Novikov's Thoughts on Catherine II and on Russia

Nikolai I. Novikov (1744–1818) was the most influential Russian publicist of the eighteenth century. Educated first at home and then at the University of Moscow, Novikov commenced his literary activity in 1769 with the publication of the satirical journal Truten (Drone); following its closure in 1770, on orders of Catherine II, he started three new journals: Pustomel (Chatterbox), Zhivotopisets (Painter), and Koshelek (Bag). After authorities closed all three of these journals, Novikov moved his activity from St. Petersburg to Moscow, where, from 1779 to 1789, he established a remarkably successful publishing enterprise. This enterprise attracted talented people, with whose help he published some 1000 titles of books (translations and original works) on a variety of topics. In 1792 Catherine II had Novikov arrested, sentenced him to fifteen years in prison, and ordered the burning of some 20,000 copies of his books. After her death in 1796, Novikov was released from prison and settled on his estate, where he remained inactive for the remainder of his life.

In his prime Novikov was Russia’s most ardent promer of human rights, justice, education, and tolerance. He was also a trenchant critic of serfdom, which he held responsible for all of Russia’s problems. Many of Novikov’s writings were accounts of interviews. Others were either “letters to the editor” or his own “editorial replies.” At one point in his career Novikov had a literary dialogue with Catherine II, who, for a time, edited the journal Vsiakaja Vsiachina [This and That].

N. I. Novikov’s Polemic with Catherine II, June 16, 1769

Mr. Editor:
The Lady [editor] of This and That has been displeased with us and considers our moral views abusive. But now I think that she is less guilty than I had previously thought. Her whole problem is that she cannot express herself clearly in Russian and therefore cannot understand properly the Russian written word—a problem that is characteristic of many of our current writers.

From the words she has singled out in paragraph 52, a native Russian could not conclude otherwise than that Mr. A. [that is, Novikov] was correct and that the Lady of This and That has criticized him unfairly.

In the fifth letter, published in Drone, nothing is said against mercy nor against condescendence, as the Lady of This and That thinks, and the reading public, to which I am now appealing, can verify this. If I had written that an individual who tries to correct vices is more humane than the one who is indulging in them, then I simply cannot understand how I could have disturbed Her Grace [Catherine II]. It seems that the Lady of This and That has become so overwhelmed with flatteries that she now considers as transgression anything that does not praise her.

I do not know why she thinks that my letter is abusive. The term “abusive” means scolding or using vile terms. However, in my previous letter, which apparently has infuriated the heart of this elderly lady, there is no mention of whips, or gallows, or other things that are found in her publication.

The Lady of This and That wrote that the fifth letter, which appeared in Drone, should be eliminated. But this expression is not good Russian. “To eliminate” means to transform. It is an expression that is peculiar to autocracy, and in such trifles as her letters it would be inappropriate to resort to such measures. The supreme authority can eliminate anything using other measures. It would have been more appropriate for the Lady of This and That to say that she despises rather than that she wishes to eliminate my criticism. Many of the pages [of Drone] are passed from hand to hand and it would be impossible to eliminate them.

She maintains that I have an evil heart because, in her view, I misrepresent the terms “condescendence” and “mercy.” It seems to me that I wrote quite clearly that human follies are worthy of compassion and that they require correction, not connivance. I believe, therefore, that for anyone who knows Russian and who believes in truth, my explanation will not be viewed as being contrary to justice or mercy. I do not know how to respond to her suggestion that perhaps I should get well. I am not sure who needs the cure more: the Lady or I. Having said that she does not wish to reply to the fifth letter that appeared in Drone, nevertheless, she has replied to it with all of her heart and reason and her letter includes all of her gall.

Whenever she forgets that, as a humble person, she often gets embroiled in matters that are beyond her capacities, it seems that to clear her mind it would be proper for her to take a cure.
This Lady has labelled my intellect as being dull because I have allegedly failed to understand her morals. I will respond to this as follows: My eyes cannot see anything that is not there. I am quite pleased the Lady of *This and That* has given me the opportunity to be judged by the general public. From our future letters the public will discover who between us was right.

