

THE RUSSIAN TRANSLATION OF VOLTAIRE'S
POÈME SUR LE DÉSASTRÉ DE LISBONNE:
I.F. BOGDANOVICH AND THE INCIPIENT CULT
OF SENSIBILITY¹

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On the 1st of November 1755, Lisbon and the surrounding regions were struck by a massive earthquake, which caused large-scale destruction and resulted in significant loss of life.² The fourth European capital in size, Lisbon at the time was booming from its trade with colonies. As news of the devastation reached European capitals, the earthquake rippled through the minds of European luminaries and caused considerable anguish and dismay. Unexpected and unfathomable as it seemed, the catastrophe called into question the fundamental tenets of philosophical optimism. The idea of Gottfried Leibniz and Alexander Pope that we live in the best possible world seemed in tatters. At the same time, the earthquake also appeared to undermine the providentialist article of faith of much of Christian theology, for it was difficult to rationalize the indiscriminate loss of life as heavenly punishment.³ The philosophical and political debates provoked by the earthquake crystalized in the heated discussion of Voltaire's *Poème sur le*

- 1 This article is part of a larger project devoted to the perception and treatment of ruins in Russian culture from the eighteenth century to the present.
- 2 For a discussion of the unfolding events and the resulting destruction, see Malcolm Jack, "Destruction and regeneration: Lisbon, 1755", in *The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755: representations and reactions*, ed. by Theodore E.D. Braun and John B. Radner, *SVEC* 2005:02, pp. 7-20. Estimates of the loss of life range widely, but many agree that around 30 000 people perished in Lisbon itself, and more further afield, including in North Africa. See T.E.D. Braun and J.B. Radner, "Introduction", in *The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
- 3 Many of the victims perished as the churches where they sought protection collapsed.

désastre de Lisbonne.⁴ Written on the spur of the moment and published in several quick-paced editions, Voltaire's poem exposed the vulnerability and insufficiency of all sorts of philosophical and religious systems in the face of the unprecedented suffering caused by the earthquake.⁵

In 1763, almost eight years after this polemic raged across Europe, the young poet Ippolit Bogdanovich published his translation of Voltaire's poem. To this day, his transposition is considered unequalled: at once elegant and moderately faithful, it renders Voltaire's words in an effective idiom, which speaks to the sensibility of the readers in its directness and simplicity. Despite the controversial reputation of Voltaire and the ascerbic wit of his poem, Bogdanovich's translation was republished several times over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Yet notwithstanding the critical attention he garnered, it is still unclear why Bogdanovich set out to translate Voltaire in 1763 and what meaning he ascribed to his translation, which is what this article intends to explore.⁶

The *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* dramatises reason's inability to "unravel the knot." It touches on various philosophical systems, from rational theodicy to epicurianism and from deism to scepticism, demonstrating in each case that the extent of suffering shockingly thwarts any attempt to make sense of the destruction in Lisbon. On his way Voltaire seeks to demolish the conception of nature as a well-ordered system. His poem stops short of advocating atheism, yet when in its concluding verses it calls on God to explain His plans more clearly, the poem implicitly denigrates the Bible as

4 For a discussion of the response to Voltaire's poem in Switzerland, see Monika Gisler, "Perceptions of the Lisbon Earthquake in Protestant Switzerland", in *The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, op. cit.*, pp. 247-264. More broadly, on the response to the poem, see René Pomeau, *Voltaire en son temps*, Paris/Oxford, Fayard/Voltaire Foundation, 1995, 2 vols, Vol. 1, pp. 816-834.

5 For a bibliography of the first editions of *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, see Georges Bengesco, *Voltaire. Bibliographie de ses œuvres*, Paris, Éd. Rouveyre et G. Blond, 1882-1890; reprint Nendeln, Klaus Reprint LTD, 1967, p. 166-170.

