the poet M. N. Murav'ev, who included a series of them in his own collection of various "opyty" (*Opyty istorii, pis'men i nrovoucheniia*, 1796; 1810), including a conversation between Kantemir and Horace.⁴ However, as M. P. Alekseev notes, "An Evening at Kantemir's" greatly differs from the abstract, a-historical and didactic works by Murav'ev and earlier Russian dialogues of the dead. These often brought together people from entirely different historical periods (like Horace and Kantemir); unlike them, Batiushkov brings together people who were contemporaries (Kantemir, his friend Montesquieu and their known acquaintances), depicting them in a particular time and setting with what Alekseev calls a "strict and consistent historicism" (historical accuracy; we might say, or realism).⁵ Batiushkov himself wrote that "Everything [in the work] is original and there has been nothing of the kind before [in our literature]."⁶

Batiushkov's historicism, however, did not extend as far as precise adherence to historical fact, and "An Evening at Kantemir's" could also be considered as a short story (that is, a work of fiction), or as an essay in the form of one. Batiushkov was rewriting history with hindsight, and one of the charming aspects of the work is its slightly humorous and lightly ironic play with anachronism. The basic target of "An Evening at Kantemir's" was Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*, from which he takes some of the opinions the philosopher expresses in the story. But as Batiushkov surely knew, Montesquieu's opus was only published several years after Kantemir's death.⁷ Similarly, Batiushkov presents Kantemir as marvelously prophetic of the later successes of Russian literature, making more or less transparent references to the post-Kantemirean poets Dmitriev, Derzhavin, and especially to Lomonosov, whose very existence proves his (Batiushkov/Kantemir's) "prophesy" about the rich future of Russian letters. Batiushkov's Kantemir describes Lomonosov's life in specific detail, following it up with the almost embarrassing authorial admission that "This is only a hypothesis, but the matter is possible." Almost, because the reader chuckles along with Batiushkov at the French intellectuals' obtuse and mistaken

³ See Nicoletta Marcialis, *Caronte E Caterina: Dialoghi Dei Morti Nella Letteratura Russa Del 18. Secolo* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1989).

⁴ "Goratsii i kniaz' Antiokh Dmitrievich Kantemir" in M. N. Murav'ev, *Opyty istorii, pis'men i nrovoucheniia* (Moscow: Universitetskaia tipografiia, 1810), 349-53. At several points *An Evening at Kantemir's* recalls this dialogue, for example, when Horace tells Kantemir that he will be remembered more for his poetry than for his diplomatic service, 350-351; see N. V. Fridman, *Proza Batiushkova* (Moscow: Nauka, 1965), 116-7. Batiushkov cites Murav'ev's dialogues in his review of Murav'ev's *Opyty in Syn otechestva in 1814*, which was reprinted in the *Opyty v stikhakh i proze*, 55-6, and also mentions Kantemir's appearance in passing. See also, M. P. Alekseev, "Montesk'e i Kantemir," *Sravnitel'noe literaturovedenie*, ed. G. V. Stepanov (Leningrad: Nauka, 1983), 123-4.

⁵ "Montesk'e i Kantemir," 124. See also Fridman, *Proza Batiushkova*, 128-30. As is clear from the work of Alekseev and Fridman, Batiushkov based his work on a careful reading of the available sources.

⁶ Quoted in Fridman, *Proza Batiushkova*, 114.

⁷ It is perhaps significant that two European reviews of Kantemir's satires published in French and German both discussed the extent to which Montesquieu's argument about Russians' "coldness" was applicable to Kantemir himself. N. A. Kopanev even suggests that Montesquieu may have authored the French review. See N. A. Kopanev, "O pervykh izdaniakh satir A. Kantemira," *XVIII vek*, 15 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1986), 151 and 153; cf. Ekaterina Vasil'eva, "Brat'ia Guasco i frankoiazychnye izdaniia 'Satir' Kantemira," *Vestnik KGU*, 3 (2017), 95-6.

confidence about Russia's alleged barbarism; we all know that history has proved them wrong. This is again underscored by the next exchange in which "Abbé V." declares that "It is easier to believe that the Russians will storm Paris and destroy all of the fortresses built by Vauban" than that Russia could produce a Lomonosov. Batiushkov himself was with the troops that took Paris in 1814, and the recent Russian victory was surely on readers' minds as they read this piece.

There are also less obvious and perhaps less conscious anachronisms. For example, Kantemir states in the story that he "was the first to dare to write like one speaks . . . the first to expel from our language coarse Slavonic and foreign words." This reflects the Karamzinian linguistic program, promoted by the members of Arzamas (including Batiushkov) in the 1810s rather than Kantemir's position.⁸ However, in a more general sense, we may say that Batiushkov was claiming Kantemir as forerunner, a linguistic reformer and a creator of the modern literary language.⁹ This was part of an attempt to put forward a new canon for Russian literature. Mariia Maiofis, who has examined Arzamas' program in detail, notes that much of the retrospective canon-building of the period actually involved a selective rejection of the eighteenth-century tradition, a de-canonization.¹⁰ However, Arzamas' "modernization project" (Maiofis' term) attempted to integrate the "new" Russian literature with the eighteenth-century "classicist" literary and Enlightenment tradition, albeit in their own way.

The issue of anachronism, however, is clearly subordinate to Batiushkov's main aim—to refute Montesquieu and to validate Russian civilization, Russia's rightful place in European culture, and its intellectual and artistic worth—which includes his own legitimacy as a poet. "An Evening at Kantemir's" took up the long-running French debate over Russia's histori-philosophical place in the world and its continued resonance in debates over Russian self-image that simmered between the momentous events of 1812 and 1825. As a document of Russian intellectual history "An Evening at Kantemir's" "gives voice to a new national

⁸ On Kantemir's linguistic position, see N. I. Nikolaev, "Trudnyi Kantemir (Stilisticheskaia struktura i kritika teksta)," *XVIII vek*, 19 (1995): 3-14. For a more detailed examination of his language, and the idea of writing as one speaks, see Victor Zhivov, *Language and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Russia*, trans. Marcus C. Levitt (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009).

