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# An Immediate Task of Historical-Literary Scholarship: Studying the History of the Reader

Aleksandr Beletskii

Translated by Brad Damaré

Oleksander Biletskii (1884-1961) was a Soviet-era Ukrainian literary scholar. He wrote and published works in both Ukrainian (under the name Oleksander Biletskii) and Russian (under the name Aleksandr Beletskii). During his lifetime he was a full member of both the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSR and the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. He served as director of the Shevchenko Literary Institute in Kyiv from 1939 to his death in 1961, with the exception of a period of time during WWII when he was evacuated to Ufa along with the other scholars of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSR.

“An Immediate Task of Historical-Literary Scholarship: Studying the History of the Reader” was originally published in Russian in the journal *Science in Ukraine* [Nauka na Ukraine], 1922, no. 2. It was republished in Moscow in a one-volume selection of Beletskii’s works under the name Aleksandr Beletskii (1964) and again in Kyiv in a five-volume collected works under the name Oleksander Biletskii (1965-1966). It has been anthologized in Russian-language book history readers and was included in the French volume *Livre et lecture en Russie*, ed. Alexandre Stroev, trans. Marie-Louise Bonaque (Paris: IMEC Éditions, 1996, 37-52).

The text translated here was taken from a late Soviet-era edition of a collection of Beletskii’s works called *In the Verbal Artist’s Workshop* [V masterskoi khudozhnika slova] (Moscow: Vysshiaia shkola, 1988, 112-

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126). This edition was edited by philologist Andrei Borisovich Esin. In that volume, Esin's notes appear both as footnotes and as commentary on pages 156-158.

There are three levels of notes to this article: author's notes, editor's notes, and translator's notes. Beletskii's own notes appear with no additional identification. Notes made by the 1988 volume editor Andrei Esin are followed by (Esin's note). Notes made by translator Brad Damaré are followed by (translator's note). In author's and editor's notes, abbreviations for cities have been expanded (for example, Pg. is expanded to Petrograd). Titles are given in translation, followed by the transliterated Russian title at first occurrence. Emphasis in the original is rendered in bold print in the translation. Square brackets are used for the translator's brief in-text clarifications.

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## 1

After enduring more than a century of ordeals in the service of bibliography and metaphysical aesthetics and history and psychology and polemics, literary scholarship has finally chosen an independent path. Much still remains fundamentally unresolved: often, not even half of the necessary rough preliminary work has been carried out in the history of individual literatures; but at least literary historians now know what they are doing and why, which they did not even know before. The usual type of historical-literary research practiced today consists quite clearly of four main stages. First, taking the literary work as a historical phenomenon for analysis, we study the circumstances that preceded the phenomenon's appearance and gave rise to it (this includes bibliographic work, collection of information about the writer as the product of a known historical era and social environment, textual criticism, history of the work's creation, etc.); second, we analyze the work in its essence (from the perspective of plot, composition, phraseology, genre, and style — in the broad sense of the word); third, we must locate the phenomenon within its historical environment (the role of tradition and the results of struggles against it; the work's relationship to facts both prior and contemporary); and finally, we must determine the results of the phenomenon (that is, the work's influence on the further course of literary development, its perception by contemporaries and immediate descendants, and its varied life in the minds of readers). For a long time, our

scholarship has barely managed to extend beyond observation of facts related to the first stage; at present, the second stage is especially fortunate (particularly in Russia). As for issues related to the fourth, the crucial question of the reader and his role in the “development of poetic consciousness and its forms,” of the reader as a participant in the literary process and as collaborators with authors in creating the national literatures of individual nationalities, is one of those methodological issues that is seemingly resolved but handled somewhat reluctantly and warily in practice. No one seems to object in principle to the role of the reader as an historical factor, especially after Hennequin’s well-known book (1887):<sup>1</sup> we all recognize the need to study not only literary works, but also the social groups that represent their consumers and that consider them a sympathetic expression of their ideals and tastes and aesthetic demands. Today, arguing that the history of literature is not only the history of writers but also the history of readers, that creative work itself would be unthinkable without the masses of people perceiving that work, and that the history of literature should be interested in the spread of literary forms among the masses, their struggle for existence, and their prevalence in the reading environment, would be preaching to the choir. Nevertheless, scholarly practice has gained little so far from transforming these theories into elementary truths. As is often the case, the situation has fared better in the West: we know of works in French, German, and English that not only raise theoretical questions, but purely historical ones as well; in the final part of his book, Hennequin himself offers by way of illustration an outline of V. Hugo’s study of readers that is interesting even though the material itself is incomplete and insufficiently factual; research of this kind has been undertaken on more than occasion: for example, Wilhelm Appell once successfully traced the history of one of the 18<sup>th</sup> century’s most contagious books, Goethe’s *Werther* (*Werther und seine Zeit*, 1896), while a French book by Louis Maigron (*Le romantisme et les mœurs*, 1910), a brilliant attempt to use highly interesting

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to É. Hennequin, *La critique scientifique* (Paris, 1888). Russ. transl.: E. Genneken, *An attempt at constructing a scientific critique: Estopsychology* [Opyt postroeniia nauchnoi kritiki: Estopsikhologiia] (Saint Petersburg, 1892) (Esin’s note).

human documents to trace how French Romanticism was put into practice within the immediate reading environment of the 1830s, appeared not too long ago in Russian translation.<sup>2</sup> I know of no Russian works similar to these: of course, Russian literary historians have also paid tribute to the reader, beginning with Porfir'ev, who grouped together the scant data on “veneration of books” in ancient Rus' in *Orthodox Interlocutor* [Pravoslavnyi sobesednik] in 1858, and apparently ending with Boborykin, who devoted a special chapter in his book on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century European novel to the reading public, or with V.V. Sipovskii (in his book on the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Russian novel) and N.A. Kotliarevskii, who offered an essay on the Russian reader on the eve of the 1860s in a recent collection of articles, *Eve of Liberation* [Kanun osvobozhdeniia].<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it cannot be said that our study of the Russian reader, for whose history more than enough material has already been collected, has stood on a clearly conscious path. We have been more interested in the psychology of the contemporary reader, studied experimentally: the tireless popularizer and bibliographer N.A. Rubakin, who currently works in Geneva in the field of biblio-psychology (yet another name for science of the reader), has published, at various times, the results of his surveys and observations<sup>4</sup> on the reader from the intelligentsia and on the reader from the general public; he was especially successful with the latter, as well as with the reader of younger generations (students); but I will not name other well-known articles and books in this area, despite their theoretical and practical significance. They will offer precious material for the future historian of late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian literature, but the Russian reader's

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<sup>2</sup> See L. Megron [Maignon], *Romanticism and Mores* [Romantizm i nnavy] (Moscow, 1914), transl. from the French (Esin's note).

