

The Dickensian

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Fellowship Diary & Branch Lines: JACQUIE STAMP (FROM SPRING 2023 ISSUE)

Published three times a year by the Dickens Fellowship, The Charles Dickens
Museum, 48 Doughty Street, London WC1N 2LX

Webpage: <http://www.dickensfellowship.org/dickensian>

Winter 2022

No.518 Vol.118 Part 3

ISSN 0012-2440

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A Tale of Two Magazines: Dickens on the Pages of *Contemporary* and *Fatherland Notes*

RENATA GOROSHKOVA

This article will provide an overview of how Dickens became one of the most beloved authors in Russia during some gloomy years of Russian history. In the midst of the current national tragedy and political catastrophe, some historical parallels remind us that there are no eternal politicians, but literature is one of the most enduring, soothing and supporting things, and can open up the possibility of an alternative reality.

In 1839, when Dickens had already gained considerable popularity in his own country, the following words were published in one of the famous Russian literary magazines, *Fatherland Notes* (in Russian, *Otechestvennyye zapiski*):

This is a period of crisis of conventional opinions and trends in English Literature, the period duller than ever, with tons of new works each weaker than the other; the period doesn't have a single representative of remarkable talent who would be worthy of the memory of posterity.¹

Later, Dickens's name would occasionally be mentioned in the literary chronicle, but the reception of Russian critics was far from warm at first. They considered him an ordinary, and overrated, writer:

Dickens belongs to the category of second-rate writers, which means that he has a significant talent. The crowd, as usual, sees more in him than they should see, and reads his novels with greater pleasure than the novels of Walter Scott and Cooper. I can explain why: because the former are more within their reach than the latter they cannot reach on tiptoe.²

Even benevolent literary reviewers met his works with indifference:

The tireless Dickens has just finished his last novel, *Barnaby Rudge*, and there is already a new series of short stories called *The Pic-nic papers*, edited by Boz. However, in this picnic, which Dickens created in favour of the widow of a bookseller who died in poverty, there are only two stories of his own preparation, but both of them, borrowed from the daily life of London, brighten up the whole book.³

However, as time passed, critics and editors changed their attitude towards the writer. According to the literary scholar Mikhail Alexeev, there were several contributing factors: 'The rapid growth of Dickens's popularity in England and on the mainland, the frequent mentions in German and French periodicals stimulated Russian magazines to provide readers with timely translations of his new works'.⁴ So, by the middle of the 1840s, Dickens reached a peak of popularity in Russia, and, as Alexeev writes, from that moment on, none of the writer's works went unnoticed by Russian periodicals. But not only newspapers and magazines gave credit to Dickens. Thomas B. Shaw, an adjunct professor of English Literature in the Imperial Alexander Lyceum of St Petersburg, invited from Cambridge, dedicated a chapter of twenty pages to Dickens in *Outlines of English Literature*, officially inscribing him in the history of English literature. This book was published in St Petersburg in 1847, and in London 2 years later. Shaw writes:

Even should he write no more, he has done enough to deserve the love and admiration of posterity: his works possess the highest and rarest of merits – that of complete originality both of matter and of form.⁵

In England, Dickens's name is directly linked with the rise of the periodical press and literary market: 'the publication of Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* has long been heralded as a watershed moment in the history of fiction and Victorian reading because of the spectacular success of instalment moment'.⁶ In Russia, the rapid development of monthly and weekly newspapers and magazines coincided with the publications of *Oliver Twist*,⁷ *The Old Curiosity Shop*,⁸ and *Martin Chuzzlewit*.⁹ Published in parts, these novels fuelled the reader's interest, provoking them to purchase a new issue. The Russian readers, as with their English counterparts, began to be impatient to know what happened next, and this passionate readership provided guaranteed income for the owners of magazines and publishing houses. Beginning their fight for the best content and subscribers, two literary magazines – *Fatherland Notes* and *Sovremennik* (in English, *Contemporary*) – were especially active in the fight for Dickens. Of course, Dickens was not the only bone of contention for these periodicals, but his writings were one of the most coveted acquisitions for the editors, and his works to some extent might have influenced the atmosphere in educated circles as well as wider public opinion. The most striking thing to note is that the author's popularity was growing even during a period of strict censorship of Western ideas.