6 The most authoritative commentary belongs to I. Z. Serman, who also provided the standard modern edition of the translation. See I. F. Bogdanovich, *Stikhotvorenniia i poemy*, Leningrad, Sovetskii pisatel', 1957, pp. 241-244. A comparison of the original publication in *Nevinnoe uprazhnenie* (April 1763) and this publication shows that the latter is deficient in several respects, in particular in matters of punctuation. It isn't clear which edition of Voltaire's poem Serman used for his analysis. His contention that Bogdanovich reduced Voltaire's 272 line poem to 240 lines is wholly unwarranted (p. 241). Both poems share the exact same number of 234 lines. For a discussion of the broader context of the translation, see also I. Z. Serman, "I. F. Bogdanovich – Zhurnal'ist i kritik", *XVIII vek*, 4 (1959), pp. 85-94. The most recent discussion of the translation is by E. Vagemans, "Literaturno-filosofskaia interpretatsiia Lissabonskogo zemletriaseniia: portugalo-franko-russkaia teoditseiia", *XVIII vek*, 22 (2002), p. 11-121. Also noteworthy is P. R. Zaborov, *Russkaia literatura i Vol'ter. XVIII- pervaiia tret' XIX veka*, Leningrad, Nauka, 1978, pp. 30-32.

an insufficient revelation, as well as discredits the Church, whose teachings fail to clarify God's intentions. As the poem exposes the limits of reason, it foregrounds a different human faculty, sensibility:

*Quand l'homme ose gémir d'un fléau si terrible
Il n'est point orgueilleux, hélas ! Il est sensible.*⁷ (lines 57-58)

Voltaire, as it were, articulates the philosophical foundation of the age of sentimentalism or pre-romanticism. As it discovers the insufficiency of philosophy, rational thought yields to compassion, seen as a natural and spontaneous feeling. And although Voltaire does not explicitly foreground compassion, the importance of this faculty of the human heart lies at the heart of the poem's mode of enunciation. Indeed, the lyrical subject seems unreservedly to share the suffering endured by victims of the earthquake, despite witnessing it from the safe distance of Geneva. Appalled by their inability to offer comforting words, he entreats the proponents of rational optimism not to compound his agony: "*Cruels, à mes douleurs n'ajoutez point l'outrage*" (line 70; italics added). It is as if he had been personally affected by the ruination. Poetic discourse, in other words, rises from empathetic identification with the victims, much as it calls for a commensurate emotional response on the part of the reader. To this effect, it depicts in vivid terms the devastation wrought by the earthquake, justifying its representational poetics as an attempt to impose upon the reader the full horror of the devastation. The poem ends with a tongue-in-cheek profession of faith centered on humility and hope, implying that trust in God and the Creation is possible only as an irrational, albeit natural act, as a stance arising spontaneously and serving mostly to lighten the burden of existence. Hence sensibility forms the cornerstone of religion, rather than the revelation, the teachings of the church, or philosophy. By placing humankind in lieu of God at the centre of the cosmic order, Voltaire effected a profound spiritual revolution, whose ramifications are still with us.

Towards the end of 1762, a translation of Rousseau's stern response to the *Poème*—a letter addressed to the author—appeared in Moscow, with an introduction scathingly critical of Voltaire. The publication of this volume may have prompted Bogdanovich's interest in Voltaire's impassioned soliloquy. I.G. Reichel, then librarian at Moscow University and extraordinary professor of history, author of the introduction to Rousseau's letter, incriminated Voltaire for "turning matters of the highest importance into jokes" and for

7 Quotations from the *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* are from *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. L. Moland [M], Paris, Garnier Frères, 1877, Vol. 9, pp. 470-479. Parenthetical references are to verse numbers.

seeking to “obscure with his farcical pranks all that well-thinking societies consider to be sacred.”⁸ Although his accusations hardly do justice to Voltaire’s serious purpose and emotion-laden verses, Reichel does not err too far from the truth when he concludes that with time Voltaire’s achievements will be recognized to lie more in his poetry than in his philosophical, scientific, or historical works. Indeed, the central question Voltaire poses in view of the catastrophe in Lisbon pertains to the meaning of the poetic word as a response to unprecedented human suffering. His poem is less a philosophical treatise than a poetic performance. And I shall suggest that Bogdanovich was sensitive precisely to this aspect of Voltaire’s poem.