⁹ After the meeting of Arzamas on Jan. 6, 1817, at which "Večer u Kantemira" was read and discussed (in Batiushkov's absence), in his notes on the session Bludov lightheartedly described Montesquieu and Kantemir of the work as "departed members of Arzamas" and said that "they spoke among themselves like worthy living members of Arzamas" (Fridman, *Proza Batiushkova*, 126-7).

¹⁰ Mariia Maiofis, *Vozzvanie k evrope: Literaturnoe obshchestvo Arzamas i rossiski modernizatsionnyi proekt 1815-1818 godov* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2008), 534-7 and passim. Maiofis suggests that Arzamas' "modernization project" attempted to integrate the eighteenth-century literary and Enlightenment tradition, albeit on their own "dynamic," historicizing terms. This "dynamic" model was based on the "idea of the gradual perfection of literature and language, parallel to. . . the enlightenment and education of the reader," 533; Maiofis cites Batiushkov, *Opyty*, 17). On the other hand, she notes (537) that Karamzin's *Panteon Rossiiskikh avtorov* (1801-2) could have been prefaced with the epigraph 'We have no literature,' thus anticipating the later crisis of Russian letters—the famous declarations by the Decembrist Alexander Bestuzhev ("Vzgliad na russkuiu slovesnost' v techenie 1824 i nachale 1825 god" [1825]) and V. G. Belinsky (*Literaturnye mechtaniia* [1834]).

consciousness" in the post-Napoleonic period.¹¹ It offers testimony that before 1825, Russian intellectual life still operated on an Enlightenment frame of reference, that it was part of "the long eighteenth century."¹² Kantemir/Batiushkov maintains that with time and education, the Russian language will be "as clear and accurate as the language of the witty Fontenelle and the profound Montesquieu"; that "there are [already] enlightened and thinking people [in Russia] who are able to enjoy the beautiful fruits of the Muses"; and that "great minds and rare talents" and even "a great genius" may arise in Russia. Regardless of the climate, "poetry is inherent to all humankind" because "the human heart is the best source of poetry," as evidenced, Kantemir/Batiushkov asserts, in the beauty and richness of Russian folksongs.¹³ Peter the Great proved "that talent is inherent in all of humanity," and it only requires time and education to be manifested. "Give us time, prolong the favorable circumstances, and you will not be able to deny us the best abilities of the mind." (Kantemir/Batiushkov seems to feel the same condescension toward the Kalmyks and Samoyeds as Montesquieu and Abbé V. do toward Russians, but allows that time and education may raise them up as well.) We may contrast this to the arch-Romantic despair over Russian culture of Chaadaev, who famously lamented in the "First Philosophical Letter" (1829) that "there is something *in our blood* that resists all true progress" (italics added).¹⁴

Batiushkov thus countered the long tradition of Russia-bashing on the part of French intellectuals,¹⁵ whose views not only had helped provide a rationale for the invasion of 1812¹⁶ but also fed into the growing dissatisfaction of Russian intellectuals of Batiushkov's cohort (including Chaadaev). Most of them, like Batiushkov, had spent much time in Europe fighting against the French, but many upon returning home were disturbed by comparing what they had seen of life there to conditions in Russia and were dissatisfied with Alexander I's reactionary policies. This dissatisfaction was manifested among other things in the growth of secret societies leading up to the Decembrist Revolt of 1825 and in caustic notes

¹¹ Otto Boele, *The North in Russian Romantic Literature. Studies in Slavic Literature and Poetics*, vol. 26 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 35.

¹² Nicholas Riasanovsky, for example, considers Decembrism the climax of "the last phase of the Russian Enlightenment." See Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A Parting of Ways: Government and the Educated Public in Russia, 1801-1855* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 83.

¹³ This is also, arguably, another anachronism in regard to Kantemir. On his alleged use of folk proverb, see Nikolaev, *Trudnyi Kantemir*, 9-12. On the other hand, the special value of Russian folk songs became a major issue in Russian letters of the late eighteenth and first third of the nineteenth century.

¹⁴ P. Ia. Chaadaev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i izbrannye pis'ma*. 2 vols. (Moscow: Nauka, 1991), 1: 330.

¹⁵ These included Montesquieu, Rousseau, Claude-Carloman de Ruhlière, Chappe d'Auteroche, Mably, Condillac, Raynal, and Mirabeau. On the European debate, see the literature cited in Marcus C. Levitt, "An Antidote to Nervous Juice: Catherine the Great's Debate with Chappe d'Auteroche over Russian Culture," *Early Modern Russian Letters: Selected Articles* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 339-57; on the roots of the anti-Russian view leading up to Montesquieu, see Marshall Poe, "A People Born to Slavery: Russia," *Early Modern European Ethnography, 1476-1748* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ Larry Wolff shows how "the intellectual formulas of the Enlightenment [were] deployed in the military maneuvers of the next generation," that is, they served as a justification for the Napoleonic invasion of Russia. See Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 363. As Wolff notes, Tolstoy exposed this connection most forcefully in *War and Peace*.

in Russian literary criticism.¹⁷ Batiushkov, however, despite his close personal and family ties to many future Decembrists, did not share their desire for political action.¹⁸ Fridman interprets the line from “An Evening at Kantemir’s” that “The plow is the foundation of society, the true site of citizenship, the basis for the law” to mean that Batiushkov was advocating the amelioration of serfdom, but this is not very convincing.¹⁹ Rather, it seems as if Batiushkov is indicating that agriculture has already sown “beneficial traces” and that the values of society, citizenship, and law already have a foothold in Russia. This reading would reinforce the larger argument promoting gradual enlightenment via time and education, building upon the legacy of Peter the Great. Responding to Montesquieu’s listing of the things that prevent Russia’s progress, including her “almost Asiatic form of government” and “slavery,” Batiushkov’s *Kantemir* not only counters with what he sees as the great humanistic achievement of the tsar-reformer, who by curing “the disease of ignorance” developed “all of the soul’s potential” in Russians; he also notes that according to Montesquieu’s own theory, “with the success of enlightenment all forms of government change in a clear and inevitable way,” and that Montesquieu himself had detected such changes in Russia. Batiushkov’s *Kantemir* concludes that “Maybe in two or three centuries, maybe earlier, the beneficent heavens will grant us a genius who will fully understand Peter’s great idea – and the most vast land in the world, heeding his creative voice, will make it a repository of law, of freedom based on it, of manners that give law endurance, in a word – a repository of enlightenment.” This genius, apparently, will be a new Peter, a new enlightened monarch. In any case, this is by no means a summons to immediate, radical change.