In the thirties and forties, the main sociopolitical currents of the time took shape, from extreme conservatism to extreme radicalism. To cut a long story short, two main viewpoints diverged in assessing the historical path of Russia: slavophiles and westernisers. The former believed Russia's traditions and destiny were unique, while the latter emphasised that Russia was historically linked with the West and shared common cultural values with Europe. The revolutionary democratic movement, which flourished in Russia at the end of the century and after, also has its origins in the 1840s.

Tsar Nicholas I,¹⁰ who previously 'dominated the printed word through his censors, his secret police, and, after 1832, his personal involvement in press matters',¹¹ was greatly frightened by the French Revolution of 1848. To suppress public opinion, he 'introduced 'the highest measures against the influx of destructive theories into Russia'.¹² The censorship committee increased pressure on periodicals, 'burning everything that criticized the surrounding reality'¹³.

Both *Fatherland Notes*¹⁴ and *Contemporary*¹⁵ were the main printed media of the westernisers, and were therefore particularly affected during this gloomy seven years of Russian history.¹⁶ However, several factors can explain why *Fatherland Notes* and *Contemporary* stayed afloat at that period:

First, both had established themselves financially and journalistically in the decade before 1848, a time of reasonably benign censorship controls. Second, both took care to skirt delicate political subjects. Third, lacking a truly mass audience, both journals appeared to the government to be read only by intellectuals.¹⁷

Before these years of strict censorship, literature reviews in both *Contemporary* and in *Fatherland Notes* not only described the literary process, but also held political and social influence, since they allowed the authors to talk about real problems of Russian life in the form of literary criticism. The era of harsh censorship significantly changed the content of this criticism. The literary review was meant to be devoted only to the aesthetic features of literature, and not to form conclusions about the connection between literature and reality, or show how literature might reflect what happens in society and in the state. The censorship committee was especially scrupulous about any Western thought penetrating into Russia, including through literature.

The relationship with Britain was ambivalent and ambiguous during this period. On the one hand, Britain and Russia were rivals. According to the historians, 'the differences which held the two countries aloof until the beginning of the 20th century had their origin not only in differences as

to political ideas and customs, but in competing imperial ambitions which impelled the two Empires to continual rivalry not only in Europe but in Asia'.¹⁸ At the same time, Russia and Britain were in dangerous proximity to countries where the revolutionary movement flourished. After the great burst of Chartism of 1848 had ended tamely in Britain, Tsar Nicholas I wrote to Queen Victoria:

Wouldn't it be natural to conclude that our intimate union is designed to save the world? Excuse me, madam, this outburst of a heart devoted to you and accustomed to remembering you.

I dare to rely with full confidence on the friendship of Your Majesty, and I ask her to receive assurances of the inviolability of affection with which I, Madame, Your Majesty, remain a faithful, good brother and friend.¹⁹

To some extent, attempts to join forces against revolutionary ideas could be the reason why Russian literary magazines were favorable to English literature, which began to prevail over other western literatures. The readers, of course, noticed it, and may have expressed some dissatisfaction – to which the editor of *Contemporary* responded as follows:

Recently, there have been talks that readers are tired of English novels; that Russian magazines translate everything only from English, only Thackeray and Dickens, and this is so boring and monotonous... As for Thackeray and Dickens, it would be nice to remember that these are the best European talents of our time; that the monotony of the constant printing of their works exists only for readers who do not go beyond the content of the issues of the magazine, and that in any case it is hardly possible to remedy the situation by printing bad German novels. It is a very monotonous thing to bake bread only from flour; the bread is not always good, but no one thinks of starting to bake it from sand. No reform in literature, even the most insignificant, is carried out forcibly, on a whim, for a change; everything comes in its own way, according to its own laws, the root of which is in reality; the decline of French literature and at the same time the brilliant development of English literature led Russian magazines to the need to acquaint its readers with the writers of England; maybe someday it will be Germany's turn ...²⁰

