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Rodolphe Baudin

Introduction: Studying Russian Letters, From Literary and Social Practices to the History of Emotions

Introduction to the special issue *Epistolary Emotions in Early Imperial Russia (1770-1830)*.

This introduction aims at briefly mapping the dominating paradigms which developed in the field of Russian epistolary studies over the past decades. It does not pretend to list all the works dedicated to this topic, but to name a few which have been regularly used by specialists of the field and are typical of the various approaches developed while studying Russian letters.¹ It concentrates on works dealing with broad issues and/or theoretical or methodological questions raised by the topic. Consequently, it focuses essentially on works addressing various aspects of the social and cultural history of epistolary culture in Russia, leaving aside the numerous studies dedicated to specific practitioners of letters and / or

the correspondence of famous Russian writers. This introduction pays special attention to the existing works which address the specific question of emotions. As it is argued, these works are especially promising. This suggests that the field can undoubtedly benefit from the addition of emotion studies, a very dynamic paradigm in recent historical studies, as the works assembled in this issue of *AvtobiografiA* aim to confirm.

The majority of works dedicated to the topic of Russian epistolary culture published both in Russia and the West can be divided into five groups. The first group consists of studies focusing on the formation of a normative epistolary culture in Russia. Among such studies, many available works focus on the genre of letter-writing manuals. Notwithstanding the existence of an epistolary etiquette and even manuscript letter-writing

¹ For general studies of Russian epistolary culture, see Atanasova-Sokolova 2006 and Baudin 2009. For Russian theoretical approaches to the epistolary form, see Paperno 1974; Paperno 1977 and Elina 1980.

manuals in Muscovite Russia, most scholars addressing this question have focused on manuals published starting from the eighteenth century and meant for a larger audience than the mostly clerical one targeted by the genre before Peter I. Works dedicated to this topic include Gabriele Scheidegger's monograph *Studien zu den russischen Briefstellern des 18. Jahrhunderts und zur "Europäisierung" des russischen Briefstils* [Studies on Eighteenth-Century Russian Letter Writers and on the "Europeanization" of the Russian Epistolary Style] (Scheidegger 1980). This monograph studies the first letter-writing manual of the Petrine period, *Examples of How to Write Various Compliments* [Priklady kako pishutsia komplimenty raznye], from such points of view as the evolution of written Russian, the history of the manual's Western sources and the early history of translation in Russia. The *Examples* are also central to Anna Joukovskaïa's paper 'La Naissance de l'épistolographie normative en Russie. Histoire des premiers manuels russes d'art épistolaire' [The Birth of Normative Epistolography in Russia. History of the first Russian Letter-writing Manuals] (Joukovskaïa 1999), which focuses on the history of letter-writing manuals in Russia

in the *longue durée*, studying the evolution of their structure and target audience, from the new lay elite of Peter's times to townspeople (*meshchane*) at the end of the nineteenth century, through the merchant readership in Catherine II's times. Besides these two seminal works, the questions of the origins and sociological evolution of letter-writing manuals are addressed in the works of Lisa Bernstein. In her first paper, 'The First published Russian Letter-Writing Manual: *Priklady, kako pishutsia komplementy raznye...*' (Bernstein 2002a), Bernstein explains how the *Priklady* drew a fictional and normative new world for its readers and fed them with new moral values and new understandings of the organization of power structures. In her second paper, 'Merchant "Correspondence" and Russian Letter-Writing Manuals: Petr Ivanovich Bogdanovich and His *Pis'movnik for Merchants*' (Bernstein 2002b), Bernstein studies what it meant for eighteenth-century merchants to correspond with commercial partners. Bernstein also examines how the need for clear and exact communication regarding commercial issues was instrumental in shaping a specific new language and how letter-writing manuals designed for a specific social group helped

them to define their class identity.

All these studies emphasize the normative character of epistolary discourse in these manuals and demonstrate how the sample letters which they offered provided readers with self-fashioning models. These models were useful to the early eighteenth-century nobility as it looked for models in its Europeanization process as well as to the late eighteenth-century merchants seeking social legitimacy.²

The second group of works on epistolary culture addresses the question of polyglossia in noble letter-writing practices in Imperial Russia. All correspondences were seen as the continuation on paper of oral social interactions. Thus the features of these oral interactions contaminated written texts, and the use of polyglossia became an important part of social and cultural practice of the Russian nobility. The question of the use of foreign languages in Russian aristocratic

² Additional studies on letter-writing manuals in the eighteenth century include Ransel 1973 and Dmitrieva 1986. In his study, Ransel explores how letter-writing manuals were used to learn how to gain protection from patrons while navigating the Russian bureaucracy.

letters is addressed in the works of Ekaterina Dmitrieva (Maimina) devoted to the correspondence of Pushkin and his contemporaries.