Your Humble Servant,
Pravdoliubov

**N. I. Novikov's Perception of Russian Society,**
*January 1770*

There is an old saying that is found in all languages, even at the present time: Everyone is seeking happiness. A few find it; the rest complain. Everyone interprets happiness in his own way. A *Miser* seeks happiness in great wealth; a *Pompous Person* in splendor; a *Haughty Person* in the servility of his subordinates; an *Amorous Person* in his lover; and so forth. I will present to my readers a few examples [of such characters].

A *Simpleton* is poorly educated, but nature has bestowed upon him exceptional qualities. In his youth he read many love stories that greatly influenced his thinking. This Simpleton is amorous and believes that of mortals he is the happiest person, especially when his female lover responds to him in the same way. He is delighted by every caress and by every glance. In short, this Simpleton believes that all of his happiness centers in his lover. This happiness, however, cannot endure for a long time, and, obviously, our Simpleton is deceiving himself.

Present-day expression of love differs vastly from that practiced by our ancestors. In our time many women do not consider it as sin to love one man and to deceive six. To say, therefore, that true love requires fidelity or blind devotion from a lover means that a lover must be blind. Present-day young lovers actually behave as follows. They pretend that they believe every word their lovers tell them, even though they think exactly the opposite. Frequently they behave like veteran government ministers. They cheat in order to discover the means to an end. This attitude has, in turn, been responsible for the emergence of an expression, which I know but to which I do not subscribe, that women are more cunning than men. I will leave to my gracious readers to decide who is more cunning: he who thinks he is deceiving and is being deceived, or he who allows himself to be deceived and is deceiving. I will add only that the Simpleton will not be happy in this town [St. Petersburg] and will have to search for his happiness in places located some distance from settlements.

A *Miser* has stemmed from a noble background, but, according to some observers, his blood is 1000 times more vicious than that of all mean peasants. At one time he was a judge in a lucrative office, and plundering and taking bribes were considered then as normal gifts. Consequently, while he ruined many people, he amassed for himself enormous wealth, which he would have in direct proportion to the groan of the poor and powerless people had not the Shining Truth that occupies the throne of Russia [Catherine II] in its vastness removed this parasite from his judgship. But while they removed him from this post, he found, nevertheless, a way to oppress his fellow citizens. He loaned money, which he had accumulated illegally, at illegal rates, and, as his goal of happiness, he sought to increase his wealth, irrespective of the fact that he had no close relatives and could not consume more than one-tenth of his unearned annual income. In short, by practicing daily injustice and illegality, our Miser frequently complains that the government has imposed limits on his income. Albeit illegally, our Miser has found his happiness. But I know that every honest person will not envy him.

A *Pompous Person* has enormous wealth, but he manages it very poorly. Instead of helping the poor and fulfilling his other Christian obligations that plead for fulfillment, our Pompous Person annually purchases additional expensive carriages and accumulates an enormous number of horses, footmen, crews, and so forth. His dining room daily serves forty different dishes, but only fifteen people sit at the table. Our Pompous Person is not satisfied with everything he has. His only concern about his own happiness is that he cannot have it all. Ambition that is neither allowed nor attainable can seldom be realized! In order to increase his pomposity, our Pompous Person would like to acquire the wealth of the entire world. Fortunately, he cannot get that happiness, and I would like for him to be content with what he has and, of course, for him to be happy.

A *Pettifogger* is a person who, by using illegal means in his contracts and leases, has amassed a substantial fortune. He fights to the death for every kopeck and increases his wealth daily. At the same time, he sighs every minute and says that he is unhappy; that his children will inherit very little; that he is being constantly offended; that all idlers are happy and that he alone is a very unhappy person. [In our view] the Pettifogger cannot be happy because, although he has happiness within his reach, he does not know how to enjoy it.