If Batiushkov’s main aim in “An Evening at Kantemir’s” was to validate Russian civilization, his no less important concern was with Russian poetry, his own and that of his predecessors such as Kantemir. He saw poetry as a major way to advance the cause of national enlightenment. In his review of *Opyty v stikhakh i proze*, Sergei Uvarov memorably called Batiushkov “a passionate lover of Italian and French poetry,” and, as Igor Pil’shchikov has noted, Uvarov “expressed the general opinion of his contemporaries” that the publication had shown Batiushkov to be “the plenipotentiary representative” of Romance literatures in Russia.²⁰ Batiushkov thus had a deep stake in defining what we may call Russia’s cultural geography. Montesquieu stigmatized Russia as a northern country whose frigid weather rendered it insensitive and culturally stunted, and as Otto Boele has noted, Batiushkov and his cohort took part in a debate in which “Western views” framed the

¹⁷ See, for example, the essays by V. K. Kukhelbeker, A. A. Bestuzhev and D. V. Venevitinov in *Russian Romantic Criticism: An Anthology*, ed. and trans. Lauren Leighton (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1987). See also Maiofis, *Vozzvanie k Evrope*, 531-99.

¹⁸ Distress with his friends’ disturbing political ideas has been suggested as a motive for Batiushkov’s move to Italy and Germany in 1819-22; upon his return he began to show serious signs of the mental illness that marked the last thirty-odd years of his life. See V. A. Koshelev, “K. N. Batiushkov i Murav’evy: k probleme formirovaniia ‘dekabristskogo’ soznaniia,” *Novye bezdelki: sbornik statei k 60-letiiu V. E. Vatsuro* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1996), 117-137.

¹⁹ Fridman, *Proza Batiushkova*, 125.

²⁰ I. A. Pil’shchikov, *Batiushkov i literatura Italii: Filologicheskie razyskaniia* (Moscow: Iazyki slavianskoi kul’tury, 2003), 6.

terms.²¹ Thus in "An Evening at Kantemir's," Batiushkov/Kantemir is at pains to affirm (as we have seen) that "poetry is inherent to all humankind," but also to defend "the possibility of a Northern poetry."²² The Abbé V. ironically refers to Russians as "Hyperboreans" (mythological dwellers of the far north) and to Kantemir as "honored defender of the North," and Kantemir counters with references to "the northern muse" (in the case of Ossian) and to Lomonosov's birth "amid the half-savage northerners." At the same time, Batiushkov's Kantemir also refers to his Greek blood and to his love for "the blue sky and the ever-green olives of southern lands," and ascribes to the notion that "the southern countries were the birthplace of the arts" (although he adds that they had spread from there). Thus, while Batiushkov argued for the universal human value of poetry, a major goal of his career was to assimilate to Russia the aesthetic legacy of both the classics and of the "Southern" poets of France and Italy.²³

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This translation is based on the text of "Vecher u Kantemira" in K. N. Batiushkov, *Opyty v stikhakh i proze*, edited by I. M. Semenko. Literaturnye pamiatniki (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 34-51 (available online at: <http://feb-web.ru/feb/batyush/texts/bop/bop-0342.htm>). Semenko's annotations have been useful in preparing my own.

K. N. Batiushkov, "An Evening at Kantemir's"

Antioch Kantemir, Russian envoy at the court of Louis XV, preferred solitude to the noise and dissipation of the brilliant court. He devoted his free time from his duties to science and poetry. In his peaceful study, surrounded by his beloved books, he often exclaimed while rereading Plutarch, Horace and Virgil: "Happy is he who is satisfied by little, free, alien to envy and to prejudice, who has a clean conscience and can spend his time with you, teachers of mankind, the wise men of all ages and peoples:

. . . With you, the Latins and the Greek...
The causes for all things and actions seek."²⁴

His mind had properties that are rarely united: thoroughness, accuracy and imagination. Often, steeped in algebraic calculations, Kantemir sought the truth and - like the sage of Syracuse-²⁵ forgot about the world, about people and constantly changing society. He was

²¹ Boele, *The North in Russian Romantic Literature*, 34.

²² This is how Jacob Emery sees Batiushkov's interest in "the Scandinavian epic tradition as exemplified by Ossian." See Jacob Emery, "Repetition and Exchange in Legitimizing Empire: Konstantin Batiushkov's Scandinavian Corpus," *The Russian Review*, 66, no. 4 (2007): 615.

²³ Igor Pil'shchikov examines Batiushkov's profound involvement with Italian poetry on the textual level in *Batiushkov i literatura Italii*.

²⁴ "Happy is he who is satisfied by little..." — a prose paraphrase of Kantemir's sixth satire, from which the following verse is also taken.

²⁵ Archemedes.

engaged in the sciences not in order to flaunt his knowledge in the vain bustle of learned women or academics--no! He loved science for science, poetry for poetry - a rare quality, a true sign of a great mind and a beautiful, strong soul! In Paris, where the self-esteem of an eminent person may be constantly reinforced by praise and appreciation for the least literary success, where a few careless verses, written by a foreigner, give the right of citizenship in the republic of letters, Kantemir wrote ... poetry in Russian! And at what time? A time when our tongue had barely become able to express the thoughts of an enlightened person. Abandon a mathematician and a poet on a desert island, said D'Alembert: the first will sketch lines and angles, not caring that no one will take advantage of his observations; but the second will stop writing poetry because there is no one to praise it; consequently, poetry and poets, concludes the rational philosopher, are only fed by vanity.²⁶ Paris was such a desert island for Kantemir. But who could understand him? Who could admire poetry in Russian? Even in Russia, where society, the arts and sciences were still in swaddling clothes, he without doubt would have found few to appreciate his talent. Heart and soul above his time and circumstances, he wrote poetry, and he constantly revised his poems, wanting to reach the greatest possible perfection, and, it seems, bequeathed both his book and his glory to noble posterity. Talent is nourished on praise, but true, great talent will not die without it. A poet may be vain – just like a scientist - but a true lover of all that is beautiful cannot exist without activity, and what our Catullus has said about our Bavius – who

With his last breath gives forth his final verse – ²⁷

may often also be said of a great poet. On his deathbed, Cervantes did not abandon his pen; Camoens wrote the *Lusiads* among uncultivated savages; Tasso, unfortunate Tasso, conversed with the Muses while in awful captivity;²⁸ and Derzhavin, an hour before his death with fingers growing cold picked out chords on his immortal lyre.²⁹ Can we accuse these people of vanity?... But let us return to Kantemir.