Received opinion holds that the Russian reception of the *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* began with Reichel’s unsparing words.⁹ In reality, Voltaire’s poem served as a tacit subtext for a polemic waged in 1756–1757 between academician Mikhail Lomonosov—Russia’s first polymath, at once poet, scientist, and historian—and Father Gedeon, then a court preacher known for his effective, none-too-ornate homilies. In his “Sermon on the terrible quake of 1755 in Europe and Africa,” which he read in the presence of Empress Elizabeth and published in 1756, Gedeon enjoined his parishioners to behold the spectacle of human suffering. In line with his conviction that God’s purpose in allowing such a cataclysm was “to frighten us sinners and lead us away from our impieties,” he began his exposition by drawing a portrait of the earthquake, cast from a panoramic vantage point by an all-seeing eye: “There we see the gaping earth, letting out terrible flames and din from its bowels; there [we see] the sea unexpectedly overflowing and swallowing lots of people; there beautiful cities are reduced to strange ruins; there high mountains turn into deep ditches and valleys; there several thousands of people are buried alive; there people in agony, without food, clothes or shelter, scream frighteningly.”¹⁰ Underscoring the scale of the devastation, his sermon clearly seeks to instill in the mind of the listeners intense fear about the events so as to prepare them to heed what he saw as godly warning against sinful behaviour. He betrays little doubt in his ability to reach the hearts of his audience and to provoke in them a god-pleasing response. His

8 “Primechaniia k sleduiushchemu pis'mu, poslannomu ot G. Russo k G. Vol'teru”, *Sobranie luchshikh sochinenii k rasprostraneniui znaniia i k proizvedeniui udovol'stviia*, part 4, Moscow, 1762, p. 231–232.

9 I.Z. Serman, “I. F. Bogdanovich – zhurnalist i kritik”, p. 91.

10 Ieromonakh Gedeon [Grigorii Krinovskii], “Slovo o sluchivshemsia 1755 godu v Evrope i Afrike uzhasnom triasenii”, *Sobranie raznykh pouchitel'nykh slov pri vysochaishem dvore ee sviashchennogo velichestva imperatritsy i samoderzhitsy vserossiiskii, skazyvannykh pridvornym ee velichestva propovednikom Ieronomakhom Gedeonom*, St Petersburg, 1756, t. 2, p. 318, 316, respectively.

representational poetics are at once effective and naïve. Using the present tense, as if to annul the distance between the moment of his exhortation and the depicted events, he brings home their intensity and massive scale, painting in broad brush strokes a grim picture of natural destruction and human misery. Gedeon appeals to every individual, making no difference in social and national terms, as “we are all equal children before God” (p. 321). The emotional intensity of his words bespeaks a feeling of exceptionality, as if in the present times sinful acts “had thrown such deep roots in us and multiplied so briskly, that it seems all previous centuries must yield to ours in sinfulness” (p. 318). The awareness of the unprecedented wayward condition of the modern world leads him to a near-apocalyptic conclusion that “the whole of nature has lapsed into chaos and therefore threatens us with collapse and with the present destruction” (p. 322). Thus questions about the causes of the earthquake find an easy answer: “the cause of the quake is God’s wrath, and the cause of His wrath is our sins” (p. 318).

Lomonosov could not fail to disagree with this interpretation of the earthquake in Lisbon and to find such conjectures profoundly pernicious. On 6 September 1757, on the occasion of the nameday of Her Imperial Majesty, in the likely presence of the court preacher, he read his “Discourse on the birth of metals from the quaking of the earth,” in which he expounded a theory diametrically opposed to Father Gedeon’s.¹¹ In contrast with the latter’s eschatology, Lomonosov starts off with a restatement of philosophical optimism: “whenever I consider in my mind the horrible deeds of nature, listeners, I always come to think that there is not a single horrifying, dangerous, and harmful event which does not at the same time bring much benefit and pleasure. A certain heavenly providence has attached to pleasant things elements that seem disagreeable so that thinking about the latter, we gain more pleasure in the use of the former. We are in fear of the waves of a stormy sea, yet the wind that raises the waves brings ships loaded with riches to their intended shores” (p. 296). Lomonosov expresses at once his belief in the well-ordered system of the universe and his trust in humanity, which achieves prosperity through industry and commerce. With regard to the earthquake itself, Lomonosov develops an original theory, whereby the trembling of the ground is indispensable to the formation of metals useful to human beings. Thus he counter-acts the feeling of transience and vulnerability generated by the Lisbon earthquake with a vision of the creation of an element able to withstand time: “the parts of animal and living bodies,

11 M.V. Lomonosov, “Slovo o rozhdenii metallov ot triasenii zemli”, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Moscow-Leningrad, Izd ANSSSR, 1954, Vol. 5, pp. 295-347.

which were swallowed by the earth, serve in the creation of metals, the beauty, solidity and hardness of which contribute to splendour, to longevity, and to our self defense” (p. 344). The benevolent order of the cosmos reveals itself in this transformation of living beings, who were doomed in any event, into ever-lasting natural elements capable of withstanding earthquakes. In contrast to Gedeon, Lomonosov operates with the premise of the systemic balance of nature, and he does so in an astonishingly literalist sense.

