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Nikolai Ivanovich Novikov

1744-1818

The Russian who did the most to popularize enlightened attitudes and notions among his countrymen in the second half of the eighteenth century was without any doubt Nikolai Ivanovich Novikov. His public activities were numerous and varied; they made him a leading force in Russian journalism, publishing, public education, and philanthropy. He helped to spread culture and learning into the remotest corners of European Russia and to instruct an entire generation of the Russian nobility. Novikov was a leading Freemason and suffered arrest and banishment when Catherine II closed the Masonic lodges and persecuted their members in the belief that they were spreading subversive and revolutionary ideas. As a dedicated Mason Novikov saw in the individual’s moral development the principal foundation of his social and material happiness and progress. Novikov’s activities, therefore, centered on the spiritual improvement of the individual. Under Russian conditions of the time this was no easy task, and one must marvel at the results Novikov achieved. The high value he put on man as a moral individual capable of spiritual progress explains his great concern for education. If future generations of Russia’s elite were to be better than their parents, they had to be exposed to higher values and given an upbringing consonant with their calling in life. Quite naturally, freedom of expression (that is, freedom of the press) ranked high on his list of “political” demands. But, like most progressive noblemen and Freemasons of his time, while critical of administrative practices, he was not unalterably opposed to the principles of the Russian state. His task, he felt, was moral improvement and reform of manners, not the transformation of Russia’s political and economic system.
GENTLE READER!

The publishers of this review, in embarking on their undertaking, are so moved by fear and hope that they are still in no condition to disclose their intention forthwith.

Our group consists of only ten; and our ages, added together, do not exceed thirty years. Such extreme youth barely brings us to the "Morning Light" of our lives; hence, as with all young persons, although we set great hopes in our industry and diligence, yet we dare not presume that many will design to read us.

For over nine days now we have been meditating on how to attract a large number of readers. Our gathering resembled the Athenian Areopagus. It had so important and dignified an air that awe-inspiring Minerva herself would have been pleased with it; yet withal, we were unable to come to any decision. Whatever was suggested appeared to us either extremely young or very old, either unduly devious or too straightforward, either very short or unconscionably lengthy; in a word, at the end of our confabulations we realized that our desire to be publishers not only was not accompanied by sufficient boldness but was not even prompted by ambition, vanity, or pride.

At last there spoke up a well-beloved fellow-member of our circle, whose small, deeply sunken, penetrating eyes and long nose, accenting the sharp features of his dry face, always reveal what he is thinking, and whose custom it is not to speak save when Venus is in conjunction with the Sun. This fellow-member, addressing us, asked: "Friends! Are you certain that our compatriots will be inclined to read what, in your opinion, constitutes the best of the new writings? Are you certain you have the proper fashion? Have England and the rest of your compositions?" Studying his flushed brow.

Even as somber clouds are dispelled by the free passage to the sun's rays, so had he been hearing this question. Whereas no lack of material had been lively among us. For a long time we had been discussing this question. Whereupon he said: "You have rudely awakened us. We shall plead with this moralist, a resolute foe, for a long time. At last his pride was overcome his obstinacy, his but still his compatriots opened his heart.

"Friends! The matter regarded as such importance that you could not neglect consultations. All your efforts are in vain; you might carefully edify: but in vain. We are at last of such importance that you could not neglect consultations. All your efforts are in vain; but in vain. Let us assume, however, for one argument and not yet spread through all Russia, that we are not the only duty toward ourselves? Rather intensified? Should we not then intelligence toward giving joy, and attracting the notice of the useful to them? Those readers of certain foreign writers, with whom we see their dream beauties, like winter, melting away at the rising of the sun, should not cause you to doubt in carrying it out; for it is a review of ours and gives you the sense."

"I might end my speech here, were it not that I see a detailed conclusion. Hence, I must conclude at somewhat greater length. I choose a better field for our compatriots. These compatriots, body, soul, and mind. Let us invent new fashions for the skillful physicians to their minds be our exclusive con
best of the new writings? Are your quills sharpened in the newest French fashion? Have England and the land of Germany supplied the subject matter of your compositions?" So saying, he sat down with great dignity, snatching his flushed brow.