<sup>3</sup> Beletskii means the following works: I. Porfir'ev, “On Reading in Russia's Ancient Days” [O chtenii v drevnie vremena Rossii], in *The Orthodox Interlocutor*, 1858, no. 2; P. Boborykin, *The European Novel in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Two-Thirds of a Century of the Novel in the West* [Evropeiskii roman v XIX stoletii: Roman na Zapade za dve treti veka] (Saint Petersburg, 1900); V.V. Sipovskii, *Sketches from the History of the Russian Novel* [Ocherki iz istorii russkogo romana] (Saint Petersburg, 1909-1910), vol. 1, Chs. 1 and 2; N. Kotliarevskii, *Eve of Liberation* (Petrograd, 1916) (Esin's note).

<sup>4</sup> See N.A. Rubakin, *Among Books* [Sredi knig], 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Moscow, 1905-195 [sic]), vols. 1-3 (Esin's note). The date of publication contains a typographical error: the second edition was published in 1911-1915 (translator's note).

past remains in the shadows, and this afflicts not only our general knowledge of Russia's cultural past but, in particular, our information about the history of Russian literature. Without the history of the Russian reader, the latter is groundless: it is one-sided and will inevitably provide only half-expressed conclusions: no matter how accurate the first half may be, we cannot obtain results for a single one of its stages without this second half.

## 2

How else, in particular, are we supposed to get an objective answer to the question that has long tormented literary historians — the question of what material to choose for historical-literary study — if not by studying the reader and his history? As we know, there are some who have proposed considering our object of study to be everything that has come down to us in a particular verbal form; others recommend we direct our main attention to poetry, to study only those works marked by artistic intent or artistic effect, i.e. by beauty or elegance of form; there are, of course, far too many such works, but we are told we must select from among that multitude those works in which the public has at some time or another found its ideal of beauty or energy. I have taken the latter words from the well-known article by Lanson<sup>5</sup> that M.O. Gershenzon published twice in Russian translation; as we can see, readers are called to be judges, but judges of a peculiar sort: their opinions are surprisingly uniform throughout the centuries, and once we recognize this, there is nothing left to pry from their opinions; in practice, it turns out that their judgments are identical to the judgments of the critic composing the history, and the latter requires no further surveys or inquiries. Leaving aside the fact that very little study has been done on the taste of readers in our country or the West, we might ask: whose tastes should we be taking into consideration? Tastes evolve: Derzhavin's contemporaries considered him an exemplary writer, while readers of Pushkin's generation and Pushkin himself valued Derzhavin as a person while considering the poet

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<sup>5</sup> See G. Lanson, *Method in Literary History* [Metod v istorii literatury] (Moscow, 1911) (Esin's note). The original work by Gustave Lanson, "La méthode de l'histoire littéraire," was published in *Revue du mois* in October, 2010 (translator's note).

“an eccentric who knows neither Russian letters nor the spirit of the Russian language, who has no understanding of phraseology, nor of harmony, nor even of the rules of versification.”<sup>6</sup> This, however, did not stop Pushkin’s friend, Prince Viazemskii, from admiring this eccentric, whose poetry is “a hot summer afternoon, where everything shines, everything burns with a bright brilliance, where charms for the imagination and the eyes abound.”<sup>7</sup> For Belinskii, Chernyshevskii, their pupil Pypin, and the “man of the sixties” Maslov (*Vremia*, 1861, no. 10), nothing could be weaker than the artistic side of Derzhavin’s poetry; for present-day critics like B. Sadovskoi, B. Griftsov, and B.M. Eikhenbaum,<sup>8</sup> Derzhavin’s poetry is as charming a garden as it was for Prince Viazemskii, though once again they each locate those charms in different areas. Whose voice should we heed when positioning Derzhavin in the history of Russian literature? Even if we presume that certain contemporaries may be acknowledged as real judges, do we not recognize how wrong the judgment of contemporaries can be? After all, it is practically a law that the more unanimous and elevated the enthusiasm of contemporaries, the lesser the work tends to be in terms of its aesthetics and ideas. Who, for that matter, are these contemporaries? Shishkov, delivering a panegyric to Derzhavin at the opening of a Colloquy of Lovers of the Russian Word? Metropolitan Evgenii Bolkhovitinov, a venerable bibliographer and scholar of antiquity but hardly a significant authority on aesthetics?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Freely paraphrasing an excerpt from Pushkin’s June 1825 letter to A.A. Del’vig; see Pushkin, *The Complete Collected Works* [Polnoe sobranie sochinenii] (Moscow, 1937), vol. 13, 181-2 (Esin’s note).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from P.A. Viazemskii’s article “The Poems of Karamzin” [Stikhotvoreniia Karamzina] (Esin’s note).

<sup>8</sup> This refers to the following works: V.T. Belinskii, “The Works of Derzhavin” [Sochineniia Derzhavina], *The Complete Collected Works* (Moscow, 1955), vol. 6; N.G. Chernyshevskii, “Great-grandfather’s mores” [Pradedovskie nnavy], *The Collected Works: In 15 Volumes* [Sobranie sochinenii: v 15 t.] (Moscow, 1950), vol. 7; A.N. Pypin, *Social Movements under Alexander I* [Obshchestvennoe dvizhenie pri Aleksandre I] (Saint Petersburg, 1871); D. Maslov, “Derzhavin the Citizen” [Derzhavin-grazhdanin], in *Time* [Vremia], 1861, no. 10; B. Sadovskoi, “Derzhavin,” *Russian Camena* [Russkaia kamena] (Moscow, 1910); B. Griftsov, “Derzhavin,” in *Sofia* [Sofiia], 1913, no. 1; B.M. Eikhenbaum, “Poetika Derzhavina” [Derzhavin’s poetics], in *Apollo* [Apollon], 1916, Oct. (Esin’s note).

