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Fontenelle and Russia. Creation of the Petrine myth in eighteenth-century France

Fontenelle i Rosja. Stworzenie mitu Piotra Wielkiego w osiemnastowiecznej Francji

Słowa klucze: Rosja, Piotr Wielki, francuskie Oświecenie, Fontenelle, reformy społeczno-polityczne, modernizacja

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Streszczenie

W 1725 r. Fontenelle, francuski pisarz, filozof i członek Akademii Nauk napisał *Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier*, by upamiętnić niedawną śmierć Piotra Wielkiego i zarazem sławić reformy, jakich podjął się ten monarcha w celu zmodernizowania Rosji. Za sprawą tego tekstu Fontenelle'owi udało się stworzyć mit Piotra Wielkiego, który później popularyzowali we Francji inni wybitni luminarze francuskiego Oświecenia zafascynowani Rosją, przechodzącą w ciągu XVIII wieku bezprecedensową społeczno-polityczną transformację. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu ukazać, w jaki sposób mit ten został skonstruowany i jakich retorycznych chwytów użył jego autor, by rozwinąć i rozpropagować go we współczesnej mu Francji.

Abstract

In 1725 Fontenelle, a French writer, philosopher and member of the *Académie des sciences*, wrote *Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier* to commemorate the recent death of Peter the Great and at the same time to glorify the reforms undertaken by the late Russian Czar to modernize his country. By virtue of this text Fontenelle succeeded in creating the Petrine myth, subsequently popularized in France by other outstanding figures of the French Enlightenment infatuated with Russia, which in the course of the eighteenth century was undergoing unprecedented socio-political transformation. Our article aims to show how Fontenelle constructed this myth and what rhetorical devices he employed to advance and later to promote it in France of his times.

1. Shift in French intellectual interests towards the East

During the early modern period, from 1600 to 1750, centers of European culture, politics and finance shifted from Italy and its flourishing city-states to the North. Hence dynamically developing London, Amsterdam and Paris superseded Florence, Venice and especially Rome, which with the advent of Protestantism lost its preponderant role as the unrivaled center of *Christianitatis*. But around 1750 another shift in European cultural and political dynamics took place. Now the French *philosophes*, indisputable leaders of the European Enlightenment, discovered a new perspective on Europe and along with Voltaire and other Encyclopedists turned their intellectual attention towards the East¹. First it was Prussia, where Voltaire had spent several memorable, if not stormy years at the court of Frederick the Great in the early 1750². But soon Prussia was supplanted with another intriguing territory, namely Russia. All the more so as this vast empire was undergoing unprecedented socio-political transformation, first during the reign of Peter the Great, then under Catherine II, acclaimed by the Parisian philosophical salons as a true enlightened genius, a new Semiramis, or Minerva, despite her astutely orchestrated *coup d'état* of 1762 and ruthless deposition of her late imperial husband, Peter III. This was a controversial act indeed and it provoked a vivid debate in the West, concerning chiefly moral and political corruption of the new Russian Empress³. Not to mention that “Catherine’s efforts to Europeanize her adopted country by establishing direct contacts with the High Priests of the *Aufklärung*” for some critics of Russia, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “stood for nothing except brute strength”, as George Peabody Gooch firmly asserted⁴. Yet an overwhelming majority of the French *philosophes* displayed a rather uncritical attitude towards the Russian modernization and wholeheartedly approved of its equivocal socio-political dynamics⁵.

¹ L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, Stanford 1994, p. 5.

² P. Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne*, Paris 1961, p. 69–70.

³ In 1762, upon his return from Russia, where he had witnessed the events of the Russian palace revolution of that year, the French diplomat and writer, Claude Carloman de Rulhière, presented to Parisian public a devastating account of Russia’s internal politics in an attempt to demystify, rather unsuccessfully, the Russian myth propagated by the *philosophes*, mainly Voltaire and other French Encyclopedists. For more details see C. Carloman de Rulhière, *Anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie, en l’année 1762* in *Œuvres posthumes de Rulhières*, vol. 4, Paris 1819, p. 257–375.

⁴ G. P. Gooch, *Catherine the Great and Other Studies*, London 1954, p. 1–2.