Some of the phrases in the last passage, such as "No reform in literature is carried out forcibly", contain 'Aesopian language' and meant something opposite to the literal: it should be stressed that Aesopian language and different kinds of techniques of conspiracy at that time were the only way to talk about what was going on and to give publicity to forbidden topics. Charles Rund, commenting on the situation in periodicals of that time,

writes that 'Critics ought rather to aspire to a level of expression equal to creative writing'.²¹

During the turbulent years of 1848 to 1855, one of the main requirements for foreign novels was that Russian magazines should not start publishing a novel in Russia if it had not been finished at home. It was important for the censorship committee to know if there were any harmful ideas about the monarchy system in the whole novel. Because of the new rule, there was a delay in printing *Dombey and Son*, the first chapters of which appeared on the pages of both *Fatherland Notes* and *Contemporary* in 1847. On this occasion, the translator Irinarkh Vvedensky wrote:

I cannot send the ending of *Dombey and Son* yet, because up to now this novel has not finished printing. The censorship had given an order to prohibit publishing the end of this novel, but now, however, they have allowed it again, and next month I will finish the translation of the original. Since the time of Peter the Great, we have not yet had such an impudent, shameless censorship as now.²²

Mikhail Alexeev remarks that we know almost nothing about Dickens's censorship troubles in Russia,²³ since 'many censorship cases related to Russian translations of his works remain unpublished'.²⁴ However, there is some available information about several cases. Alexeev mentions that *The Pickwick Papers*, in some editions, was reduced by more than half.²⁵ For example, Chapter XIII, which describes parliamentary elections, was rewritten, changed, and significantly shortened. In particular, the speech of the mayor is given greater coherence and met with applause, while in the original the words are unclear, and accompanied by whistling, hissing and caustic remarks from the audience. Even *David Copperfield* was banned by censorship, and this is how it was defended: '... Dickens's work is not a novel, but a psychological biography in the form of a novel, and similar works have been and are placed in all Petersburg magazines... Dickens's work is completely pure, moral, and does not contain any ulterior motives and impermissible hints'.²⁶

Judging from the number of his works translated and published in Russia, it might be assumed that Dickens was not entirely blacklisted by the censorship committee. Perhaps the reason is that, in the earlier works, he did not criticise the monarchy or autocracy, and most of his works did not promote any revolutionary sentiments. So, in the gloomy years Dickens's novels were one of the few good works that could be sold well. While his criticisms of bureaucracy, small and high-ranking officials, the rich and the cruel (but by no means the Queen) were generally in line with

accepted judgments in Russia about a good tsar and bad boyars, Dickens also touched upon topics that elicited a response from liberal circles.

Despite a similar liberal agenda, the editors of *Fatherland Notes* and *Contemporary* were in a permanent state of frank, mutual criticism. In 1850, a reader's letter was published in *Fatherland Notes*:

By placing Mr. S. S.'s letter here, we wash our hands of it. Let all responsibility for the opinions and judgments expressed in it fall on him.

'The worst thing in our magazines is the ability to easily adopt other people's ideas. For example, two and a half years ago, *Fatherland Notes* announced that they would publish Dickens's endless novel *Dombey and Son*. The same novel began to be issued by *Contemporary* in parts... I no longer have the means to read anything new in these magazines... not a single new novel. I want to read Dickens's novel *David Copperfield*, which has been published for the second year now in London and still has not ended. Despite its length, *Fatherland Notes* has already announced that they will translate it. Take it from me, after *Fatherland Notes* other magazines will begin to translate the same novel... All this is very bad.'²⁷

To this article, the editor of *Contemporary* Nikolai Nekrasov, not hiding behind the name of the reader, answered as follows:

The magazine *Fatherland Notes* asserts that *Contemporary* imitates everything that *Fatherland Notes* does. They try to prove their words by the fact that we translated Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair* and Dickens's novel *Dombey and Son*, which were also translated by *Fatherland Notes*.