<sup>9</sup> This refers to the following works: A.S. Shishkov, “On the Value of Language and Literature” [O pol’ze iazyka i slovesnosti], *The Collected Works and Translations of A.S. Shishkov* [Sobranie sochinenii i perevodov A.S. Shiskova] (Moscow, 1819), Ch. 2; E. Bolkhovitinov, “Derzhavin,” *A New Essay on a Dictionary of Russian Writers* [Novyi opyt slovaria o rossiiskikh pisateliakh] (Moscow, 1845); E. Filomafitskii, *The Ode* [Oda] (Khar’kov, 1815) (Esin’s note).

Or Filomafitskii, a Kharkiv professor of general history, geography, and statistics who happened to express an opinion on Derzhavin in one of his articles? Are these really the authoritative voices, if not of the entire mass of the Russian people contemporary to Derzhavin, then at least of that small group within that mass who read Derzhavin and, for that matter, read anything at all? For the Old Believer scribe who was still transcribing the *Prologue* [Prolog] and the *Great Mirror* [Velikoe zertsalo] even in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>10</sup> Derzhavin did not exist at all. The Francophile Russian lord building a library of late-18<sup>th</sup>-century encyclopedists and ribald poets had little need for Derzhavin. To say “contemporary” means to give only an indication of chronology, and nothing more. Yet there are reasons why Derzhavin remained in the memory of readers in the post-Pushkin era, why that memory persisted through all the *Sturm und Drang* of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia, and why our own contemporary reader-aesthetes have found taste and charm in Derzhavin.

This much is true: not everything that has come down to us in verbal form is of course equally worthy of serving as the object of our study. Selection is inevitable, and we have no criterion for selection other than the voice of readers. All attempts to establish the aesthetic value of a literary work without regard to question of perception of that work have failed. It is high time we acknowledge that a work is artistic or non-artistic, first-rate or second-rate, only in the minds of readers: it is they who discover beauty within it, it is they who create its “idea,” an idea the writer often does not suspect. But it is obvious that, in each particular case, the mass of readers is not homogeneous in its composition; a literary historian must listen to everyone patiently and not feel ill at ease by the fact that, rather than a simple one-story building, his historical-literary diagram of the era will require constructing a building of several floors, and sometimes with outbuildings. Let us take another well-known example from 18<sup>th</sup>-century Russian literature. Our textbooks depicted this era so simply, even a short time ago! The 18<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The *Prologue* was a collection of synaxaria compiled in the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries; the *Great Mirror* was a Russian translation of a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Polish anthology of moral tales (translator’s note).

century was the era of “false classicism’s dominance,” of the court poetry of odes, tragedies, and poems, the era of Lomonosov, Sumarokov, Kheraskov, and Derzhavin; these names alone nearly exhaust its content. With a closer look, however, we notice that the picture was not only *not* monotonous, but extremely variegated in color. For example, the statistical survey carried out by V.V. Sipovskii in his works on the history of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Russian novel<sup>11</sup> showed that the literary form most favored by readers of the era was not the tragedy, nor the long poem, nor the ode, all of which were so widely discussed in primers on poetics, but the novel, which the primers did not envision. Both odes and tragedies were written in the French spirit: but with all due respect to our academic authorities, the works that the ordinary reader, who’d just learned to sound out syllables, would copy by hand were Bova and Peter Golden Keys, and at the end of the century, Arphaxad, the English milord, and the Man of Quality.<sup>12</sup> A small number of connoisseurs relished Russian poetry in the classical style. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, these connoisseurs belonged to the clergy and upper nobility, and by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, to the class of Punins and Baburins.<sup>13</sup> The middle class, to whom Novikov gave the somewhat inapt designation of “townspeople” [meshchane] (though they in fact belonged to the petty and provincial nobility), were more inclined to watch comedies and comic operas or *comédies larmoyantes* (also foreseen by theory) than *Khorev*<sup>14</sup> or

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<sup>11</sup> See note 3 (Esin’s note).

<sup>12</sup> This refers to the following works: P. Zakhar'in, *Arphaxad. A Chaldean Tale* [Arfaksad. Khaldeiskaia povest] (Moscow, 1795-1796); M. Komarov, *The Tale of the Adventures of the English Milord* [Povest' o prikliucheniiakh angliiskogo milorda] (Moscow, 1782); A. Prevo [Abbé Prévost], *The Adventures of the Marquis G...* [Priklucheniia markiza G...] (Saint-Petersburg, 1756-1765). Bova and Peter Golden Keys were protagonists of popular literature (Esin’s note).

<sup>13</sup> I.e., to educated individuals outside the formal social estates [raznochintsy]. “Punin and Baburin” [Punin i Baburin] is a tale by I.S. Turgenev (Esin’s note).

<sup>14</sup> *Khorev* (1747): a tragedy by Aleksandr Petrovich Sumarkov (1717-1777), the Russian poet, writer, playwright, and prominent representative of Russian classicism (Esin’s note).

*Sorena*; <sup>15</sup> they preferred *The Comely Cook* [Prigozhaia povarikha] <sup>16</sup> to *The Rossiad* [Rossiada] <sup>17</sup> and, with Chulkov's songbooks at their fingertips, had no need of Lomonosov's odes. Finally, the literate lower strata read *Vanka Cain* [Van'ka Kain], <sup>18</sup> copied out facetiae or Polish jokes, laughed at popular prints, and sang songs: not from songbooks but from the inventory of living folk memory; they composed the earliest rhyming couplets [chastushki], "Ah, black eyes / kiss me at least once..." [Akh, chernoi glaz, potselui khot' raz...], etc. If we go even lower, another step down, both *Vanka Cain* and the facetiae seemed too frightening: this level is where songs were sung and fairy tales told just as they were under Tsar Aleksei, where the elders read aloud from their paterikon, *Izmaragd*, and *Menaion Reader* [Chet'i minei], <sup>19</sup> and where, somewhere in the distance, a raging controversy refused to die, not over the ancient and new phraseology of the Russian language, but over the old and new faith; they discussed the question of self-immolation and settled scores with Patriarch Nikon, who himself had long since settled back into dust. Where is the true Russian reader of the 18<sup>th</sup> century? In the Russian Academy or in a manor outside Moscow? In a village of the Saratov governate or in a district town? In Northern Palmyra or in the forests of Bryansk and Kerzhenets? Both here and there, and we have no reason to include some while keeping silent about others. That kind of preference is based on the premise that, in any given era, a particular

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<sup>15</sup> *Sorena and Zamir* [Sorena i Zamir] (1785): a tragedy by Nikolai Petrovich Nikolaev (1758-1815), the Russian poet and classicist (Esin's note).