Is it ever possible to list all human aspirations? Every human being is trying to seek his happiness in accordance with his individual inclinations. A large majority would like to have what it cannot have. These people will never be happy. Only those can be happy who are satisfied with what they have and whose ambitions know limits. These people aspire only to have what is essential
for their well-being and not what they would like to have to satisfy their
caprices. It would be very nice if everyone could follow the example of an
Honest Person who has an annual income of 1000 rubles but who lives on
750 rubler and gives the rest to the poor. If that Honest Person desires more
income, he desires it only to be able to contribute more to benefit others.

Finally, in accordance with well-established practice, in this New Year I
wish happiness for all of my readers.

**For the Well-to-Do People**

Please be kind to your subordinates and to all of your common people. Arrange
your activity and your affairs in such a way that they will consider you their
protector and intercessor in their needs and not their tyrant who deprives
them of their prosperity at a time when real benefits are being offered them
in abundance from the throne. Be virtuous so that you will not think of
oppressing the poor. Do good to all of them without exception, and passion-
ately take more care of their well-being than your own. Do not listen to
your flatterers because they, while seducing you, take advantage of your weak-
nesses and use your authority to oppress others. And those who are being
oppressed consider this as a terrible blow from your own hand. These flatterers
tell you that you are a well-born person. They lie. Behind your back they say
that everyone is surprised by your generosity, that you satisfy their needs, that
they cheat you; and they call you a dumbbell. Avoid these people because
they are your poison. They are a bile that fills your sweet life with bitters.

Be the judge of your own action. Conduct your business impartially and
you will discover how honest or deceitful your conduct is. Therein should be
the center of your happiness! A truly virtuous person of your standing will
obviously call himself happy should he decide to live up to these suggestions.
And, frankly, it is not too difficult to remember that a poor person recognizes
the virtuous one when the latter does not harm him.

**My Appeal to the Middle Classes**

Your status requires that you be appreciated by the well-to-do and by the poor
because you occupy a middle ground between the high- and the low-
born. You should always tell the former the truth without being rude; point
out to them their transgressions; and show respect to the virtuous among
them, not because of their rank, but because of their just and righteous
behavior. Do not hold them in contempt on account of their innocent acts,
because human weakness is a natural characteristic of mankind. Do not flatter
them, and do not allow yourself to be embroiled in their generosity. Fortunes
made in such a way do not last too long.

You should also remind your low-born associates of their obligations and,

using your own exemplary behavior, try to encourage them to fulfill them.
Finally, while preparing yourself for higher positions, you should also try to
condition yourself to be a virtuous person, a characteristic that is very essential
for those posts. Your should perform your duties justly and, in accordance
with your performance, aspire to higher posts. At the early stage of your career
you should become accustomed to bearing the burdens imposed on you by
your superiors. Power and responsibility glitter on the outside and, therefore,
they have attracted you. Be candid in your dealings with both the high- and
the low-born. In your position make friends with everyone, but patronize only
those who would tell you the truth even after you have gained a high post
and who also would be so virtuous that you could learn something from them.
If you cannot encounter such individuals, then you will not find happiness
even though you may have a high rank. This is so because a person of high
moral quality seldom has a true friend.

**My Advice to Petty Bourgeoisie**

I wish you continued industriousness and the display of a true sense of justice.

**My Advice to the Poor**

I wish that you were surrounded with decent and virtuous people and that
your superiors would not oppress you. I believe that this would be your greatest
happiness!

**My Advice to Peasants**

I wish that your nobles would behave toward you as your fathers and that
you would act as their children. I wish you ample physical strength, good
health, and industriousness. When you have these qualities, you will be happy.
[And remember], your happiness benefits the entire empire.

[A New Year's Wish for Myself]

Finally, on the occasion of this New Year I would like to express a wish for
my own happiness. What would I like? I will leave this to you, my readers,
to figure out. But really I wish that all the wishes that I have expressed for
my fellow citizens would please and benefit them and that they would not
curse me.