Even as somber clouds are dispelled by a loud roll of thunder and allow free passage to the sun’s ray, so were our souls suddenly filled with light on hearing this question. Whereas our learned disputes concerning the choice of material had been lively and noisy, a profound silence now reigned among us. For a long time we stared at each other, not knowing what we should think, say, or do; and so we begged him to extricate us from this new difficulty by giving us wise counsel. “This you must do,” we said, “because you have rudely awakened us from a most pleasant slumber.” We had to plead with this moralist, a resolute foe of weakness, imperfection, and vice, for a long time. At last his patriotic attachment to his beloved country overcame his obstinacy, his burning desire to do something for the good of his compatriots opened his humanitarian heart, and this is what he said:

“Friends! The matter regarding which I questioned you is without doubt of such importance that you could not even have broached it in your earlier consultations. All your efforts and your artistic undertakings, all the learned pieces you might carefully edit would be vain and useless if they did not please our readers. I am far from doubting our compatriots’ love of reading, but we are in no position now to decide a matter which time must settle. Let us assume, however, for argument’s sake merely, that love of reading has not yet spread through all Russian cities. Will we be released from our obligation to our countrymen, merely because some of them forget their duty toward themselves? Rather, should not our zeal for their welfare be intensified? Should we not then direct our efforts with greater foresight and intelligence toward giving pleasure to those of our compatriots who read and attracting the notice of those who do not read to something that will be useful to them? Those readers who have fallen under the spell of the works of certain foreign writers, with their tinsel glitter, will soon recover if they see their dream beauties, like the snowflakes which sparkle in our air in winter, melting away at the rising of the sun of truth. Thus my question should not cause you to doubt your intention, but merely make you cautious in carrying it out; for it brings before you the whole orientation of this review of ours and gives you this unspoken advice: Be useful to men of good sense.

“I might end my speech here and leave the rest to your commendable zeal, were it not that I see in your eyes an impatient desire to hear my detailed conclusions. Hence, contrary to my inclination, I shall now speak at somewhat greater length than is my wont. We cannot, it seems to me, choose a better field for our labors than the hearts and souls of our beloved compatriots. These compatriots of ours are rational beings, consisting of body, soul, and mind. Let us leave it to the hairdressers, tailors, and inventors of new fashions for females to improve their appearance; let us leave it to skillful physicians to heal their bodily ailments; and let their souls and minds be our exclusive concern. Let us offer healing and strengthening
substances for those. Consequently we must fill the pages we publish with truths which have their basis in human nature, truths which derive from all of creation and are by it explained. Do you wish me to advance supporting evidence? Very well—bear with me a few minutes longer.

"If we systematically investigate the heavens, the earth, water, air, and fire—in a word, all of creation—we shall essentially be studying man, because of whom all Nature's works are worthy of discussion. The majestic sun and all the magnificent host of stars would not merit our attention, did not their beneficent influence prove to us how much they do for our welfare. The three realms of Nature would be of little worth, did not experience show that man was created master of them all. The whole vast field of learning and the arts would become an empty, arid mirage not worth mentioning, did not the arts and sciences work to improve the human heart, to increase human well-being, and to broaden the soul and its powers. Everything proves to us that among the tangible objects with which we have become familiar over many long years, there is nothing finer, nobler, or more majestic than man and his qualities, which flow from the source of all good. Hence it follows that we are not mistaken—and who will blame us for the great and noble self-love that we show in holding man to be the focal point of this created earth and of all things? Nothing can be more useful, more agreeable, and more worthy of our labors than that which is closely bound up with man and the object of which is his virtue, well-being, and happiness.

"We all seek ourselves in everything; the causes which move us would be weak and ineffective if, in undertaking any task, we forgot ourselves or our hopes of pleasure, joy, or well-being. Indeed, nothing pleases and delights us more than our own selves. It is surprising that we are fond of conversations of which we are the subjects and constantly seek to learn what others are saying about us? Do we not note a generous response even in callow youth when we deign to praise its endeavors? The most misguided man will not long resist if the error of his ways is pointed out to him in a gentle manner. Hence if it were possible to teach men in general to regard themselves as examples of goodness and virtue, as being the crown of all things, then each man in particular would be brought to consider himself an important and worthy part of this crowning whole. My friends, how can you doubt that you will find many readers for a publication which will speak of the readers themselves—provided only that by a skillful selection of material you seek to foster the inborn human desire to acquire knowledge?