<sup>16</sup> *The Comely Cook, or Adventures of a Loose Woman* [Prigozhaia povarikha, ili Pokhozhdenie razvratnoi zhenshchiny] (1770, part 1): a novel by Mikhail Dmitrievich Chulkov (1743 or 1744-1792), Russian author whose works broadly reflected the everyday life and mores of various social strata (Esin's note).

<sup>17</sup> *The Rossiad* [Rossiada] (1779): a long poem by Mikhail Matveevich Kheraskov (1733-1807), Russian poet and playwright and major representative of classicism (Esin's note).

<sup>18</sup> *Vanka Cain*: the eponymous protagonist of a novel by Matvei Komarov (1730s?-1812?), Russian writer, author of the kind of compilation-like literary reworkings of popular literature that were en vogue in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript tradition, like *The Story of Vanka Cain* [Istoriia Van'ki Kaina] and *Tale of the Adventures of the English Milord George...* [Povest' o priklucheniakh angliiskogo milorda Georga...] (1782) (Esin's note).

<sup>19</sup> Respectively: a paterikon is a collection of works related to saints and other Church figures; the *Izmaragd* (from the Greek for "emerald") is a compilation of moral teachings; the *Menaion Reader* is a sixteenth-century monthly service book compiled under Metropolitan Macarius (translator's note).

social group sets the tone for the culture and drives it forward; no one would dispute that premise; but in the history of literature, perhaps even more so than in the history of other arts, there are underground currents (experiences, the power of tradition) that make themselves felt and, accumulating imperceptibly in one era, gush forth suddenly in the next, flooding the surface. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the [18]60s, when Galakhov, Porfir'ev, and others were testing out their overall outline of the history of Russian literature, the picture of the Russian 18<sup>th</sup> century looked much simpler than it does now! But if the history of Russian literature is the history of the literature of the Russian people and not just the Russian nobility or that group we conventionally designate with that vague term “intelligentsia,” then its outlines must, of course, consider this people in the totality of its composition, in all its strata: a stratum that is historically motionless at some given moment may be the main driving force in the next historical era.

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So it is absolutely necessary that we classify the literary phenomena of each given era according to the readerships that established a demand for those particular phenomena; but this alone is not enough: we must also make sense of these readerships themselves, not only from the point of view of their social significance, but also in terms of the relationship between these groups and the writer. Even if he be representative of the purest lyricism and sing like a songbird, the writer always addresses himself to some imagined interlocutor; this fictitious reader may not belong to the environment observed by the poet nor even to his contemporaries; the poet looks beyond them to discern him somewhere in the future, like Baratynskii: “And as I found a friend in my own generation/I will find a reader in posterity” [I kak nashel ia druga v pokolen'i,/chitatelia naidu v potomstve ia].<sup>20</sup> Not for nothing has one of our contemporary poets compared this

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted from E.A. Baratynskii's poem “My gift is meagre and my voice subdued...” [Moi dar ubog i golos moi negromok...] (Esin's note).

famous poem of Baratynskii's to a bottle thrown into the sea and found in coastal sands many years later by a chance wanderer. Our studies of poets rarely consider these imaginary interlocutors, yet it is they who would often help us, in our circumstances, to understand both the poet's creative devices and his entire poetics; as has been repeatedly noted, every work of art more or less skillfully conceals its imperative; every discourse has some impact in mind. The poet lavishes all the seductions of his art on this interlocutor; he tries to interest, convince, or persuade him, to win him over to his side: in a word, he does everything to evoke a sympathetic spirit from the emptiness he feels around him. "There is no lyric poetry without dialogue," noted the contemporary poet I quoted in reference to Baratynskii (O. Mandel'shtam), whose short essay "On the Interlocutor" [O sobesednike]<sup>21</sup> includes some curious additions to my own observations in this area. Essentially, this essay and the article by B.V. Nikol'skii, *The Poet and the Reader in Pushkin's Lyric Poetry* [Poet i chitatel' v lirike Pushkina] (Saint Petersburg, 1899)<sup>22</sup> are the only attempts I know of to illuminate this issue; failing to solve it would mean that much in the work of both individual poets and entire schools will remain unclear. Nikol'skii, however, prioritizes the image of the poet in Pushkin's lyric poetry and makes no note of the fact that the reader of interest to the poet is very often a fantastical person created, of course, from personal and environmental elements, but nevertheless created, and not actually present in the environment. "Poetry as a whole is always directed at a more or less distant, unknown addressee whose existence the poet cannot doubt without doubting himself," says Mandel'shtam. For example, Bal'mont is constantly snubbing "someone in his poems, treating that someone without respect, negligently, condescendingly." "Bal'mont's 'thou' never finds an addressee, rushing past like an arrow loosed from too tight a bowstring." Hence the lack of forcefulness in his poems, the fleeting nature of the impressions we receive from them. On the other hand,

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<sup>21</sup> *Apollo*, 1913, no. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Although Beletskii uses the word "article" to describe Nikol'skii's piece, it was published as an 82-page book in 1899 in publishing magnate Aleksei Suvorin's printing house in Saint Petersburg; no publisher is indicated (translator's note).