²⁶ Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert (1717-1783), a French mathematician, physicist, philosopher, and music theorist. Batiushkov seems to be referring to d'Alembert's "Essai sur la societe des gens de lettres" of 1753. (Thanks to Kirill Ospovat for this suggestion.)

²⁷ The line is from P. A. Viazemsky's satire "K peru moemu." Viazemsky is thus "our Catullus." His literary antagonist, "our Bavius," criticized in the poem, is evidently A. S. Khvostov, who was mocked for graphomania. Viazemsky read the poem at a public meeting of the Society of Lovers of Russian Literature on April 29, 1816.

²⁸ Cervantes completed the novel *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* just before his death; it was published posthumously in 1617. Camoens wrote the epic poem *The Lusiads* while in exile in Portuguese Macaum in China; Tasso was confined to a madhouse for seven years. Notably, from the early 1820s until his death in 1855, Batiushkov himself suffered from mental illness.

²⁹ A reference to Derzhavin's unfinished poem, "Na tlennost'," whose first stanza he wrote on a small slate chalkboard (preserved in the Derzhavin Museum in St. Petersburg). The poem is commonly known for the start of its first line, "Reka vremen v svoem stremlenii..."

One evening Montesquieu and Abbe V.,³⁰ a known wit, visited our poet. He had been communing with his muse and did not notice the arrival of his friends who had free access to his home. For several minutes Kantemir kept on rereading aloud the beginning of his epistle to Prince Nikita Trubetskoi,³¹ each time with new fervor and satisfaction. While reading Kantemir's serene and even cold face changed markedly: his eyes shone like lightning, his cheeks burned, and his hand beat time on the open book before him. Montesquieu looked at the Abbé, nodded to him, and intended to leave. They did not want to disturb the minister, assuming that he was busy with some important state business. Kantemir heard a rustle behind him, looked back - and rushed to embrace his unexpected guests. "We are bothering you. We came at a bad time." "Not at all!" "Are you reading important papers?" "I was entertaining myself rereading some verses that I wrote." "What kind of verses? We did not understand a word of them." "Russian." - "Russian verses!" exclaimed the abbe, shrugging his shoulders in surprise: "Russian poetry! That's curious ..."

Kantemir:

A pale imitation of Horace, Juvenal and Persius. You know my passion for the ancient writers; I was carried away. Unable to compete with the classical Roman poets, I drag after them, like a slave after his master, or like a passionate lover after a proud beauty. Have you never written poetry, Mr. President, and known the suffering and pleasure that they call metromania?

Montesquieu:

What you say is true. I have not written verse, but I love poetry when I find just as many thoughts as words in it: when it is clear, strong, expressive, in a word - as good as prose. I have always respected the satires and epistles of Horace; they introduce us to Rome, with the manners and the way of life of the degenerate descendants of the Brutuses, Coriolanus, and Scipios.³² I read Juvenal with pleasure; a true Roman soul! He is the same in verse that Tacitus is in prose. I love the creations of those poets as monuments of language, formed by centuries of the people's glory, a language that is brave, abundant, and expressive: the venerable parent of modern languages.

Abbé V.:

³⁰ Kantemir's acquaintanceship with the philosopher Charles Louis Montesquieu (1689-1755) gave Batiushkov the idea for this composition. Batiushkov has Montesquieu called the "president" in reference to his position in the Parliament of Bordeaux. M. P. Alekseev suggests that "Abbé V." refers to Montesquieu's friend, the archaeologist Filippo Venutti (1706-68) ("Montesk'e i Kantemir," *Sravnitel'noe literaturovedenie*, ed. G. V. Stepanov (Leningrad: Nauka, 1983), 133-4), although he notes that "Abbé V." functions more as a literary foil for Montesquieu, helping to shape the debate, than a real historical figure (135).

³¹ The "Pis'mo I. K kniazuiu Nikite Iurevichu Trubetskomu." Kantemir's friend Trubetskoi (1699-1767) was a high-ranking official, from 1740 the procurator-general of the Senate. Kantemir also addressed his seventh satire to Trubetskoi.

³² Cf. Montesquieu's well-known treatise of 1734, "Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur decadence."

And, of course, Mr. President regrets that you are writing Russian poetry. Knowing Latin perfectly as well as our French, so clear, precise and beautiful, you are depriving us of the pleasure of reading your charming works.

Montesquieu:

I do regret it and wonder how you can write—I will say more-- how you can think in the language of the uneducated. You write in Russian, but your tongue and nation are still wrapped in swaddling clothes.³³

Kantemir:

True: the Russian language is in its infancy; but it is rich and as expressive as Latin, and will eventually be as clear and accurate as the language of the witty Fontenelle and the profound Montesquieu. Now I am forced to struggle with the greatest of difficulties: I am forced to constantly invent new words, expressions and phrases, which, no doubt, will become obsolete in a few years. Translating "The Worlds" of Fontenelle, I created new words, and the Academy in St. Petersburg often approved of my attempts.³⁴ I was clearing the way for my followers.

Abbé V.:

But tell me, for God's sake, how could you incorporate all of the subtle expressions and turns of phrase of that leading connoisseur (*shchegol'*) of the French language, our septuagenarian Fontenelle?

Kantemir:

As best I could! I followed slavishly in his footsteps. My translation is weak, coarse, unfaithful. The Scythians once forced a captive Greek to carve Venus and promised him freedom. The Greek was a bad sculptor; in Scythia there was neither Parian marble, nor skilled carvers; for the lack of them this fellow countryman of Praxiteles used rough granite, a hammer, and a simple saw but created something similar to Venus, following in absentia the model that was so famous not only in Greece but even in barbarian lands. The Scythians

³³ Note that it is the narrator ("Batiushkov") who first uses this phrase.