⁵ Many prominent Polish scholars addressed the complex and problematic issue of the Russian modernization during the reign of Peter the Great or Catherine II. One of them, of whom we remain particularly appreciative for the purpose of this text, is Andrzej Andrusiewicz, the author of an exhaustive and well documented study entitled *Piotr Wielki. Prawda i mit*, Warszawa 2011.

Inventing this new, allegedly modernized Russia, a project carried out in fact by all major figures of the French Enlightenment, required a specific methodology and rhetoric based on a series of binary oppositions endowing this hitherto impenetrable, distant land with quasi mystical attributes. For Russia was an enigmatic realm indeed, located between West and East and combining “the age of barbarism and that of civilization, the tenth and the eighteenth centuries, the manners of Asia and those of Europe, coarse Scythians and polished Europeans⁶.” Hence a brand new Russian myth was needed in order to conceptualize and rationalize this obscure, yet promising nation and at the same time to rectify what had already been known about the old Muscovy from the reports of several European travelers who had ventured there in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, long before the dawn of the Enlightenment. Peter the Great, who stood at the threshold of the ancient and the modern Russia, was the most suitable figure for creating and propagating this enlightened Russian myth⁷.

2. Origins of the Petrine myth in France

On January 28th, 1725, Peter the Great, the Czar of Muscovy and the founder of the new Russian Empire, died. His premature death caused political uncertainty in Russia, yet he was destined to remain immortal and forever remembered by the French *Académie des Sciences*, which had elected him to membership on December 22nd, 1717. The *Académie*, in accordance with traditional customs, charged its perpetual secretary, Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, to formulate in writing a lengthy eulogy of the late Russian Czar with the purpose of communicating to the French public the great loss which Europe of the early Enlightenment had suffered thereby. Fontenelle produced a solid piece of apologetic literature, entitled *Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier* which, along with the *Mémoires* of the duke of Saint-Simon, published about the same time, helped to establish and to promote the Petrine myth not only in France, but all over Europe. The heroic and quasi-divine figure of Peter was featured in Fontenelle’s text not only by means of a rather lengthy enumeration of his socio-political reforms and military victories, but was also boosted in a short paragraph depicting the Czar’s agony and death:

He was only 52 when he died on January 28th 1725 of urine retention, caused by vesicular abscess. Although he suffered extreme pain during twelve days, he chose

⁶ L. Wolff, *op.cit.*, p. 357.

⁷ D. Chirot, *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe: Economics and Politics from the Middle Ages Until the Early Twentieth Century*, Berkeley 1989, p. 13–14.

to finally lay in bed only three days prior to his death. He departed this life with all courage of a hero and all piety of a Christian⁸.

If Peter's fairly ordinary and uneventful death was narrated by Fontenelle with inflated rhetoric and his agony represented as exemplary trespassing of a true Christian hero, we can only imagine the highly laudatory nature of the remaining fragments of the *Éloge*. But this uncritical and quite selective perspective on the Russian Czar, where, according to Albert Lortholary, behind the mask of a statesman and reformer hid a true barbarian⁹, was emblematic not only of Fontenelle, but of later eighteenth-century French *philosophes* as well. But it is Fontenelle who must be given full credit for inventing the Petrine myth in France. Moreover, his *Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier* is a classic example of an oversimplified Manichean vision of the world that the Age of the Enlightenment fabricated. For many writers and thinkers of the period, even for the most prominent ones such as Montesquieu, Voltaire and Diderot, history was a battleground between forces of darkness and light. The eighteenth-century vision of the infamous domain of darkness encompassed various elements: organized religion and its anti-rational, dogmatic character, obsolete socio-political and judicial systems, privileges of birth sanctioned by feudalism, popular superstition, intolerance associated with lack of education, and last but not least, poverty resulting from inadequate economic policies and social injustice. Conversely, the realm of light consisted of everything that sharply contradicted the pre-modern way of thinking. The illuminating splendor of philosophy, expected to suffuse even the most remote and backward nations of Europe and lead them to a new, enlightened truth, was associated with progress and change, abolition of aristocratic entitlements, socio-political mobility benefiting the middle classes and economic reforms. The Manichean struggle, as conceived by various thinkers of the Enlightenment, was fierce indeed, but the final victory was felt to be nearby and it was commonly believed that the new era of mankind, the new day was soon to come. Jean Starobinski recapitulates this mythical belief in a new beginning and complete regeneration of humanity in his book *Les emblèmes de la raison*, dedicated in particular to the esthetics and rhetoric of the revolutionary period in France¹⁰. However, the Manichean perspective investigated by Starobinski, based on antithetical metaphors opposing forces of light and darkness, exemplifying respectively antiquated tradition and progress, can surely be applied to Fontenelle's *Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier*.