Most interesting are Lomonosov’s views on the purpose of representing the catastrophe. Unlike Gedeon and Voltaire, Lomonosov refrains from a verbal depiction of the suffering and perdition caused by the quake: “I do not intend to show more such examples, nor to disseminate with my eloquence the poverty of the capital city of Lima, or the cruel fate of Lisbon” (p. 304). The sub-text of this attack against poetic exploitations of catastrophes is clear. Both Gedeon and Voltaire had dabbled in this undertaking, and the latter had been at the receiving end of a similar critique by Rousseau, who reproached him only to “increase our miseries” with his poem.¹² Lomonosov’s sensitivity to the issue of representation suggests that he was aware of this polemic. In his view, verbal depiction of geological phenomena are in any case unnecessary, as nature itself tells its story: “It is unnecessary to represent the destruction of cities by an earthquake, for the entire face of earth is filled with clear proofs of it.” Indeed, mountaineous fissures are all remnants of earthquakes, which are “the more violent, the more chaotic the [ensuing] ruins, precipices and abysses.”¹³ In his view, nature itself acquires the status of a ruin, which conveys a truthful image of its own history. The surface of the earth is a narrative.

These views enable Lomonosov to legitimize the gaze of the naturalist. Indeed, as Leibniz and Christian Wolff had argued before him, scientific curiosity alerts our mind to advantages of the cosmic order that would otherwise remain concealed behind an appearance of destruction. Scientific discoveries affirm our awareness “that we benefit more from the outpouring of God’s generosity, than His wrath” (p. 296), and thus reconcile us with the Creation, instilling confidence in the future and in scientific progress. Where Voltaire and Gedeon had appealed to the human heart, Lomonosov addresses himself to our minds, while placing blinkers on our eyes: “If the horrifying vision of the trembling face of the earth circles in your mind, turn around, cast your mental eyes away. [...] Behold instead your blessed fatherland and

12 Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Voltaire (18 August 1756), *Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. R.A. Leigh, Geneva, Institut et musée Voltaire, 1967, Vol. 4, pp. 37-50.

13 M.V. Lomonosov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, *op. cit.*, Vol. 5, p. 304.

compare it with other countries. In it you shall see the moderate impact of nature's underground fire." If Russia benefits from a tectonically stable earth crust, then it must be a sign of her chosen-ness, Lomonosov implies. The academician advocates a quietism based on the consciousness of Russia's exceptionality and on a deliberate occluding of catastrophic scenes.

Here, too, one senses an implicit reference to the polemic between Voltaire and Rousseau. In his poem, Voltaire had anticipated the charge that his verses foster social unrest, and Rousseau had accused him of "encouraging murmur."¹⁴ Despatches from Portugal about the consequences of the earthquake published in *Moskovskie vedomosti* in 1756 provided insights into the social disturbances occurring in the wake of the destruction, from looting to arson and murder. Lomonosov was evidently concerned about the destabilizing impact of the events and he attempted to insulate Russia from it. By undermining the idea of heavenly intervention in human affairs, Voltaire's poem also invalidated the notion of anointment of the sovereign by God, thus driving a dent into the absolutist theory of power.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, Lomonosov tied the absence of earthquakes in Russia to the wise rule of Elizabeth: "We do not tremble from frequent earthquakes, which are almost unheard-of here, but instead we enjoy the inner peace of the earth as well as of the entire society. O, how blessed Russia is with these characteristics! Yet this general felicity is a hundred times augmented by the unprecedented good deeds of the great Elizabeth. [...] Nature itself corresponds to her virtues, showering her gifts upon us."¹⁶ Thus Lomonosov draws an explicit parallel between the alleged quiescence of nature in Russia, the benevolence of her empress, and the amiability of social relations. Such correspondences between natural and social phenomena represent, of course, a commonplace of panegyric odes, of which Lomonosov was a prolific writer, yet in this context, the notion of Russia's exceptionality acquires a topical concreteness.