³⁴ This refers to Kantemir's translation of Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686). Completed about 1729-30, the translation was only published by the Academy of Sciences in 1740; the delay was due to the book's argument against heliocentrism, offensive to some members of the Orthodox Church. On this translation, the problems concerning its publication and its linguistic innovations, see, B. E. Raikov, *Ocherki po istorii geliotsentricheskogo mirovozzrenii v Rossii: iz proshlogo russkogo estestvoznaniia*. 2nd ed. (Moscow: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1947), 223-35; M. I. Radovskii, *Antiokh Kantemir i Peterburgskaia Akademiia nauk* (Leningrad: Akademiia nauk, 1959), 64-76; V. V. Veselitskiĭ, *Antiokh Kantemir i razvitie russkogo literaturnogo iazyka* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974), 10-12, 20-26.

were happy because they didn't know the divine original, and they worshiped the new goddess with childlike ardor. The Scythians – are my compatriots; Praxiteles' statue – is Fontenelle's immortal book; and I am that unskilled Greek sculptor.

Abbé V.:"

Oh, you are too modest, honored prince!

Kantemir:

Not satisfied with my experience with Fontenelle, I set to work on *The Persian Letters*.³⁵

Abbé V.:

The Persian Letters in Russian!

Montesquieu:

Could I have expected that this first, weak fruit of my pen would take up so much of your precious time?

Abbé V.:

Now the Hyperboreans³⁶ will learn how flighty and faint-hearted the inhabitants on the banks of the Seine are!

Kantemir:

And how witty.

Abbé V.:

I've long attended the evenings at Mme. Geoffrin – she praises you to the skies, but in her soul despises you.³⁷ I've predicted your fame for a long time, M. Montesquieu! No one is a

³⁵ Kantemir's translation of *The Persian Letters* was lost.

³⁶ In Greek mythology, the Hyperboreans were a mythical people who lived in the far north in a land of sunshine; in the modern period, it came to refer to people who live in extremely cold, northerly and Arctic regions, and the word was sometimes used to refer to Russians or inhabitants of Siberia.

³⁷ Marie Thérèse Rodet Geoffrin (1699–1777), hostess of a celebrated salon that was an important venue for French Enlightenment writers. Long after Montesquieu's death she was greatly upset by the publication of his private letters, issued anonymously in 1767 by Kantemir's close associate, the Abbé Guasco (on whom, see below), whose aim, according to R. J. M. Evans, was "to insult and discredit" the aged Mme Geoffrin; the publication caused "something of a scandal in France and England." See R. J. M. Evans, "Antiokh Kantemir and His First Biographer and Translator," *Slavonic and East European Review*, 37 (1958): 184–5.

prophet in their own country,³⁸ but my prophecy has come true, as you can see. It may very well be that at this very moment on the shores of the Arctic Ocean, on the banks of the Lena or the Ob, in the deserts of Tartary – they are reading your witty writings, and the name of Montesquieu is being broadcast in the encampments of Kalmyks and Samoyeds!

Montesquieu:

They are reading *The Persian Letters* by the light of fish oil lamps...

Abbé V.:

Or by the light of the aurora borealis ... How strange and wonderful! - And we were talking with such disdain about the great Moscovia!³⁹

Kantemir:

Kalmyks and Samoyeds do not read books of philosophy, and it will be quite a while until they do, of course. But in densely inhabited Moscow, in Peter's emerging capital, in small and large monasteries of Russia there are enlightened and thinking people who are able to enjoy the beautiful fruits of the Muses.

Montesquieu:

The number of such people must be very limited. Until now, I thought, and still think, that your climate, harsh and unstable; your land, mostly barren, covered in winter with deep snow; the small population; the difficulty of communications; the form of government, almost Asiatic; deep-seated prejudice and slavery, ingrained over centuries; all of this together will hold back the progress of thought and enlightenment for a long time. The power of climate is the primary factor.⁴⁰

Abbé V.:

I agree with you; and I believe that all the efforts of a giant tsar, whatever he could accomplish even with an iron hand – will all be destroyed, crumble away, disappear.⁴¹

³⁸ A paraphrase of a line from Ivan Dmitriev's *skazka* "Iskateliam fortuny." (Of course, the original line is from John 4:39-45.)

³⁹ "Moscovia" is an old Latinized name for the city of Moscow that later came to stand for the kingdom of Muscovy. Below, Kantemir repeats the use of this archaic term with mild irony.

⁴⁰ Montesquieu's argument about the dependence of civilization on climate in *De l'esprit des lois* (*The Spirit of Laws*, 1748), and his negative judgements about Russia with its frigid, "northern" weather, is the main target of "An Evening at Kantemir's." Batiushkov strove to present his poetry as equal to that of the "Southern" poets of France and Italy.

⁴¹ Batiushkov is referring to the extensive debate over Peter's reforms and their viability among eighteenth-century thinkers including Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau and many others. See the discussion and bibliography in Levitt, "An Antidote to Nervous Juice," 341-3.

Nature, ancient customs, superstition, incurable barbarism will prevail over weak and insubstantial education; and all of what is half-savage will return to being the old savage Muscovy, and an eternal fog of oblivion will cover over the life and deeds of Peter the Great's successors.

Kantemir:

I dare to disagree with the great creator of the book about the spirit of laws,⁴² and with you, my dear abbé. Russia has awakened from a deep sleep, like the mythical Epimenides.⁴³ The dawn, illuminating our land, heralds a beautiful morning, a magnificent noon, and a clear evening: here is my prophecy!

Abbé V.:

But this is not the dawn – it's the Northern Lights. They sparkle a lot, but without light and without warmth.

Montesquieu:

The witty abbé has said a great truth. Let us assume - a difficult assumption, hardly realizable! - that the government will open up all paths to enlightenment, that it will constantly summon foreigners to educate its youth, build warm edifices for schools, and from these greenhouses and hothouses of enlightenment will come a few immature and parched fruits. Let us assume that the government will produce sufficiently skilled soldiers, some sailors, a number of artillerymen, engineers and so on. But tell me, can the government inspire taste for the elegant, for the abstract and speculative sciences? What power can change the climate? Who can give you a new sky, new air, a new earth?

Abbé V.:

And a new sun? How can one sow the sciences where in autumn a farmer's sickle can only reap scant ears on furrows that he has irrigated, where in the winter iron dissolves from the cold and you need an axe to chop liquids? *Caeduntque securibus humida vina!*⁴⁴

Montesquieu:

Cold air constricts iron; how could it not act on a person? It squeezes his fibers; it gives them extraordinary strength. This physical strength is communicated to the soul. The soul inspires courage in danger, determination, bravery, strong self-reliance; it is a secret source

⁴² This is an anachronism, as *The Spirit of Laws* was published in 1748, four years after Kantemir's death.