Dmitrieva (Maimina)'s studies include 'Frantsuzskaia rech' v pis'makh Pushkina k Viazemskomu' [French Language in Pushkin's Letters to Viazemskii] (Maimina 1977), 'Stilisticheskie funktsii frantsuzskogo iazyka v perepiske Pushkina i v ego poezii' [The Stylistic Functions of French in Pushkin's Letters and Poetry] (Maimina 1981), and the paper in French 'La correspondance française de Pouchkine' [Pushkin's Correspondence in French] (Dmitrieva 1994). Additionally, polyglossia in Russian letters of the Imperial period is studied by Iurii Lotman in his anthology of Russian literature written in French (Lotman et al. 1994) and by Irina Paperno in her paper 'O dvuiazychnoi perepiske pushkinskoi epokhi' [About Bilingual Correspondence in Pushkin's Times] (Paperno 1975). It was also given attention by the contributors to the recent Bristol University research project on the use of French language in Imperial Russia (Offord et al. 2015).

According to the above-mentioned specialists, the use of French in Russian letters was prompted by different elements:

the social status of the addressees; the content of the letters; and various textual strategies, intended to help the authors of the letters to influence the reception of their messages by their addressees or to perform specific social rituals which were characteristic of the nobility's cultural practices. The textual manifestation of polyglossia also varied in Russian letters, from the use of isolated words, expressions or sentences in another language to more generalized forms of code switching throughout entire letters. As Irina Paperno put it, what defined one's belonging to the nobility was not so much the knowledge of another language but the ability to code switch freely in letters just as in ordinary conversation. Epistolary polyglossia also showcases the ability of letters to help their authors in their self-fashioning efforts by offering them role models often provided by literary texts in foreign languages.

Another epistolary practice associated with the nobility was writing friendly letters. This practice has attracted the attention of scholars, both Russian and Western, whose works constitute the third group of scholarship on Russian epistolary culture. Works addressing this type

of letters include the classic study by Nikolai Stepanov 'Druzheskoe pis'mo nachala XIX veka' [The Friendly Letter in Early Nineteenth Century] (Stepanov 1926), as well as William Mills Todd III's monograph *The Familiar Letter as a Literary Genre in the Age of Pushkin* (Mills Todd III 1976). The friendly letter embodied an ideal type of informal epistolary communication, free of the constraints weighing on both form and content in the contexts of court life or state service. This made it particularly valuable to contemporaries, who used it to consolidate their conception of private identity. But friendship was central also to freemasons who, as Victoria Frede argues in her paper 'Freemasonry; Secrecy, and Letter Writing in the 1780s' (Frede 2015), cultivated it in both lodges and letters. It was seen as a tool of mutual support in their collective search for moral improvement. The quest for simplicity, characteristic of the friendly letter, also helped modernize the Russian language and turned the letter from a type of written discourse into a literary genre of its own at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, as William Mills Todd III, Petr Bukharkin (Bukharkin 1982), Rima Lazarchuk (Lazarchuk

1972), Laura Rossi (Rossi 1994) and Konstantin Lappo-Danilevskii (Lappo-Danilevskii 2013) have demonstrated.

If the freemasons studied by Victoria Frede constituted a specific segment among letter writers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they were nevertheless aristocrats and men, that is members of the dominating group of writing people in Imperial Russia. Other segments of the population, however, did write letters, too. Such segments include less visible parts of the demographic, like women or peasants. The epistolary practices of these gender or cultural minorities have been studied in works forming the fourth group of scholarship on Russian epistolary culture. Letters written by noblewomen are addressed in the papers of Anna Belova, 'Women's Letters and Russian Noble Culture of the Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries' (Belova 2003), and Mary Wells Cavender "'Kind Angel of the Soul and Heart': Domesticity and Family Correspondence among the Pre-emancipation Russian Gentry' (Wells Cavender 2002). According to both scholars, noblewomen wrote private letters extensively. Letter-writing was important to them as a part of the

education they gave to their daughters, as well as a tool in their efforts to pass on to the next generation family memories built on narratives about successful marriages and family happiness. Additionally, letters were important to women of the nobility as a network-building tool. Finally, noblewomen used letters to express their social values and to ensure the preservation of symbolic roles and hierarchies inside the family. The language of female letters was simpler than the language of letters written by men. Women also often preferred French to Russian, which, as the language of state service and business, was less familiar to them than it was to male letter writers.