Every educated Russian reader knows that the novels of Dickens and Thackeray belong to the best works of not only English, but European literature in general, and this is the real reason why we translated them.

We publish our magazine for those readers who honour our works with their attention, and we make sure that not a single remarkable phenomenon in the field of literature remains unknown to them; and we don't care about other magazines and what they translate. And if the following works by Dickens and Thackeray are as good, then we will continue translating them, not caring whether *Fatherland Notes* translates the same works as well.

It is also worth noting that the novel *Dombey and Son* was published in *Contemporary* a month earlier than in *Fatherland Notes*. The sceptical readers can check: the first part of *Dombey and Son* was issued with the eighth book of *Contemporary* in 1847, and *Fatherland Notes* placed the first part of the novel in its ninth issue. Where is the imitation here? If we are already talking about imitation, then we can present many more facts proving that it is not we who imitate *Fatherland Notes*, but it's *Fatherland Notes* which imitates us.²⁸

For several years, magazines were arguing about who first began translating Dickens's novels, or who held the unique right to publish these novels at all, trying, unsuccessfully, to convince others and reach an agreement:

In the last issue we claimed that we were ready, for our part, to enter into an agreement with the editors of *Fatherland Notes* so as not to translate the same novels. Who among the readers will not agree that this would be good? *Fatherland Notes* leaves our challenge aside, but they try to shift the blame for the fact that both journals translate the same novels onto us on the grounds that they always announce in advance their intention to translate this or that novel. The fact of the matter is that this is not enough; both magazines will announce, and both will be translating the same novels, because up to now the business has usually been about the best novel at the present time, and both magazines did not want to give way. It would be possible to avoid translating the same novels only by agreeing to translate the novels of Dickens and Thackeray alternately. But *Fatherland Notes* say that it is enough to simply publish your intention in advance. Good! We are now declaring that we will translate every new novel by Dickens and Thackeray. Let's see if this announcement is enough for *Fatherland Notes* to refuse to translate these writers.²⁹

Furthermore, various marketing methods for attracting new subscribers were trialled using Dickens's works. For example, in 1848 *Contemporary* announced that, due to the fact that the final instalments of *Dombey and Son* would be published the next year, the editorial board of the magazine would give out free issues for the previous year to those new subscribers who were not subscribers last year.³⁰ *Fatherland Notes* reacted caustically, and asked a provocative question: can *Contemporary*, in order to confirm the purity of their intentions of caring for readers, do the opposite and give out new numbers for free to those subscribers of the previous year who do not buy a subscription for the new year, but want to know how the novel will end?³¹

According to Leon Litvack, 'The feeling of closeness to Dickens and his published output on the part of his public was boosted through the medium of photography, through which individuals could literally "own Dickens"'.³² In one of the issues of *Contemporary*, there was such an announcement from the editors: 'In this issue, as a gift to subscribers, a portrait of Dickens was handed out, engraved on steel in London'.³³ It is likely that this marketing ploy was quite successful, because in the next issue it was announced that 'Subscriptions for all copies of the magazine for 1852 have closed'.³⁴

Indeed, Dickens became a major celebrity not only in England and America, but in Russia as well. His popularity provided not only high sales of his works or issues of a magazine with his photograph, but also rumours and gossip about his career and personal life. The editor of *Contemporary*, Nikolay Nekrasov (a famous poet himself, and no less famous journalist and editor), believed that it was editorial work that spoiled Dickens's talent. Nekrasov compared Dickens – unfavourably – with Joseph Addison and Samuel Johnson:

His magazine will never be on a par with *The Spectator* and *The Rambler*, and its publisher will be neither a Johnson nor an Addison for its subscribers... The reader would not weep over the page of *The Spectator*, as over some of the warmest chapters of Dickens, but the general influence of *The Spectator* on the hearts and minds of the public was more beneficial... And most of all, in Edison, thanks to his moderation and tact, there is not even a shadow of the mawkishness that has so often appeared in Dickens's novels and short essays in recent years.