⁴³ Epimenides (of Knossos) – a semi-mythical ancient Greek philosopher-poet said to have fallen asleep for fifty-seven years in a cave on Crete that was sacred to Zeus, after which he awoke with the gift of prophecy.

⁴⁴ "They cut the liquid wine with axes" (Virgil, *Georgics*, III, 364).

for many fine qualities of character; but it also deprives one of the sensitivity necessary for the arts and sciences. Heat, on the other hand, expanding the tiniest creases of skin, reveals the tips of the nerves and gives them a wonderful prickliness. In cold lands the outer skin is so much compacted by the air that the nerves, so to speak, are deprived of life, and rarely, very rarely, communicate feeble sensations to the brain. You know that imagination, taste, sensitivity and liveliness depend on these innumerable weak sensations.⁴⁵ You must skin a Hyperborean to make him feel something.⁴⁶

Abbé V.:

What can you say to that? You will defend your compatriots as a minister, and to the strong, convincing syllogisms of the president reply with diplomatic phrases that deflect the truth.

..

Kantemir:

I was born in Constantinople. My forefathers came from an ancient family that once possessed the throne of the Eastern Empire.⁴⁷ Consequently, Greek blood also flows in me, and I genuinely love the blue sky and the ever-green olives of southern lands. In my youth I traveled with my father, a sincere friend and inseparable companion of Peter the Great, and saw the broad valleys of Russia from the Dniepr to the Caucasus and from the Caspian Sea to the shores of magnificent Moscow.⁴⁸ I know Russia and its inhabitants. The farmer's hut and the boyar's terem are equally familiar to me. Guided by the lessons of my father, one of the most well-educated men in Europe, from early years brought up in the schools of philosophy and experience, I was obliged by my position to have continual and close intercourse with foreigners of all nations. I could not retain barbaric superstitions and was accustomed to look at my new homeland with the eye of an impartial observer. At Versailles, in the private office of your king, in the presence of his ministers, I was the representative of a great people and its almighty monarch;⁴⁹ but here, in friendly society, with a great genius of Europe, I consider it my duty to speak frankly; and you, M. Abbé,

⁴⁵ This is a summary of *The Spirit of Laws*, Book XIV, part 2. On eighteenth-century theories about the deleterious effect of the climate on Russian nerves and national character, see Levitt, "An Antidote to Nervous Juice," 339-57, that includes the bibliography on the issue.

⁴⁶ In *The Spirit of Laws* (Book XIV, part 2), Montesquieu wrote: "Il faut écorcher un Moscovite, pour lui donner du sentiment (You must skin a Muscovite to make him feel)." A variant of this saying – "Scratch a Russian and you will find a Tatar"—is attributed to Napoleon.

⁴⁷ The family of Kantemir's mother, Princess Kassandra Cantacuzene, was one of the most prominent in the Byzantine Empire, and included two emperors of the same name (Gr. Kantakouzenos).

⁴⁸ Kantemir's father Dmitrii Kantemir (Cantemir) (1673-1723) was a statesman, soldier, and a well-known man of letters. While serving as ruler (voivode) of Moldavia, he allied with Peter the Great against his Ottoman overlords and upon Russia's defeat in 1711, Peter took him and his family under his protection. In 1722-3, Peter gave Dmitrii administrative command over his Persian campaign, and he took his family on his travels along the Volga.

⁴⁹ Empress Anna Ioannovna appointed Kantemir plenipotentiary minister to France in 1738 and he continued to serve there under Empress Elizabeth until his death in 1744.

may reprove Kantemir for his ignorance rather than for partiality or insincerity. Here is my answer: you know what Peter did for Russia; he created human beings, - no! He developed all of the soul's potential in them; he cured them of the disease of ignorance; and the Russians, under the leadership of this great man, proved in a short time that talent is inherent in all of humanity. Not fifteen years had passed, and the great monarch already enjoyed the fruits of the learning of his followers; all of the auxiliary military sciences suddenly blossomed in his state. With the thunder of victories we announced to Europe that we have artillery, a navy, engineers, scientists, and even experienced sailors. What do you want from us in such a short time? Intellectual successes, successes in the abstract sciences, in the fine arts, in eloquence, in poetry? Give us time, prolong the favorable circumstances, and you will not be able to deny us the best abilities of the mind. You say that the power of climate is the primary factor. I do not argue: the climate has an effect on people; but this influence, as you noted in your immortal book, is reduced or mitigated by the form of government, customs, a communal lifestyle. The climate itself in Russia is diverse. Foreigners writing about our country generally assume that Moscovia is covered with eternal snows and populated by savages. They forget Russia's immeasurable size; they forget that at the time when a resident of the dank shores of the White Sea goes hunting for marten on his swift skis, a happy inhabitant of the mouth of the Volga is collecting wheat and valuable millet. The North itself is not so terrible to the eye of the traveler; for it provides everything necessary for the farmer. The plow is the foundation of society, the true site of citizenship, the basis for the law; and where, in what part of Russia does it not leave beneficial traces?⁵⁰ With the successes of sociability and education the North is constantly changing, and, if I dare say it, it is becoming part of enlightened Europe. Tell me, when Tacitus described the Germans, could he have imagined that in their wild forests one would one day encounter magnificent cities, that in ancient Pannonia and Noricum luminaries of human thought would be born?⁵¹ No, of course not! But Peter the Great, holding the fate of half the world in his hands, consoled himself with the great thought that on the banks of the Neva the tree of sciences would flourish under the protection of his power and, sooner or later, it would produce new fruits, and humanity would be enriched by them. You, M. Montesquieu, constantly observe the political world: on the ruins of past centuries, in the dust of proud Rome and beautiful Greece, you apprehend the causes of current phenomena and have learned to prophesy about the future. You know that with the success of enlightenment all forms of government change in a clear and inevitable way, and you have noticed these changes in the Russian land. Time destroys everything and builds it back up, ruins and perfects. Maybe in two or three centuries, maybe earlier, the beneficent heavens will grant us a genius who will fully understand Peter's great idea - and

⁵⁰ "v kakoi strane Rossii ne ostavliaet on [plug] blagodetel'nykh sledov svoikh..." N. V. Fridman interprets this passage to mean that Batiushkov was advocating the amelioration of serfdom (Fridman, *Proza Batiushkova*, 125), but this is not very convincing. The connection between agriculture and civil society may derive from physiocratic ideas, but I have found no evidence for this either for Kantemir or Batiushkov.