"The fact that many people are ignorant of matters which concern themselves will be a great aid to you. Most men, allowing their thoughts to roam over the limitless expanse of the world, wish to know of all possible things that exist, and yet remain ignorant of, and alien to, their own small world. Many do not regard the science of self-knowledge as necessary and demanding great diligence but, rather, deem it not particularly useful, a homely craft, and easiest of all to learn. Others appear to think that they should study this, the highest, science after they have learned everything else. Still others—and how numerous they are!—prey to inconstancy, flit, like greedy bees, from one flower of knowledge to the next, in the great number of fair flowers and dewy meadows of delight and repletion of our own selves. Finally, yet others take some trifle for a thing of great study of themselves. Is it so to be with learning which is as yet little esteemed?

"We cannot deny that the purpose of doing nothing but looking within the hearts of men. Their self-knowledge and self-improvement are to be sought in the study of men. Their self-knowledge and self-improvement are to be sought in the study of men.

"Such knowledge, my friends, is the only knowledge which will help you all the more to understand and to aid those persons who are as inconstantly as men and women, because of the existence and the nature of their own selves. If they are not able to know themselves, how can they be able to know others?"
lees, from one flower of knowledge to another; the vastness of the field and the great number of fair flowers in it cause them to lose their way in these meadows of delight and never to return to the fragrant amaranth of their own selves. Finally, yet others, more numerous than all the rest, neglect useful matters in favor of useless ones; they stray from the straight path, taking some trifle for a thing of importance, and hence never attain to the study of themselves. Is it surprising then that self-knowledge is a branch of learning which is as yet little known among men?

"We cannot deny that there are some people who spend their entire lives doing nothing but looking at themselves, but they examine only the surface of man. Their self-knowledge is not the kind from which the ancient Egyptian and Greek sages promised us such great benefit.

"Such knowledge, my friends, cannot thwart your undertaking; and it will help you all the more if, with all gentleness, you hold before some persons who are as inconstant as butterflies! the mirror of truth and show them the way from the surface of their bodies to the inside of their hearts.

"The whole vast field of higher, middle, and general ethics lies open to us in our self-appointed labors. Let us apply ourselves to some parts of it that are bare and uncultivated. Let us not fear those mocking and denigrating wits who pronounce moralistic writings dated and superfluous. To raise virtue, much looked down upon in the world, to its majestic throne, and to show vice in all its nakedness as base and contrary to human nature, is a praiseworthy labor, even if it does not go beyond intention, even if there is not sufficient strength of character to pursue it. The more our hearts solemnly assure us that no other intention will guide our pen, the more calmly and indifferently shall we bear all mockery and invective addressed to our Morning Light, until at last the great sun of the enlightening spirit rises over our land; and we shall then gladly vanish in its rays.

"Man, as I have already said, is a high and exalted being. Divine revelation teaches us, in addition, that he was made before all other creatures, in the image of the All-Highest, and that the Almighty breathed life into him. This circumstance is in itself so weighty and significant that it can readily inspire in us the greatest respect for a creature which was so honored by its own Creator; consequently we must produce writings commensurate with the importance of our task and treat man's qualities with due solemnity. We will permit ourselves to deal otherwise only with people who themselves trample underfoot their high estate and abase a condition worthy of respect, who resist the noble tendencies inherent in them, who willfully deny pure human feelings. Such people deserve that we should regard them as savage beasts in human guise and, for the honor of mankind, should treat them more severely than our inclination to gentleness would have us. Let universal satire be the scourge with which we chastise the vices of such non-humans. And let it be our inviolable law to inflict such punishment on the vices alone, and not on persons, inasmuch as they are human beings. In our pages the vice and the man, two separate objects, shall be as two parallel lines, which can never meet. Let us, my friends, endeavor above all to love man, in order that, being all-tolerant and refraining from personal criticism,
we may the better with our writings promote *virtue*; and if, as we do so, love of all mankind serves us as our Pole Star, we shall easily pass among the rocks that surround us and launch a strong attack against vice, wickedness, and inhumanity.