⁸ B. le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier* in *Œuvres*, vol. 7, Paris 1792, p. 193.

⁹ A. Lortholary, *Le mirage russe en France au dix-huitième siècle*, Paris 1951, p. 22.

¹⁰ J. Starobinski, *Les emblèmes de la raison*, Paris 1979, p. 31.

3. Fontenelle's incurable binarism

Almost the whole text of Fontenelle's *Éloge* is positioned on the dichotomy of darkness and light, contrasting Russia before and during the reign of Peter the Great. The simple message the author attempts to convey is that seventeenth-century Russia was a cultural, economic and political desert where nothing worthy of the attention of a cultivated European existed. Peter's predecessors were, according to the perpetual secretary of the French *Académie des Sciences*, deficient, nearsighted and in fact detrimental to Russia's fate. Fontenelle's representation of Peter the Great is that of a supra-human hero. However, in the *Éloge* he goes even one step further. For him Peter the Great is not only a monumental pioneer, maker of a new Russia, but indeed a true God. He attributes divine powers and prerogatives to him, such as the ability to create the entire universe out of pure nothingness. For *creatio ex nihilo*, reminiscent of the biblical creation of the world, was, as Fontenelle reports, precisely what Peter the Great managed to accomplish:

Everything in Muscovy was to be made and nothing to be perfected. It was all about creating a new nation. And, what concerns creation again, Peter had to act alone, without assistance, without any instruments to use. Blind policies of his predecessors had almost entirely detached Muscovy from the rest of the world: commerce was either ignored, or gravely neglected there. And yet all abundance and wealth, even that of the human spirit, depends on commerce. The Czar opened his vast lands, hitherto sealed off from the world. Having sent his principal subjects to seek enlightenment and knowledge in foreign lands, he later drew to Russia every foreigner he only could capable of imparting such knowledge on his own subjects: field and navy officers, shipmen, engineers, mathematicians, architects, miners, metal workers, physicians, surgeons and all kinds of artisans¹¹.

Fontenelle asserts that nothing in Russia could have been perfected, for everything had to be generated *ab initio*, from the very beginning. He dramatizes the Manichean struggle between the forces of light and darkness by a deliberate choice of potent rhetorical enunciations, such as: "blind policies of his predecessors" which "detached Muscovy from the rest of the world". The obsolete and thus unproductive national tradition obstructed the passage of light into Muscovy and kept that country away from the only source of essential truth, meaning the Western world and its allegedly most advanced, universal values. Fontenelle divides Russian history into two distinct and incompatible entities, corresponding respectively to the times before and after Peter the Great. In the past all arts, crafts, sciences and industries were either

¹¹ Fontenelle, *op.cit.*, p. 173–174.

ignored or gravely neglected in Muscovy, but then came Peter the Great with a firm intent to put an end to this inveterate Russian misery. Fontenelle praises the influx of foreign craftsmen and professionals into Russia during Peter's reign. His long and somewhat tedious enumeration of the Western experts in know-how serves the main objective of the *Éloge*, namely to convince the members of the *Académie des Sciences* and the European enlightened public of the genius of the late Czar. The contrast of the unproductive past, reduced to merely one or two lines of the quoted passage, with the flourishing and prosperous after, emphasized by progressive register of arts and crafts, newly implanted on the virgin, not to say sterile Russian soil, convinces instantaneously. And that is precisely what Fontenelle's binary rhetoric intended to do.