there are poets in whom we might note a fear of a specific interlocutor, of that interlocutor's judgment and critique; this phenomenon is quite typical. It sticks out, for example, in even a casual reading of Nekrasov. It is hard to think of another poet so insecure about his poetry, always trying so hard to prove to someone else that he, the writer, is acting correctly, that if he holds back, the reasons are entirely excusable, and so forth. Nekrasov was late in achieving a prominent place in the literary world and did so only with great difficulty; he long hesitated to speak candidly in his personal lyric poems, appearing under a mask, trying more or less artlessly to deceive his imagined interlocutor. Thus the original titles of individual 1846 lyrics ("In an unknown backwater" [V nevedomoi glushi], "Imitation of Lermontov" [Podrazhanie Lermontova], "Motherland" [Rodina], "I deeply despise myself for that" [Ia za to gluboko preziraiu sebia], and others) carry the subtitle "After Larra" [Iz Larry];<sup>23</sup> other poems are portrayed as translations and imitations of Heine, even of Chénier and others. Lermontov, Larra, Heine, Chénier, Reshetilov, Valentinov: these are all masks that Nekrasov dons in fear of his interlocutor, who for some reason makes him tremble. Who is this reader? For the Nekrasov of the [18]40s and 50s, he is a kind of collective face with the individual features of Turgenev, Botkin, Druzhinin, and Annenkov: an idealist, aesthete, and sybarite; for all the author's desire to be independent, Nekrasov fears him, and this fear elicits endless reservations about the fact that this struggle prevents him from being a poet, that he himself recognizes the lack of creativity in his poems, the self-flagellation, the self-justifications that Nekrasov essentially does not abandon until the end of his activities. But beginning in the [18]50s and 60s, another interlocutor begins to emerge in Nekrasov's imagination alongside the old one; the new one had already been embodied once in the figure of the citizen in a well-known poem; he too is a severe critic, but he is

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<sup>23</sup> Beletskii is referring to the fact that versions of these works published during Nikolai Nekrasov's lifetime included the subtitle "After Larra," indicating that they were adaptations of works by Spanish writer Mariano José de Larra (1809-1837). However, this attribution is false: Nekrasov added it in an attempt to avoid censorship. Furthermore, Nekrasov wrote two different poems with "Imitation of Lermontov" in the title, and the "Imitation of Lermontov" Beletskii seems to have in mind here is, in fact, "In an unknown backwater" (translator's note).

also a teacher who points out the way; once again, an image woven from real elements, from images of Chernyshevskii, of Dobroliubov, of the revolutionary youth of the 60s whom Nekrasov wanted to serve at all costs as their Tyrtaeus. And behind these two interlocutors stands the grandiose figure of a third, whose relationship with Nekrasov one critic characterized as a love affair: this third is the People, a touching and mysterious image much less real than the other two; that distant, unknown friend the thought of whom inspires the most energetic flights of Nekrasov's muse.<sup>24</sup>

These are Nekrasov's imaginary interlocutors. We could have chosen any other poet instead. For example, we might recognize the same fear of the interlocutor in Leskov's reworkings of legends from the *Prologue*: their style and composition are incomprehensible if we do not account for the fact that the author is constantly polemicizing with some readers but wants to convince others, to assure them, to position them in favor of his characters and their behavior; he bows and scrapes before this imaginary interlocutor, either curtailing himself as an artist or, on the contrary, bewildering and amusing him with witticisms and wordplay. The poets of our own time, who sometimes aim to *épater le bourgeois*, betray their interlocutor with the very titles of their books: they have a very low opinion of him, which reflects so unfavorably on the quality of their creations! But enough examples for now: they all illustrate our position that studying fictitious readers who inevitably stand before the eyes of the poet at the very moment of the creative act can clarify something about that act as well. Tell me who you know and I will tell you who you are, as the old but hardly accurate saying goes. There is no telling who I have come to know by chance; but ask who I would like to know or what kind of acquaintances I value, and then, maybe, you can pass judgment. The study of the reader begins with the study of the imaginary reader. In some cases this may coincide with someone who really existed; this happens rarely; in other cases this reader

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<sup>24</sup> With regard to Nekrasov, I have analyzed this issue in greater detail in a separate article ("Nekrasov's Poet and Reader") which is awaiting publication. (A.I. Beletskii's article "Nekrasov and His Interlocutors" [Nekrasov i ego sobesedniki] was published in *Soviet Literary Studies* [Ukrainian: Radians'ke literaturoznavstvo], 1938, no. 1 [Esin's note].)

is a “secret and distant friend,” an “enlightened great-grandson, the young son of Phoebus,” a “friend of sacred truth”;<sup>25</sup> third and finally, he is a base ignoramus and a fool, a member of that crowd the poet flees into solitude in order to converse with himself, with posterity, with his muse. The idea of an imaginary interlocutor persists even in the latter case, because not only is there no lyric poetry without dialogue, but there is no creative work at all.

## 4

But now the work has left the poet’s workshop and made its way from imaginary interlocutors to real ones, to stammering interlocutors whom the poet serves as Aaron, to all those wingless interlocutors on whom the poet’s inspiration ties wings. For the moment, we can divide the poet’s milieu into two parts: his blind admirers in one group and the deaf majority in the other. A third group made up of impartial judges and objective critics is so insignificant and uninfluential that we have no need to discuss them. The first group includes those readers of *Werther* who donned blue tailcoats, yellow waistcoats, and yellow trousers in his honor, who made sensitive pilgrimages to his grave in Wetzlar: a heap of earth piled under some trees by a savvy innkeeper who grinned to himself at the sight of young gentlemen solemnly pacing around the putative grave and, after a memorial libation and with bared daggers in their hands, listening to a speech in honor of that unforgettable patron of all unfortunate lovers. We had our own Werthers in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; they were seventeen-year-olds who already had an “especial system of thought,” Muscovites and Kharkivites, the kind that A. Barymov described in his essay from his 1830s Kharkiv chronicles;<sup>26</sup> pilgrims to Poor Liza’s pond

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<sup>25</sup> All of Beletskii’s quotes here are inexact paraphrases. The first is likely from F. Sologub’s 1897 poem, “Will you come to me, my distant, secret friend? [Pridesh' li ty ko mne, dalekii, tainyi drug?]. The second are lines from Pushkin’s 1815 poem “A Small Town (To \*\*\*)” [Gorodok (K \*\*\*)], albeit with the order reversed. The third may be a reference to K. Ryleev’s 1822 poem “Derzhavin,” where a “young singer” eulogizes the recently deceased Derzhavin as “the organ of sacred truth” (translator’s note).