Peasant letters have attracted even less attention than female ones, an unsurprising fact, considering the extremely low level of literacy among the non-noble rural population of the Russian Empire. They are examined in Olga Yokoyama's two-volume monograph *Russian Peasant Letters. Texts and Contexts* (Yokoyama 2008) and in her *Russian Peasant Letters: Life and Times of a 19th-Century Family* (Yokoyama 2010). Studying the correspondence of the Zhernakovs, a family of peasants, whose social rise in the last third of the nineteenth century led to their in-

creasing mastering of literacy, Yokoyama examines it first and foremost as a linguistic source providing information on the local variant of Russian used by the family, as well as on their idiosyncratic conception of linguistic norms. But Yokoyama also addresses the letters' significance as a record of the Zhernakovs' social trajectory, from illiterate peasants to future *kulaks*. From this point of view, the correspondence had value in the family's eyes as a proof of their success. Letters became a space where to build the family's memory and myth. Besides Yokoyama, an interesting analysis of peasant letters is offered in Zhanna Kormina's monograph *Provody v armiiu v poreformennoi Rossii. Opyt etnograficheskogo analiza* [Farewells to Military Service in Reformed Russia. An Experiment in Ethnographic Analysis] (Kormina 2005). Examining the letters of early twentieth-century Russian soldiers to their families, Kormina stresses their wide use of recurring elements, such as songs, *chastushki* and formulaic expressions, as well as their striking indifference to the expression of intimacy. This double feature, argues Kormina, is the consequence of the massive illiteracy of Russian peasants, which impacted both ends of the communication pro-

cess. When communicating with their families, soldiers had to resort to the help of public writers, with whom they did not want to share intimate details, especially since they would often be fellow soldiers. They also knew that, upon reception of the letters, their widely illiterate families would resort to the village priest to read them, and that the reading would often be performed publicly. This aspect inhibited the free expression of intimate circumstances.

The fifth and last group of available works on Russian letters deal with the epistolary practices of the Soviet period. For obvious reasons, numerous works in this group study how Soviet letters expressed Soviet citizens' attitudes to political power. In their monographs *Everyday Stalinism* (Fitzpatrick 1999) and *5% de vérité. La dénonciation dans l'URSS de Staline* [Five per Cent of Truth. Denunciation in Stalin's USSR] (Nérard 2004), both Sheila Fitzpatrick and François-Xavier Nérard examine different types of letters to the authorities, from letters of request sent to leaders, government bodies or newspapers, to letters of denunciation ('*signaly*'). Letters of request testified of the embracement of Soviet power by Soviet citizens and their faith in its

ability and willingness to resolve the numerous issues that the population was facing. As for letters of denunciation, citizens wrote them to showcase their loyalty to the regime and/or to fix personal problems, often connected with family or work issues. Whatever function they assigned them, Soviet citizens, argue Fitzpatrick and Nérard, were avid letter-writers. The Soviet state itself invited them to do so, seeing in letter writing both a valuable source of information on the population's mood and a mechanism of self-legitimization. Naturally, letters helped their writers build an ideal persona in Soviet times no less than in Imperial Russia, as they provided models of behaviour, discourse and even phrasing adequate for the ideological requirements of the new regime. Besides Fitzpatrick and Nérard's works, Soviet epistolary practices have been studied by Alexey Tikhomirov in his paper 'The regime of Forced Trust: Making and Breaking Emotional Bonds between People and State in Soviet Russia, 1917-1941' (Tikhomirov 2013). In his paper, Tikhomirov examines the mechanisms of the 'regime of forced trust' engineered by the Soviet authorities to manage control

over the population through the 70 years of its existence.³

Among the works dedicated to Soviet epistolary practices, war letters have also enjoyed growing scrutiny in recent years.⁴ Such studies include Tatiana Voronina's paper 'Kak chitat' pis'ma s fronta?' [How to Read Letters from the Front?] (Voronina 2011), Jochen Hellbeck's "'The Diaries of Fritzes and the Letters of Gretchens". Personal Writings from the German-Soviet War and their Readers' (Hellbeck 2009) and the study of Sergei Ushakin and Aleksei Golubev 'Eks-pozitsiia pis'ma: o pravilakh chteniia chuzhoi perepiski' [Ex-posing a Letter: About the Rules of Reading Someone Else's Letters] (Ushakin et al. 2016). Soviet soldiers actively wrote letters during World War II. It was a practice encouraged by the authorities, which considered letter writing as an efficient tool of mobilization for the rear and of promotion of the image of the ideal Soviet soldier

³ Tikhomirov's use of letters to study emotions in Stalin's USSR follows the path opened by Fitzpatrick in her seminal exploration of Soviet emotions in the 1930s. See Fitzpatrick 2004.