... Hasty work, good ideas spoiled with a hasty delivery, an abundance of family scenes – all these and many other shortcomings of Dickens's magazine are unable, however, to completely overshadow the publisher's talents, his ingenuity, resourcefulness and versatility. From reading *Household Words*, it is still impossible to fully see the entire decline of that talent, which for so many years delighted Europe and America, created hundreds of characters dear to the heart, and gained enviable popularity in its homeland.

But in order to comprehend all the harm done to Dickens's talent by his enterprise in the field of journalism, one must re-read *Bleak House*, a cloying novel as cloying as the worst of the final chapters of *The Pickwick Club*... Once having crossed that fatal limit beyond which kindness becomes cloying, the writer loses all his strength; and for Dickens this limit no longer exists: he crossed it in his magazine. Woe to poets with warm hearts who are unable to curb this very warmth!³⁵

A few years later, however, Nekrasov's opinion about Dickens's editorial talents changed.

Despite the variety of British political magazines and newspapers (of which up to 120 are published in London alone), *Household Words* was a huge success. This magazine has spread to all corners of the globe: it can be found at the Cape of Good Hope and in India, Canada and New Zealand. For the variety and amusement of the articles, it is food for thought for all classes. This magazine has become an indispensable book for every family, after the Bible, the first book that was considered permissible to read at all times.³⁶

It is interesting that Nekrasov – who, it is worth noting, was famous for sharing with his co-editor Ivan Panaev not only the duties of an editor, but also Panaev's wife Avdotya, so he could easily proclaim himself an expert in this dangerous field – discusses the reason for the termination of the publication of Dickens's magazine:

Unfortunately, Dickens acted extremely unwisely. All family quarrels bear an unpleasant imprint. Prudence is required either to stop them altogether, or to make them a secret to others. Dickens deviated from this rule and published about his quarrel in various newspapers, and in his magazine.³⁷

Dickens was wildly popular in Russia, as well as deeply loved and appreciated. As in the case of any celebrity, the reason for that admiration was not only what Dickens created – that is, his books. Both his character traits and even behaviour were idealised. Here is a biographical sketch in *Contemporary*, delivered with warmth and tenderness:

In his family and social life, Dickens is very simple, thoughtful and humble, like most people who are truly happy... Dickens has no equal among the living poets and writers of all Europe... It is possible to imitate the style of any writer, even for a short time, but no matter how true the most successful imitation of Dickens turns out to be, it will always lack that subtle charm that belongs to Dickens alone. The germ of this main, intangible originality lies in the soul of the writer himself, in the events of his life, and finally in a beneficent attitude of the spirit, always ready to sympathize with the slightest pain, as well as the most insignificant joy of human existence.³⁸

Speaking from a present-day perspective, the phenomenon of Dickens's enormous popularity on Russian soil might be sorely needed evidence that literature is capable of standing above barbarism, becoming a reason for connection between nations, and a beacon of hope for a happy ending, as occurs at the end of most of Dickens's novels.

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1 'English Literature in 1838', *Fatherland Notes* (1839): p. 74. All translations from Russian made by the author.

2 'Oliver Twist. Dickens's Novel.' *Otechestvennye zapiski [Fatherland Notes]* 20 (1842): p. 47.