<sup>26</sup> *Antique Kiev* [Kievskaiia starina], 1883, no. V, 49-65.

gave way to Muscovites in Childe Harold's cloaks<sup>27</sup> and Caucasian warriors from Marlinskii's tales battling for the hearts of maidens in the silence of provincial backwaters; later came the little Onegin and Pechorins, and then journeys back to the Orlov city garden, to the bench where Liza Kalitina sat with Lavretsky,<sup>28</sup> and finally, in the 1860s, the phalansteries organized according to Chernyshevskii's prescriptions, etc. Unfortunately, the historian of the Russian reader still has a very insignificant quantity of facts at his disposal that testify to any epidemic enthusiasm for Russian books similar to the Wertherian influenza described by Appell; we are somewhat better off in information about Russian admirers of Byron or Hugo, Russian Nietzscheans, and Russian admirers of O. Wilde or French Decadence; but here too our information is often fragmentary. Some of the poet's contemporaries rejoice in finding in him a mouthpiece for expressing their own feelings and aspirations; others remain cold to him, and practice has shown that the greater the prestige of the poet for subsequent generations, the more indifferent the majority around him (exceptions are possible, of course). Our textbooks stubbornly refer to the 1820s-30s as the Pushkin Era, though Pushkin and his small contemporary readership represented a very modest circle, one barely discernable to the naked eye. The ordinary reader absorbed in Bulgarin's *Vyzhigin*<sup>29</sup> or Begichev's *The Kholmisky Family*<sup>30</sup> simply had no perception of that circle; the youth captivated by

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<sup>27</sup> Poor Liza [Bednaia Liza] is the title character of Nikolai Karamzin's 1792 sentimental short story of the same name; "Muscovites in Childe Harold's cloaks" is a reference both to Byron's poetic hero and to Pushkin's description of the title character of *Eugene Onegin* [Evgenii Onegin], stanza VII, line 24 (translator's note).

<sup>28</sup> Onegin from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*; Pechorin from Mikhail Lermontov's 1840 novel *A Hero of Our Time* [Geroi nashogo vremeni]; Liza Kalitina and Lavretsky from Turgenev's 1859 novel *Nest of the Gentry* [Dvorianskoe gnezdo] (translator's note).

<sup>29</sup> The 1829 novel *Ivan Vyzhigin*, by author, newspaper editor, and police informant Faddei Venediktovich Bulgarin (1789-1859), was the first Russian-language novel to enjoy massive sales and success with general readers. Its critical reputation has not been nearly so favorable (translator's note).

<sup>30</sup> Dmitrii Nikitich Begichev (1786-1859): Russian writer close to the Griboedov circle and friend of Aleksandr Pushkin's. His first novel, *The Kholmisky Family. Some Features of the Mores and Lifestyles, Familial and Individual, of the Russian Nobility* [Semeistvo Kholmiskikh. Nekotorye cherty nravov i obraza zhizni, semeinoi i odinokoi, russkikh dvorian] (1832), was published anonymously with the support of N.A. Polevoi (Esin's note).

Marlinskii and Benediktov saw Pushkin as incomparably small next to these giants of poetry. "Rumor of me shall spread throughout great Rus'," the poet foretold in his dying poem;<sup>31</sup> we know this prophecy would come true in due time, but it clearly did not pertain to the time immediately following Pushkin's death. The facts are well known: we may recall the circulars of Count Bludov, Minister of the Interior, asking governors to distribute the posthumous edition of Pushkin's works for sale to benefit the poet's family. Governors sent order forms to district police chiefs, but for all his respect for the authority of governors and district police chiefs, the man on the street held firm. There were zero buyers in Pskov; the Akkerman police chief wrote that he tried get nobles, officials, and merchants to agree to purchase Mr. Pushkin's works but could find none willing to do so; only eighteen copies were sold in the Bessarabian governate, and these bought mostly by civil servants in the governor's office (poor things!); the governor of Yaroslavl returned 39 of the 50 copies sent to him, and so forth. The ordinary reader during Russian literature's Pushkin Era had no need of Pushkin, but he did need Bulgarin, Senkovskii, and Marlinskii. Historians of Russian literature consider themselves less bound than any other historians by the old motto to write *sine ira et studio*, and for this indifference to Pushkin they have severely scolded the Russian reader of the [18]30s. A strange and pointless exercise! Not unlike scolding a horse for preferring oats to ice cream. There have been moments when Russian literature practically did not exist for the Russian reader: not just for the ordinary reader, but even for the more advanced. Of course Tatyana Larina and Sofya Famusova are more intelligent than their milieu,<sup>32</sup> but what need did they have of Karamzin, Makarov,<sup>33</sup> or Dolgorukii<sup>34</sup> when they had Mme.

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<sup>31</sup> Namely, his 1836 "Exegi Monumentum" (translator's note).

<sup>32</sup> Tatyana Larina is the main heroine of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*; Sofya Famusova the heroine of Aleksandr Griboedov's 1823 comedy *Woe from Wit* [Gore ot uma] (translator's note).

<sup>33</sup> Mikhail Nikolaevich Makarov (1749-1847): Russian writer who compiled folk legends and lore, though his publications in this area lack any scholarly value (Esin's note).

<sup>34</sup> Ivan Mikhailovich Dolgorukii (1764-1823): Russian poet who was, in V.G. Belinskii's estimation, "sensitive and satirical, often distinguished by a genuine Russian sense of humor" (V.G. Belinskii, *Complete Collected Works* (Moscow, 1955), vol. 7, 129) (Esin's note).

Cottin, Mme. Genlis, Krüdener, and Rousseau? It would be interesting to trace how and why Russian readers developed an interest in Russian books; perhaps aesthetic considerations were not foregrounded as a motive when patriotism (and sometimes simply ignorance of foreign languages), a desire to discover a clue to the mystery of Russian reality, and the like were playing a role. Fascinated by the great foreign masters, the Russian reader could do without the more or less successful experiments of Russian apprentices. This does not apply to Pushkin, of course, but even he found only a small group of admirers while the majority remained deaf and indifferent.