⁵¹ Tacitus' *Germania* (c. 98 AD) described the Germanic peoples on the periphery of the Roman Empire, including in the Roman provinces of Noricum and Pannonia. Pannonia included parts of present-day Hungary, Austria, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia and Bosnia - Herzegovina; and Noricum - parts of modern Austria and Slovenia.

the most vast land in the world, heeding his creative voice, will make it a repository of law, of freedom based on it, of manners that give law endurance, in a word - a repository of enlightenment. Gratifying hopes!⁵² They will come true, certainly. The benefactor of my family, the benefactor Russia, rests in his tomb; but his spirit, his still active, great spirit, has not abandoned the country that he loved. He is present everywhere, animating everything, giving spirit to everything, and new life and new strength. It seems to me, he continually visits Russia, urging it to go forward! "Do not stop on the path I have set you on and you will achieve the great goal that I have marked out for you!"

Montesquieu:

But the arts? Can they thrive in the mists of the Neva or under Moscow's severe sky?

Abbé V.:

The arts ... Ah! They need the transparent air and bright sun of Rome, ancient Greece, or the temperate climate of our France.

Kantemir:

The southern countries were the birthplace of the arts, but these lovely children of the imagination were often forced out of their homeland by barbarism, superstition, the sword of conquerors, and, like swift waves, spilled out over the face of the earth. Music, painting and sculpture love their ancient fatherland, and, even more, crowded cities, luxury, effeminate manners. But poetry is inherent to all humankind: wherever a person breathes the air, is nourished by the fruits of the earth, wherever he exists - there he enjoys himself, experiences good and evil, love and hate, rebukes and caresses, has joy and suffering. The human heart is the best source of poetry...

Abbé V.:

So! But admit it, it is not as sensitive in the North.

Montesquieu:

I have seen the opera in England and in Italy. From music that the British listen to quietly the Italians are beside themselves and jump around like Pythia on the prophet's tripod.

Kantemir:

What does that prove? That the sensitivity of the people of the south is more irascible, more communicative? But it is hardly as deep or as strong as the sensitivity of northern

⁵² This is possibly a reference to Alexander I and his promised constitution.

peoples. During my stay in London the Scottish scholar N. N. showed me the songs of his compatriots from the mountains. They recall ancient Homer and in both the power of their thought and depth of feeling they outstrip many works of the Italian Muse.⁵³

Abbé V.:

Incredible!

Kantemir:

We Russians also have folk songs. They breathe tenderness and the eloquence of the heart. One can see contemplation in them, quiet and deep, which gives indescribable charm even to the coarsest works of the northern muse.

Abbé V.:

Wonderful! On my honor, incredible!

Kantemir:

...Tell me, if the rude children of the North are able to feel and express themselves so vividly and pleasantly, what can we not expect from these people when they are educated?

Abbé V.:

But ... honored defender of the North ... you know that folk songs ... are just the babbling of infants!

Kantemir:

Infants eventually grow up. How can we know, perhaps on the wild shores of the Kama or the majestic Volga great minds and rare talents may arise?⁵⁴ What do you say, M. President, what do you say, on hearing that by the ice of the North Sea, amid the half-savage

⁵³ Batiushkov is referring to the works of Ossian, allegedly the ancient author of Scottish epic poetry. However, Kantemir could not have known Ossian's works since they were first published by the Scottish poet James Macpherson in 1761, long after his death. Ossian's poetry was later revealed to be counterfeit, written by Macpherson himself. However, Ossian had a strong international impact, including in Russia, and on Batiushkov's poetry in particular. Emery sees Batiushkov's interest in the Scandinavian epic tradition as reflecting his desire "to argue for the possibility of a Northern poetry, exemplified by Ossian." See Emery, "Repetition and Exchange," 615. On Ossian's reception in Russia, see Iu. D. Levin, "Ossian v Rossii," in *Dzheims Makferson. Poemy Ossiana*, ed. and trans. Iu. D. Levin (Leningrad: Nauka, 1983), 502-529.

⁵⁴ A veiled reference to Batiushkov's contemporaries, the poets Ivan Dmitriev (1760-1837) and Gavriila Derzhavin (1743-1816).

northerners, a great genius was born?⁵⁵ That he traversed all scientific fields with giant steps, and as a philosopher, orator and as a poet transformed the language and left behind timeless monuments? This is only a hypothesis, but the matter is possible. What would do you say if...

Abbé V.:

But why put forward such hypotheses? It is easier to believe that the Russians will storm Paris and destroy all of the fortresses built by Vauban⁵⁶! However, there are no laws for miracles, Fontenelle told me with a meaningful snicker after he read his profound discussion of oracles to me for the first time.⁵⁷ All your hopes can come true, perhaps, or you'll find them in the kingdom of the moon together with Astolphe's lost hopes.⁵⁸ But forgive my candor ... I confess, I still look at you with surprise and cannot comprehend how in Paris - in the land of Racine and Corneille - you can write Russian poetry!

Kantemir:

This reminds me of: "how can one be Persian?"⁵⁹

Montesquieu:

You would defeat us with our own weapons. But let me make one remark. You imitate Horace and Juvenal: consequently, you are writing satire, satire on manners - which have not yet been established. Horace and Juvenal ridiculed the vices of depraved people, but people who had reached a high degree of enlightenment. The witty and always thoughtful Boileau wrote at the court of a great king, in the most brilliant era of the French monarchy. But society in Russia must be a terrible state of chaos now, a coarse mixture of everything distorted, a combination of hardened prejudices, ignorance, ancient barbarism, Tatar customs with some glint of Asiatic luxury, plus a few sparks of European enlightenment! What kind of material is there for a satirical poet? Can the delicate arrows of an epigram penetrate triple layers of ignorance and sting a heart petrified by vice, tempered in ignorance? And what do these arrows mean in a land where women, guardians of morality, have hardly begun to be freed from the yoke of their husbands; in a land where public opinion is still unstable, still not established, and cannot punish that which is not subject

⁵⁵ Mikhail Lomonosov (1711-65). This is another anachronism, as the cult of Lomonosov as a national genius did not develop until long after Kantemir's death. Hence "This is only a hypothesis."