⁴ The study of war letters is not limited to the Soviet period. For an exploration of eighteenth-century war letters, see Sdvizhkov 2019.

as the latest hypostasis of the New Soviet man. Letters from the front were either individual or collective and were meant to be read either individually or collectively, especially when they were published in newspapers. All of them went through censorship and had to celebrate the Soviet wartime cult of heroism and self-sacrifice. This did not exclude the expression of individual emotions. If fear and defeatism were no options, expressing someone's desire to fight for his or her loved ones was welcomed, especially since this emotion was associated with love for the motherland and the regime. The authorities also encouraged the expression of human feelings as they were considered a proof of the moral superiority of Soviet soldiers over their Nazi enemies, who were presented by official propaganda as either beasts or emotionless killing machines.⁵

The last group of Soviet letters examined by scholars are letters written from or to the Gulag camps. A relatively recent field in Russian epistolary studies, this topic is addressed in Sofia Chuikina's paper 'Kak ras-skazyvat' o gulage iazykom is-

toricheskoi vystavki: "pravo perepiski" v moskovskom "Memoriale" [How to Speak about the Gulag Through the Language of a History Exhibition: *Right to Correspondence* at Moscow Memorial] Chuikina 2015); in Emily Johnson's introduction to Arsenii Formakov's *Gulag Letters* (Johnson 2017), as well as in her paper 'Learning to Read Between the Lines: Miscommunication and Competing Notions of Victimhood in Private Gulag Correspondence' (Johnson 2011); and in Andrei Zavadskii's paper 'Pis'ma iz lageria kak sposob sokhranit' sebia: sluchai khudozhnika Grigoriiia Filipovskogo' [Camp Letters as a Way to Preserve Oneself: the Case of the Artist Grigorii Filipovskii] (Zavadskii 2015). Due to the extreme conditions of life in the camps, which sometimes led to writing on cigarette paper, postcards, fabrics or even tree bark, letter writing was central to many prisoners in Soviet camps. Yet some of them were deprived of this right for security reasons, or because they spoke a language which the camp censors did not understand and could not control.⁶ In

⁵ For a recent study of Russian letters from the front, see Rozhdestvenskaia 2020.

⁶ This topic is addressed in a forthcoming paper by Emily Johnson. See Johnson, Emily. 2022. 'Censoring the Mail in Stalin's Multi-ethnic

their letters, prisoners tried to save their former social identity and expressed their thirst for life. They also used them to escape reality and substitute it with a world of their own, co-constructed with their correspondent and to which camp personnel and other prisoners had no access. Often softening the description of life in the camps both for censorship reasons and for protecting their relatives outside, prisoners also resorted to letter writing as a form of empowerment. It was used as an opportunity to move from a victim position to a witness status.

As this brief overview shows, one of the central issues addressed by Russian epistolary studies is the complicated and intertwined relation between letter writing as a form of expression of individual subjectivities and its use according to norms of behaviour dictated from the top, through normative literary models and/or political discourses, from Peter I's time to the Soviet period. The perma-

nent tension between these two motivations can be spotted in all aspects of Russian letters, including the way they are used to express emotions. The thematic cluster offered in this issue of *AvtobiografiA* is an additional opportunity to explore this tension. It is also a contribution to the history of emotions in Russia, a topic that has gained increasing attention in recent years. Major contributions to the study of this relatively new field include a cluster of papers edited by Jan Plamper in *Slavic Review* in 2009⁷ and two collections of essays: *Rossiiskaia imperiia chuvstv: podkhody k kul'turnoi istorii emotsii* [The Russian Empire of Feelings: Approaches towards a Cultural History of Emotions] (Plamper et al. 2010) and *Interpreting Emotions in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Steinberg et al. 2011). Broad in scope and conceptually inspiring, these three collected volumes examine the history of emotions in Russia from the eighteenth century to the Soviet

Penal System: the Use of Languages Other than Russian in Soviet Inmate Correspondence', in *Rethinking the Gulag: Sources, Identities, Legacies*, ed. by Alan Barenberg and Emily Johnson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