Let us move on to the third stage. Time forms a yawning chasm between the writer and the reader; on the far side of this chasm, in the alluring distance of the past, the light lit by a departed writer glimmers; this light is attractive, and bridges begin to be thrown across the chasm. A reader and descendant comes along: a selective reader, a judge and interpreter. We could discern isolated versions of him even among the writer's contemporaries, but his voice was barely audible there against the din of enthusiasts and the cold silence of the majority. This new readership is characterized by one property common to all its members: the desire to assimilate the work, to make it useful for their own ethical and aesthetic purposes, to infuse their own blood into the thinning veins of a once young and powerful organism. Then comes the reader whom I would call the intrusive reader. No more passive perception: what begins now is a kind of creativity. They will find in *Don Quixote* an image of the eternal antithesis of idealism and realism, the eternal tragedy of the idealist faced with the brutal truth of everyday life; they will discover in *Hamlet* a worldview characteristic of an entire country, of an entire era, and so forth. This imposition generally proceeds in two basic directions, though not always at the same time.

The first is taken by the reader **who imposes his ideas on the author**. Of course, ethical appreciation usually precedes aesthetic appreciation whenever the reader wants to make his appreciation conscious; to justify one's passion for a work of art (unnecessary for "blind admirers"), one must recognize it as practically useful: expressing one's ethical understanding is much easier than defending an aesthetic assessment, which is why

imposing an idea is more often the initial act. Russian criticism of the 1850s-60s provides an abundance of examples of imposition: chronological distance between the reader and writer is also unnecessary should the reader belong to a different social milieu than the author he interprets. Such, for example, is Dobroliubov's attitude to Ostrovskii and Goncharov's or Chernyshevskii's attitude to Turgenev's *Asya*. In criticism, this imposition of an idea is expressed in the translation of a work from the language of poetry into the language of prose; even as it loses its artistic vitality, a work thus translated can become an effective tool, a party slogan, an impetus for polemical and philosophical thought. For a time, the reader is satisfied by this life revealed to him in the product of someone else's thought; of course, the poet's contemporaneous admirers would not fall for this bait and would be satisfied by the unconscious delight provided by his work (the window through which they declare their "self" to the world). But the reader of the next era would not be satisfied by this, either: he would either continue imposing ideas (in rare cases) or begin work of a different kind, another form of creativity, but in a different direction. We should remember that the chasm between the work and the reader has become even wider and deeper by this time; despite all efforts, the work begins to fade and risks falling prey to dealers in antiques; it requires renewal, not just a renewal of ideas, but also an artistic renewal. The situation was very simple in the Middle Ages, both in the West and in Ancient Rus': new editions appeared that changed the composition, phraseology, and sometimes plot of the work according to new demands; the "Tristan" of French trouvères turned into the "Tristan" of Gottfried von Straßburg (just as he later turned into the "Tristan" of R. Wagner); the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>-century story of Ahikar the Wise appeared in a completely new, Russified version; a fragment of an old French epic became a 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>-century Russian popular tale, and so on. But this kind of metamorphosis is not always possible and not with all works: the 19<sup>th</sup> century is very particular on this score, and one can only imagine the storm of indignation that would arise around a reader who ventured seriously, that is, not in parodic form, to offer the world a Gogol' or a Pushkin revised according to his own aesthetic tastes. What is possible are ruses and circumventions: reworkings take place in the form of a critical article, a historical treatise; this is especially easy in an era that looks condescendingly upon subjective criticism

permitting a reader to talk simply about how the material he has read has been reflected in his soul. Let us call these **readers who impose an image**. In our own literature, these readers include, for example, Merezhkovskii, author of books on Gogol' and Lermontov, I.F. Annenskii, author of *Book of Reflections* [Kniga otrazhenii], Bal'mont, author of *Mountain Peaks* [Gornye vershiny], and many others. I will offer two caveats on the above. First, I use the word "imposition" without the reproachful connotation it has in our everyday speech. Second is a foreseeable rebuke, of course: you have been talking about readers, but the examples you give are all taken from critics. Quite right, but is a critic not a reader? The history of the reader should, in large part, include the history of criticism, finally clarifying its place in our overall depiction of literary history. Literary historians usually bring up critics when characterizing a historical era, though that kind of characterization is not the task of literary-historical scholarship; or they cite their opinion as an authoritative voice, though a critic's voice cannot be authoritative for the scholar; or finally, they bring them up in order to refute them, to prove the error of their verdict, which is also pointless, because in a certain sense, criticism is always right, just as the reader is always right. The Romantic Gogol' who ultimately became the Realist Gogol' in the 1850s becomes the Symbolist Gogol' at the end of the century; from a knave and a swindler, the *sui generis* Crispin-Khlestakov<sup>35</sup> becomes the embodiment of the devil: a natural enough transformation, since this is not about the scholarly study of Gogol'. The era will finally arrive when the reader, completely dissatisfied with his former passive role, will take up the pen himself; and we shall now see why that is.

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We now come to the fourth stage, one that is especially characteristic of, for example, our own time, or perhaps we should say the recent past, because not only do the readers of the present day remain an unstudied quantity, but they have not been formalized by

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<sup>35</sup> Lesage's Crispin: *Crispin, The Rival of His Master* [Krispen, sopernik svoego gospodina] (*Crispin, rival de son maître*, 1707, performed 1779 [sic]) (Esin's note).