- 3 'English Literature.' *Otechestvennye zapiski [Fatherland Notes]* 19 (1841): p. 28.
- 4 Alexeev, p. 184.
- 5 Shaw, p. 539.
- 6 Poplawski, p. 425.
- 7 First published in *Fatherland Notes* 18 (1841): pp. 163-306, and vol. 19, pp. 66-181.
- 8 First published in *The Library for Reading* 57 (1843): pp. 1-284.
- 9 First published in *Fatherland Notes* 36 (1844): September, pp.3-84; October, pp. 179-280.
- 10 According to historians, Nicholas's politics, both internal and external, were mostly a failure. Evgeniy Tarle, for example, underlines that the Russian emperor was famous for his tunnel vision: 'He was completely devoid of any historical instinct, a sense of the changes that are taking place and which make absolutely impossible doing things what the previous generation was very good at' (Tarle, p. 42). This tunnel vision provided a specific attitude towards Russian history: 'The Russian Empire, according to the views of Nicholas, was created by conquests and will hold out as long as it is able to defend old conquests and attempt new ones' (Tarle, p. 41). In the end, having gained the glory of an aggressor, he found himself in a position of complete political loneliness and isolation.
- 11 Rund, p. 67.
- 12 Varshavskii, p. 62.
- 13 Ibid., p. 62.
- 14 *Fatherland Notes* went down in the history of publishing periodicals as one of the first large, successful literary and encyclopedic magazines in the world. By 1846, the magazine's circulation reached 5,000 copies per issue.
- 15 *Contemporary*, founded by Pushkin, did not have much success after the poet's death. In the early 40s, the magazine's circulation hovered around three hundred copies, but when the magazine passed into the hands of Nikolay Nekrasov and Ivan Panaev, *Contemporary* underwent a kind of rebirth. The number of pages and the magazine's publication frequency were increased. New editors had picked the best of *Fatherland Notes*, and, in a year or two, its circulation increased to 3,000 copies.
- 16 This is the name of this period in the history of Russia, which began in 1848, after the outbreak of revolutionary movements in Europe, and ended in 1855 with the death of Tsar Nicholas I.
- 17 Rund, p. 79.
- 18 Cooke, p. 5.
- 19 *Letters of Queen Victoria*, Vol. II, p. 166.
- 20 'Notes on Magazines for October 1855.' *N. A. Nekrasov, Criticism, Journalism 1847-1869* 11.2 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1990): p. 191.
- 21 Rund, p. 77.
- 22 'I. Vvedensky and His Letters.' *Russian Archive* (1847): p. 117.
- 23 Alexeev, p.183.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Barsukov, pp. 388-389.
- 27 'The Autumn Comments on Russian Magazines.' *Fartherland Notes* 10 (1850): p. 289.
- 28 'From the Editors of *Contemporary*.' *Nekrasov, N. Materials For a Biography, Additions to Previous Volumes*, vol. 12 (Moscow, 1953): p. 146.

- 29 'A Few Remarks on the Latest Tricks of *Fatherland Notes Against Contemporary*.' Nekrasov, N. *Materials For a Biography, Additions to Previous Volumes*, vol. 12, (Moscow, 1953), p. 175.
- 30 'About the Publication of *Contemporary* in 1848.' Nekrasov, N. *Materials For a Biography, Additions to Previous Volumes*, vol. 12 (Moscow, 1953), p.114.
- 31 'The Autumn Comments on Russian Magazines.' *Fartherland Notes* 10 (1850): p. 293.
- 32 Litvack, p. 146.
- 33 [Nekrasov, N.] '1852. From the Editors.' *Compositions: Literary Explanations*, vol. 13, book 1, p. 106.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 'Letters from a Non-Resident Subscriber on English Literature and Journalism.' *Contemporary* 38.4 (1853): pp. 278-279.
- 36 'The Closure of *Household Words* magazine.' *Contemporary* 1 (1860): p. 119.
- 37 Ibid., p. 120.
- 38 'Charles Dickens: A Biographical Sketch.' *Sovremennik [Contemporary]* 31.2 (1852): p. 34.