⁷ The cluster, entitled 'Emotional Turn? Feelings in Russian History and Culture', contains an introduction by Jan Plamper, four case studies by Andrei Zorin, Jan Plamper, Olga Matich and Adi Kunstman and a conclusion by William Reddy. See *Slavic Review*, 68/2 (Summer 2009): 229-334.

period, through a variety of historical and literary sources.⁸ These sources include letters, addressed in the second and third volumes by Andrei Zorin (Zorin 2011) and Magali Delaloye (Delaloi 2010). In his contribution to the 2011 volume, Zorin examines how the sentimental educator and writer Mikhail Murav'ev used two different sets of letters to his wife, real ones on the one hand, partly fictionalized ones in the form of a diary on the other, to express simultaneous yet contradictory emotions after he failed to be rewarded on the occasion of Paul I's coronation.⁹ As for Delaloye,

her paper in the second volume discusses Bukharin's use of authorized and forbidden emotional repertoires in his correspondence with Stalin after his arrest. As she demonstrates, the letters of the two Bolshevik leaders showcased two competing types of masculinity, an expressive, emotional one on Bukharin's side vs. a detached one on Stalin's side, which was instrumental in comforting his leadership.

However compelling, these two correspondence-based chapters are isolated case studies in the three volumes on the history of emotions in Russia cited above. Yet letters do seem to be a privileged source to study not only the emotional discourse of any given culture but the rhetoric strategies and the mechanisms of its reception. 'Emotional refuges' (Reddy 2001: 129) for their participants, correspondences compare to high society salons or masonic lodges. But they are also spaces of negotiation between individual emotional speech acts ('emotives' in Reddy's terminology; Reddy 2001: 128) and the emotional regimes organising the economy of the

⁸ These three volumes do not exhaust the existing bibliography on the study of emotions in Russia and the USSR. For an extended bibliography and an introduction to the emotional turn in both Western and Russian studies, see the double introduction to *Rossiiskaia imperiia chuvst* by Jan Plamper and Schamma Shakhadat, as well as the bibliography at the end of the volume. See also Vinitskii 2012. Seminal studies on emotions in English include Reddy 2001, Rosenwein 2006 and Gross 2006. For a bibliography of studies in French, see Corbin et al. 2016–2017.

⁹ Zorin's paper was just one of his numerous works on emotions in Russia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. All his work on the topic resulted in his

2016 monograph *Poiavlenie geroia* [The Appearance of the Hero] (Zorin 2016).

exchange between correspondents.

The importance of letters as a source for the history of emotions led to the organization of an international conference on epistolary emotions at Sorbonne University in June 2019. The seven studies gathered in the present volume represent a significant part of the material presented at the conference and offer additional readings of epistolary-mediated emotions in Russian culture.¹⁰ They focus on correspondences written by noblemen or women in the late eighteenth century, a rich period for the development of subjectivities through letters, as suggested by Elena Marasino's seminal work on the psychology of the Russian elite (Marasino

¹⁰ Besides the studies included in the present issue, the conference program included papers by Alexei Tikhomirov (*Speaking Female: Emotions, Languages and Epistolary Selves in Women's Letters to Soviet Leaders*), Emilia Koustova (*Connections under Constraint: Emotions and Solidarities in Letters to and from Soviet Deportees, USSR, 1940s-1950s*) and Claire Delaunay (*Pafos otvrashcheniia v epistolarnom nasledii Tolstogo kak iavlenie kul'turnoi istorii emotsii*) [The Experience of Disgust in Tolstoy's Correspondence as a Phenomenon of the Cultural History of Emotions].

1999).¹¹ The studies of the present cluster also consider correspondences from the early nineteenth century which, taken together with the previous period, form the age of the *Cult of sensibility*, a period particularly productive for the generation of emotional regimes and as such of utmost importance for historians of emotions such as Reddy or Gross. Additionally, one paper of our cluster focuses on the correspondence of writers associated with the Decembrist movement, whose members, according to Il'ia Vinitsky, shared a partially common emotional regime with their sentimentalist predecessors (Vinitskii 2012: 455).