4. Peter the Great and the Russian regeneration

In another passage of the *Éloge* Fontenelle recounts in more detail the Russian *status quo ante* only to emphasize again the historic significance of Peter the Great as the founder of the new Russia and regenerator of his people. He reiterates once more Peter's unrelenting desire to cut ties with the Russian national heritage. To make his rhetoric more effective, Fontenelle needs to venture directly into the heart of darkness, to descend to the bottomless pit of all evils, namely the Muscovite past. Here he follows in footsteps of an earlier French writer, Philippe Avril, who travelled to Russia at the end of the 17th century and left a devastating account of that country, calling it a *malheureux Empire* (miserable Empire)¹². Indeed, Avril's Dantesque vision of the Russian pre-modern gloom, revisited by Fontenelle just a generation later, appealed to the imagination of the French *philosophes*, for whom the Manichean struggle between anachronistic past and the new enlightened times became one of the crucial components of the ideology of progress. Behold Russia before Peter the Great, as Fontenelle relates it:

Everywhere in Russia reigned an extreme moral depravity and corruption of thought, which not only, like elsewhere, laid hidden behind a thin mask of propriety, coated in some appearance of wit and superficial amenity. For this nation was sovereignly haughty, full of contempt for everything it had no knowledge of; thus haughtiness is the epitome of ignorance. The Czars themselves largely contributed to such moral depravity by not allowing their subjects to travel abroad. Perhaps they feared that they might open their eyes to the truth about their miserable state¹³.

¹² Ph. Avril, *Voyage en divers états d'Europe et d'Asie*, Paris 1692, p. 268.

¹³ Fontenelle, *op.cit.*, p. 165–166.

Fontenelle sees the source of the Muscovite despondency and backwardness in ignorance, deficiency of true light, from which, as he claims, all progress and human prosperity originate. All the more so as Peter's predecessors kept their lands in complete isolation, thus perpetuating Russia's unrelenting inscience. The old Muscovy was the country of the blind deprived of light by their ill-advised and senseless rulers, reminiscent of prisoners locked up in Plato's cave – the realm of eternal shadows and desolation, both spiritual and physical. Fear of illuminating light, which prevented the Russians from changing their wicked conditions conserved for centuries by their barbaric culture, deeply rooted in isolationist ideology of the Orthodox Church, could only have been overcome by an extraordinary ruler, a supra-human visionary, namely Peter the Great. Fontenelle compares the late Czar to other outstanding figures of European civilization, Caesar Augustus and Charlemagne, both highly regarded by many French *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, especially Voltaire¹⁴:

Sciences, in favor of which he lowered himself deliberately to the level of an ordinary man, should elevate him in recompense to the rank of Augustus and Charlemagne, who also accorded them their familiarity¹⁵.

Fontenelle does not fail to use the same and fairly predictable binary opposition of light and darkness when portraying Peter the Great as a young man. Here he shows him as a precocious hero discovering his genius and coming to terms, against all odds, with his glorious destiny. Thus the future Czar manages to triumph at a relatively early age even if obstructed by nefarious forces of the Muscovite tradition embodied by the Princess Sophia, his sister and regent of Russia, who ineffectively tried to curb his imperial prerogatives and by the same token to minimize his potential reformatory impact. Fontenelle's thesis is clear and simple, although it borders on pure "enlightened" propaganda: light not only must, but will invariably vanquish darkness. No other solution is possible and progress shall prevail anyhow, it is only a matter of time:

Once Peter became the Czar, at such a tender age, he was so poorly educated, not only by entrenched vices of the Muscovite education and customary education of the princes, inescapably corrupted by flattery (...) but even more so by the endeavors of ambitious Sophie, who already knew him well enough to fear that one day he might become too powerful a prince and too difficult to be governed. She placed about him every object and person capable of stifling his natural light, corrupting his heart and debauching his manners. But just as good education

¹⁴ A. Lagarde, L. Michard, *XVIIIe siècle*, Paris 1985, p. 146–147.

¹⁵ Fontenelle, *op.cit.*, p. 184.

does not suffice to make great personalities, bad education proves insufficient to ruin them. For heroes of all kinds leave the nature's hands fully formed and with insurmountable qualities¹⁶.

Peter's early victory over reactionary forces of Sophia and her Muscovite partisans is only the first entry in the long list of his heroic deeds rendered in Fontenelle's *Éloge*. The French author continually praises the Czar's incessant reformatory activities, which helped to refurbish Russia's rather ominous image in the West. By infusing life into Russia's decaying organism, Peter created a brand new political entity. Fontenelle juxtaposes the regenerated Russian Empire with the old Muscovy, the cultural heritage of which he either completely marginalizes or overtly disdains. When he refers, for instance, to the new printing industry in eighteenth-century Russia, stimulated by Peter the Great, he does not miss a chance to compare it with the previous, decidedly ineffective state of affairs:

Here one could have a glance at different establishments which Russia owes to him, and only the principal ones. (...) The printing industry and printing techniques among many others, where Peter the Great changed all archaic fonts, too barbaric and indecipherable on account of frequent abbreviations. Besides, books, which had previously been so difficult to read, were in general more scarce [in Muscovy] than any other foreign merchandise¹⁷.