life. What should we call the readers of this fourth stage? I would define them by the epithet that I had just let slip as I was discussing readers who impose images: readers who take up the pen. But this fourth group takes up the pen not to rework, supplement, or modify someone else's work and modestly pass it on to others without erasing the name of the original author; no, they themselves want to create, and if they lack sufficient imagination, these readers will be aided by their memory and by the art of combination, acquired through practice and sometimes so well developed that we can hardly distinguish them from natural, true writers. Reader-authors of this sort most often appear during the decline of great literary-historical eras: we find them among the Alexandrians in the last centuries of ancient Rome; however, they are not always the messengers of decline and decadence; they were no strangers to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; they may always arise in a cultural milieu or within a group that has accumulated a notable stock of artistic acquisitions and has attained a certain level of sophistication that usually leads to eclecticism and decline of imagination. Works by these readers may sometimes be extremely primitive in their construction: such are the centos composed from Virgil; such is the *Christus Patiens*, a tragedy by an unknown Byzantine author usually attributed to St. Gregory, woven entirely from the verses of Lycophron, Aeschylus, and especially Euripides, occasionally interspersed with Gospel sayings from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as well as from the gospels of Nicodemus and James and other apocrypha. The patience with which a 12<sup>th</sup>-century author strung together 2,610 verses and the art by which he adapted these verses to express new content astonishes us; of course, we are inclined to look down our noses at this Byzantine pedant, perhaps because the diligence of recent publishers has revealed the secrets of his work; like the author of that Byzantine tragedy, 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century readers find themselves in a better position to enter literature boldly and move around with the air of genuine writers, especially if they see themselves surrounded by a society that consists of others like them. However, it takes a great deal of tact and observation to be able to distinguish these reader-authors from real writers. There may be writers who read little and are indifferent to all books except their own. But there are genuine writers who are very well-read in literature; they imitate and they borrow, but their source of

inspiration is not someone else's book, and their combination of elements taken from their reading with elements drawn from experience proceeds according to some law other than those of readers who take up the pen. The issue of the latter requires a dedicated study; for now I will cite only the first example I come across, with a caveat about its possible subjectivity. What comes to mind is our renowned contemporary, well-known in Russia, Anatole France, in whom the abilities of the thoughtful and talented reader clearly, in my opinion, outweigh the abilities of the author-poet. We usually consider the hallmark of a true poet to be creative imagination. France knows this and regrets all the more that he lacks this gift: "Je n'ai point d'imagination, et ma véracité est une vertu forcée," as he himself admits in his novels, making his protagonists complain of a lack of imagination or even deny the fact that it exists. France's so-called creative work is a vast and tastefully decorated library where he himself serves as an amiable and obliging custodian, with a head full of quotations and literary impressions from works of all countries, times, and peoples: not for nothing does he call books the opium of the West; the opium smoked, he begins to dream, and his dreams are not impressions of the reality that preceded the dream but impressions from books, sometimes repeated with the conscientiousness of complete creative impotence. No wonder this "poetry librarian" (as one of his French critics expressed it) was, in real life, the son of a bookseller. Articles and notes by Renard, Larroumet, Deschamps, Delaporte, Potez, Ernest-Charles, and G. Michaut<sup>36</sup> have gradually revealed the secrets of his skill. Any of France's novels is a kind of cento constructed from a wide variety of authors. This applies not only to novels like *Thaïs* (of which E. Charles notes, "What here is not imitation or pastiche?") or *La Rôtisserie de la reine Pédauque*, but also to his novels of contemporary life like *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*, woven from Renan's article "Vingt jours en

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<sup>36</sup> See the results of this critique gathered in G. Michaut, *Anatole France, étude psychologique* (Paris), 142 et seq.

Sicile”<sup>37</sup> and from reminiscences of Baudelaire, Mérimée, A. Theuriet, E. About, and A. Daudet, and supplemented by impressions from lithographs, engravings, and drawings: once again, impressions of other people’s art. Most curious of all is the fact that France himself is well aware of this peculiarity of his, and in the fourth volume of his *La Vie littéraire*, he included two short articles under the paradoxical and provocative title “Apologie pour le plagiat.” He does not, of course, rush to the defense of crude and primitive plagiarism: he is ultimately defending his right — the right of the reader — to take up the pen; but it is funny that this “Apologie pour le plagiat” is itself, if not plagiarism, a recollection of something he once read, Charles Nodier’s *Questions de la [sic] littérature légale*, which surprisingly anticipated his own thoughts.

If, in spite of everything, France captivates others and, while himself a “reader,” is surrounded by a significant group of reader-admirers, this should be no surprise. Are not parasitic growths on the trunk and branches of an old oak tree sometimes beautiful? But they live on the vital fluids of another. Of course this analogy is only superficial, for this other serves not only as a source of creative life for the reader who has taken up the pen, but also as its manifestation. If France does not serve as a sufficiently convincing example, he is far from the only one; late-19<sup>th</sup>- and early-20<sup>th</sup>-century Western European and Russian literature is teeming with works of the sort we have in *Thaïs* or *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*. If the reader has not yet completely exterminated the writer, then he has at least constrained him greatly with his own productions. Nietzsche’s precept, “Schreibe mit Blut und du wirst erfahren, dass Blut Geist ist,” may sound strange for readers who have no desire to understand the blood of another, since this is no easy matter: they, these *Müßiggänger*, prefer their palimpsests written in ink rather than blood. Our arrogant attitude towards, say, 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine literature will be abandoned by our descendants; we have a much closer relationship to it than we

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<sup>37</sup> Beletskii mistakenly attributes this to Renard rather than Ernest Renan and the title as “Quinze jours” rather than twenty. While the former mistake is Beletskii’s, the latter mistake comes directly from Michaut (translator’s note).

thought and continue to think. But assessing contemporary literature is not, of course, my task here.

In my opinion, literary historians seeking to understand the literary phenomena of a given era should, to whatever extent possible, distinguish “readers who have taken up the pen” as a distinct group without confusing them with genuine authors. Of course, even this fourth group of readers will prove to be heterogenous upon detailed study; the pureblooded reader-centoists within it exist side-by-side with readers who discover creative inclinations and to a certain extent justify them, and so on. But the main thing I would like to emphasize is the need to move towards real efforts to collect, classify, and analyze materials on the history of the reader. Experimental research on the contemporary reader will prove to be a not insignificant guide to his history, just as the study of contemporary dialects sheds light on a language’s distant past. We should not retreat before the seeming scarcity of material; there is ample material in memoirs and correspondence, in book inventories and catalogues, and finally, in works of art themselves. I know the task I have set is not an easy one and will, of course, require collective efforts to solve. A solution may be nowhere at hand. But I am absolutely convinced of one thing: even attempts in this area are both timely and necessary.