"The ancients have left us many beautiful writings, of great literary merit, on such important matters. Time and circumstance have buried most of these under ruins. Let us rescue them, my friends, let us give them to our compatriots in their own tongue. In this way we will restore the honor of antiquity for the good of our country and, in addition, we will often have occasion to lead our readers to the doors of good taste and rational knowledge. The modern age owes thanks to a few individuals endowed with great intelligence who have discovered the ways of gaining knowledge of man and his nature. Many great minds have dared to penetrate to the very depths of the human heart, and have made public their observations. Let us not disdain anything that furthers our purpose, even though there is prejudice against it.

"Let us regard as invaluable whatever can serve our aim, that is to say, can promote the welfare of our fellow-countrymen. I know, my friends, how remote we are from malice and pride, and how ardently we desire that all our beloved compatriots should join us in our labors to attain our common goal. Hence you must allow all those who have acquired new knowledge of themselves and of man in general to fill some of our pages with their writings. Welcome them and encourage them in this socially useful task; assure them that they will greatly oblige us by submitting their work to us. They can address their letters to the bookdealer who will sell our review, and we shall see to the rest with the greatest pleasure. What a delightful hope dawns in my heart! We shall thus have an opportunity to meet many great minds, true patriots, and honest men. In ancient times, Diogenes looked for them with a lantern, but even today, my friends, one does not come across them on every street!

"Finally, in order to avert any suspicion of cupidity, you should not conceal from your fellow-citizens the use you intend to make of the profits from this review. Why not let the world know that you have decided that all the money received from the sales of the review will go to maintain schools for poor children?"

"True, the left hand need not always know what good deeds the right hand does; and when good deeds are made public knowledge they lose their inner worth, so that the doers become no better than Pharisees. But the situation here is quite different; the founding of such schools cannot be kept a secret. They require considerable and constant support. Your good example may move other well-disposed people to do likewise. Their love for their poor, uneducated compatriots will be strengthened thereby; they will be glad to share the burden which others have readily agreed to place on their shoulders—a light, agreeable burden which can hurt no one and which can do great honor to the country and to humanity. Hence, where a good deed should serve as a public example, be deserving of censure. Audacity people are often moved by them in his work on chance wrote that actions without a qualm, may he believe that we not only may make of being thought vainglorious, but open a new door to our dear com weal of mankind, we shall pre afforded an opportunity to show w and for their beloved fatherland."

This was the conclusion of our thorough examination, we decide nothing with which we were not these views of his should be pub as there are always certain diff foreword to any new work. There composing a preface for their memer has spared us that labcriticism or to seek to attract at such effort on our part, learn of from our review in the future.

Following the example of the treasure to them for all time, and of its price. They already know I will show which was the better for

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1 The reference is to a translation of a *Utreunit svet. Ibid.,* p. 498, note 9.
should serve as a public example, the modesty that would conceal it would be deserving of censure. Audacity and fearlessness are always attractive, and people are often moved by them as by an irresistible force. When Plutarch in his work on chance wrote that it is possible to speak of one's own good actions without a qualm, may he not have been thinking of such a case? 4 I believe that we not only may make such an announcement without any fear of being thought vainglorious, but that it is our duty to do so. If we thereby open a new door to our dear compatriots and show them a new path to the weal of mankind, we shall prevent them from saying that they were not afforded an opportunity to show their love for men, for their fellow-citizens, and for their beloved fatherland.”

This was the conclusion of our good fellow-member's remarks. After a thorough examination, we decided that, except for his last proposal, he said nothing with which we were not in complete agreement. We decided that these views of his should be published instead of a foreword to our review, as there are always certain difficulties attendant upon the writing of a foreword to any new work. There are few writers who do not tremble when composing a preface for their books. Fortunately, our beloved fellow-member has spared us that labor; and we have now no need to appease criticism or to seek to attract attention. Our respected readers will, without such effort on our part, learn of our purpose and of what they can expect from our review in the future.

Following the example of Thucydides, we have not bequeathed our treasure to them for all time, and therefore are not obliged to inform them of its price. They already know both our intention and our fear—and time will show which was the better founded!

4 The reference is to a translation of Plutarch's essay that appeared in the first issue of Utrenii wet. Ibid., p. 498, note 9.—Editor.