The emotions addressed in the present studies go from sympathy (Frede, Lavrinovich) to maternal sentiment (Dickinson); from trust (Ivinskii, Lavrinovich)

¹¹ See also her *Vlast' i lichnost'. Ocherki russkoi istorii XVIII veka* [Power and the Self. Essays in Eighteenth-Century Russian History] (Marasino 2008). On emotions in the long eighteenth century and beyond, see also Catriona Kelly's contribution to the volume *Rossiiskaia imperia chuvstv*: Kelly, Catriona. 2010. 'Pravo na emotsii, pravil'nye emotsii: upravlenie chuvstvami v Rossii posle epokhi Prosveshcheniia', in (Plamper et al. 2010: 51-77).

to guilt (Baudin, Aloe); from pride (Ivinskii, Aloe) to the astonishment caused by unexplainable death (Vinitsky)¹² and the pleasures of self-victimization (Baudin). As this short list suggests, these emotions are mostly positive ones, a characteristic feature of sentimentalism, which evolved later, when romanticism developed a new emotional regime by bringing in negative feelings (Vinitskii 2012: 451).¹³ The negative emotions addressed in this volume are, at least, legitimate ones, far from the radical ones such as fear, hatred or disgust, explored by Plamper, Matich or Kunstman in *Slavic Review* and *Rossiiskaia imperiia chuvstv* (Plamper 2009; Matich 2009; Kunstman 2009).¹⁴ This legitimacy largely owed to noble conceptions of appropriateness and to logics of class and/or symbolic domina-

tion, as suggested by the papers of the present cluster focusing on the correspondences between patrons and protégés (Baudin, Lavrinovich) or aristocrats and intellectuals (Dickinson). As Gross reminds us, emotions are cultural products of class belonging, an issue visible in the limitations of the emotional regimes used by Radishchev or Malinovskii in their letters to members of the aristocracy (Baudin, Lavrinovich).

Yet some emotions discussed here are ambivalent, or reflect the competing use by subjects of conflicting emotional repertoires, such as guilt and pride (Aloe) or suffering and pleasure (Baudin). Another element stimulating the simultaneous use of competing emotional regimes is gender, a topic addressed in this cluster in Dickinson's study of princess Dashkova's performance of motherhood in her letters to William Robertson.¹⁵ In Dashkova's case, however, competition does not mean ambivalence. Similarly, Murav'ev's letters showcase the harmonious combination of the gentry's sense of their own dignity and the eagerness to serve

¹² Vinitsky's prior explorations of emotions in Russian culture include his monograph on Zhukovskii. See Vinitsky, Il'ia. 2015. *Vasily Zhukovsky's Romanticism and the Emotional History of Russia* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press).

¹³ For a case study of the replacement of one emotional regime by another, see, for example, Frede 2011.

¹⁴ The studies by Plamper and Matich were republished in Russian in *Rossiiskaia imperiia chuvstv*.

¹⁵ Womanhood as performance in Russian epistolary culture is also addressed in Lamarche Marrese 2016.

and collect rewards from state service (Ivinskii). As Ivinskii argues, this coexistence derives from antique models, especially Cicero. Murav'ev's use of literature-based emotional matrixes is similar to the examples examined in Zorin's monograph *Poiavlenie geroia* [The Appearance of the Hero] (Zorin 2016). Besides literary sources, notably epistolary novels, which provided ready-to-use models of emotional discourse and roles, epistolary emotions were also inspired by visual narratives, which constituted another rich repertoire of self-fashioning models in the Age of sentimentalism. This visual dimension of emotional matrixes is analysed in the present collection (Baudin) and sheds light on the mechanisms of emotional communication. Indeed, as Frede argues in her paper, epistolary communication required from correspondents to be able to visualize each other's emotions in order to sympathize (Frede). Apart from this visual component of epistolary emotional mechanisms, the papers included in this issue of *Avtobiografiia* focus on the evolution of emotions staged throughout correspondences spanning over several years (Lavrinovich, Aloe, Baudin), or deemed unstable

due to the class gap separating correspondents (Baudin, Lavrinovich). This instability of emotional communication is perhaps more specific to letter writing than to other forms of ego-documents staging emotions, such as diaries or autobiographies, where the implied reader fulfils a less interactive and normative role. On the contrary, correspondences grant addressees the active role of guarantor of the appropriate emotional regime of the letter exchange. As such, they deserve specific attention, just as the multiplicity of voices that letters can carry simultaneously (Vinitsky), a specificity of the medium which was also partially influenced by the popularity of epistolary novels and which proved instrumental in forming visible emotional communities.

The visual origins of emotions, their collective verbalization, the interactivity of their utterance and the possible status of correspondences as instable emotional refuges are just some of the questions raised by the study of epistolary emotions in the Age of the *Cult of sensibility*, the topic addressed in the thematic cluster of this issue of *Avtobiografiia*.

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