In the grip of his French tastes, Fontenelle was unable to understand and reluctant to show appreciation for the beauty and originality of the old Russian Orthodox architecture and arts. The magnificent medieval churches of the Byzantine Muscovy decorated with famous icons were of no value whatsoever for him. His position perfectly reflects the esthetics of the Enlightenment, based on Western classical concepts. Once more he employs a binary, antithetical strategy to contrast the barbaric era of Muscovite ignorance and neglect with the resplendent, westernized times of Peter the Great:

Having laid his works on solid and necessary foundations, he just added to them what only represents ornamental bits and pieces. He transformed the ancient architecture, crude and deformed, or rather made it emerge in his lands and thus contributed to its birth. (...) He ordered to bring many paintings from Italy and France. They teach what painting really is the people who hitherto knew this art only through very poor representations of their saints¹⁸.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 166–167.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 188–189.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 189–190.

5. Fontenelle and Voltaire

Fontenelle's *Éloge*, an adulatory homage paid to the late Czar, shows the latter not only as a reformer, implementing some more or less important changes, but as a revolutionary regenerator who shaped the destiny of Russia in his own hands and, like God, called her into existence *ex nihilo*. Solitary, messianic, ill appreciated and often disparaged by his own uncivilized subjects, such was his heroic life and his heroic feat of modernizing the Russian Empire. For Fontenelle and other thinkers of the French Enlightenment, who gladly followed in rhetoric footsteps of his binary, antithetical vision, Russia's history began with Peter the Great and nothing worthy of acknowledgement had existed there before. His *Éloge* was the first major literary document to lay a solid foundation for the Petrine myth not only in France, but in the rest of Europe as well, since all accounts written for and presented at the *Académie des Sciences* or the *Académie Française* were widely read, circulated and commented all over Europe. Voltaire's bipolar vision of Russia's gloomy past and its luminous future, prevailing in his historical works dedicated to Eastern Europe, is analogous in essence to that of Fontenelle. In 1731 Voltaire publishes *Histoire de Charles XII*. Faithful to his dialectics of historical processes, he portrays the Swedish king as a great hero, a warrior who triumphed militarily in his prime time but eventually was defeated, leaving practically no trace in universal history¹⁹. To great heroes, like Charles XII, Voltaire decidedly prefers grand men, namely outstanding reformatory rulers and lawmakers of genius who in various domains contributed to the general progress of the whole Western civilization. And for Voltaire such grand man Peter the Great undoubtedly was. In 1759 he dedicated to him a comprehensive study entitled *Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand*.²⁰ But Voltaire simply followed to some extent Fontenelle's pioneering *Éloge* and subsequently contributed to the further promotion of the Petrine myth already well in existence. For it was Fontenelle who had set a new intellectual trend and prompted the infatuation of the French with Russian reforms. To reiterate his momentousness as a myth creator let us quote the last passage of the *Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier*:

He had the advantage of drawing from the sources already developed and perfected by the nations more experienced in knowledge and more civilized than Russia. These nations will save him thus the arduous pains inevitable in the slow and lengthy course of actions leading eventually to progress, pains which for so long

¹⁹ Voltaire, *Histoire de Charles XII*, Paris 1968, p. 47.

²⁰ See: Voltaire, *Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand*, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 16, Paris 1878, p. 231.

they themselves had to suffer. But soon these nations will see the Russians reach their own level, and reach it even more gloriously since the Russian nation started from a much more distant point than they did²¹.

Laudative, adulatory and above all strikingly optimistic – such is Fontenelle's vision of Peter the Great and the new Russia he had created. Furthermore, in 1725, in his *Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier*, Fontenelle prophesizes a glorious future of this country. Was he justified to do so? It is surely an open, if not rhetorical question, in fact.

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²¹ Ibidem, p. 191.