⁵⁶ Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban (1633-1707), a marshal of France and the foremost military engineer under Louis XIV. Of course, Batiushkov is being tongue in cheek here, referring to the Russian occupation of Paris in the war against Napoleon, in which he himself took part.

⁵⁷ A reference to Fontenelle's ironic discussion of superstition in his "Histoire des oracles" (1687).

⁵⁸ In an episode of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516), the protagonist Astolphe finds his lost hopes on the moon.

⁵⁹ From Letter 28 of Montesquieu's *The Persian Letters*; this is the response of some Parisians upon hearing of the Persian letter writer's national origin when he was wearing French clothing.

to the judgement of law? In short: how can you tell the truth with a smile to sovereigns or to slaves? First - it is dangerous; second - it is useless.

Kantemir:

Enjoying the favor of tsars and nobles who hold top positions in the state, I have no fear of speaking the truth, and my satires were of some benefit. Peter the Great, transforming Russia, also tried to transform customs: a new arena opened up for an observer of humanity and its passions. In the old Moscow, we have seen a wonderful mix of old and new, two elements in constant struggle with each another. New customs, new clothes, a new kind of life, a new language still could not change old people or erase their old character. Some boyars wore wigs and new clothes but retained the same old prejudices, the old stubbornness, that now seemed all the stranger; others, putting aside the beard and long caftan of their ancestors, together with European dress assumed all of the vices and all of the weaknesses of your countrymen, but were incapable of your politeness and sociability. Frequent changes at court brought low and unworthy people to high office; they appeared and disappeared. Favorite succeeded favorite, one crowd of flatterers – another. Pride and meanness, superstition and blasphemy, hypocrisy and open debauchery, greed and extravagance beyond belief. In a word, passions, contrary in all respects miraculously merged together and presented a new spectacle for an impartial observer and philosopher, who only by groping his way with Horace in his hands could find the happy mean. I tried to capture some of the features of that time. I'll say even more, I strove to depict vice in all of its nakedness and show my compatriots the true path of honesty, good morals and virtue. The wise Feofan, Archimandrite Krolik (both worthy pastors), Nikita Trubetskoi and other magnates encouraged the weak effort of my unskilled but audacious and sincere pen.⁶⁰ I was the first to dare to write like one speaks. I was the first to expel from our language coarse Slavonic and foreign words, unnatural for Russian, and I opened the way for future talents. My satires will have some value for our descendants, like the ancient paintings of the first painters, the precursors of Raphael; in them they will find an accurate picture of Russian manners and language during a glorious era - from the time of Peter the Great to the reign of the happy Elizabeth, whom we adore - and my name (forgive me my authorial pride) will be respected in Russia more because I first dared to speak the language of the Muses and philosophy, rather than because I occupied an important place at your court.⁶¹

⁶⁰ The references are to Feofan Prokopovich (1681-1736), church leader and an architect of the Petrine reforms; and to his ally, Feofan Krolik (d. 1732); and to Kantemir's friend Trubetskoi (see note 8). Prokopovich and Krolik wrote poems in Russian and Latin praising Kantemir's first satire. They circulated in manuscript together with the satires and were included in the first published edition of 1762.

⁶¹ Batiushkov describes Kantemir's legacy in the poet's own (ventriloquized) voice as a kind of Horatian "Exegi monumentum" (Horace, *Odes*, Book 3, ode 30). Montesquieu's discussion of Horace and his posing of the problem of "telling the truth with a smile to sovereigns or to slaves" ("smeiasia govorit' istinu vlastelinam ili rabam") also recalls the famous line from Derzhavin's adaptation of "Exegi monumentum," "Pamiatnik": "And speak truth to tsars with a smile" ("I istinu tsariam s ulybkoi govorit"). In prioritizing Kantemir's poetry over his diplomatic service Batiushkov echoes Murav'ev's dialogue of the dead "Goratsii i kniaz' Antiokh Dmitrievich Kantemir"; see note 6 to the Introduction.

Abbé V.:

Perfect! You speak like a true philosopher.

Montesquieu:

We would like to see your satires in French. I agree with you in part: the picture of manners of a people that is almost new is curious. But ... it's your friend the Abbé Guasco . . .⁶²

“You have come to visit us just at the right moment!” Kantemir said, hugging the Abbé. “You translated my satires into French--read something to satisfy the president; and you, gentlemen, I beg your patience and indulgence ...”

The reading and conversation lasted a long time, even past midnight. Finally, Montesquieu and the Abbé V. bowed to the minister and parted. Were they satisfied? I don't know.

I only know that Kantemir, stirring the coals that were dying out in the fireplace, said to Abbé Guasco: “Admit it, dear friend, Montesquieu is an intelligent man, a great writer, but ...”

“But he talks about Russia like an illiterate?” added Abbé Guasco. Modest Kantemir smiled, wished the abbé good night, and they parted.

⁶² Octavien de Comte de Clavières Guasco (1712-1781), Italian writer and friend of Kantemir, who took credit for translating his satires into French prose (from an unpublished Italian version). Montesquieu helped to get the translation published in 1749, after Kantemir's death; the title page said it was published in London, but it actually came out in The Hague, according to N. A. Kopanev (*O pervykh izdaniakh satir A. Kantemira, XVIII vek*, 15 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1986), 144-5). Batiushkov made use of the biography of Kantemir that Guasco appended to this translation in preparing *An Evening at Kantemir's*. Some doubt has been raised about Guasco's authorship of the translation. See Evans, “Antiokh Kantemir and His First Biographer,” 184-95; Kh. Grasskhof [Helmut Grasshoff], “Pervye perevody satir A. D. Kantemira,” *Mezhdunarodnye svyazi russkoi literatury* (Moscow; Leningrad: Akademiia nauk, 1963), 101-111; and Ekaterina Vasil'eva, “Brat'ia Guasco i frankoiazychnye izdaniia “Satir” Kantemira,” *Vestnik KGU* 3 (2017): 93-8.