Lomonosov wrote his "Discourse" in the context of the Seven Years' war, and military events rumble in the background of his "Discourse." By the end of his speech, the vision of an underground fire bursting through the surface of the earth and causing an earthquake yields to the image of an overground blaze, a metaphor of the war, which Elizabeth is called on to extinguish with her "peace-seeking warfare." The Empress here becomes the instrument of the

14 "Le Poème de Pope adoucit mes maux, et me porte à la patience, le vôtre aigrit mes peines, m'excite au murmure, et m'ôtant tout hors une espérance ébranlée, il me réduit au désespoir," Rousseau to Voltaire, p. 38.

15 See B.A. Uspenskii, "Tsar' i Bog", *Izbrannye trudy*, Moscow, lazyki russkoi kul'tury, 1996, Vol. 1, pp. 205-337.

16 M.V. Lomonosov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, op. cit., Vol. 5, pp. 345-346.

“creator of the world,” who “will calm the flame of war with the shower of grace, having poured water over the surface of the earth and thereby curbed its frightening inner fire” (p. 346). The assimilation between earthquake and war allows Lomonosov prophetically to herald the complete disappearance of tectonic disturbances, much like in the “Ode to Her Imperial Majesty [...] on her Bright Birthday” of the same year, he described how Elizabeth obtained from God the permission “to declare war on war.”¹⁷ Strangely enough, after carefully justifying the usefulness of earthquakes, Lomonosov nevertheless proceeded to predict their abolition as part of a general geological and geopolitical settlement sanctioned by God.

In short, Lomonosov answered Voltaire almost point by point. Voltaire depicted the earthquake in vivid words, while Lomonosov disputed the expediency of representations of the devastation. Voltaire had appealed to the sensibility of his audience, making light of reason’s ability to comprehend the creation. In contrast, Lomonosov called on his listeners to exercise their reason in order to understand the laws of the universe. For the French poet, nature “is silent,” whereas the Russian author found it to be intrinsically narrative. Whereas Voltaire entreated God to clarify his Creation, Lomonosov expected science to do the job, enabling us to strengthen our confidence in God’s benevolence. Lastly, if in Voltaire a person meets God in a sort of direct *tête-à-tête*, Lomonosov envisioned the mediation of worldly powers, which collaborate in the implementation of God’s designs and acquire legitimacy from this providential role.

Yet Lomonosov also sought to refute Gedeon. If the latter saw the quake as punishment for the sins of the modern world, Lomonosov was keen to foster scientific progress. He is clearly concerned by attempts of the Orthodox church to constrain scientific freedom and supplant the ideology of enlightenment. Thus, in his ode to Elizabeth, he commends her most particularly as a patron of the sciences. It is not entirely by chance that in *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia*, the organ of the St Petersburg Academy of Sciences, two articles appeared in 1756 on the earthquake, both confirming Lomonosov’s ideas on the importance of the natural sciences and placing the events of Lisbon in the context of multiple previous quakes known in history

17 M.V. Lomonosov, “Oda ee imperatorskomu velichestvu [...] na presvetlyi i torzhestvennyi prazdnik rozhdeniia ee velichestva [...]”, *Izbrannye sochineniia*, Leningrad, Sovetskii pisatel’, 1986, p. 147.

and similar in intensity and impact, thus undermining Gedeon's point about the unprecedented nature of the events in Lisbon.¹⁸

The lack of direct verbal references to Voltaire's poem and to Gedeon's sermon should not mislead us. Lomonosov's intervention was daring enough. In September of 1756, the translation of Pope's *Essay on Man*, which was prepared by a protégé of Lomonosov, fell foul of censorship by the Holy Synod, which reproved it for "basing all its views on natural concepts."¹⁹ If Pope could be published only in an expurgated form, with some verses doctored by a hapless archbishop, then all the more so the more radical Voltaire of the *Poème*. Following established practice, Lomonosov had to submit his "Discourse" to the Empress a day ahead of its public reading.²⁰ Yet Lomonosov offers a detailed implicit engagement of Voltaire's ideas, leaving no doubts that his "Discourse" aims in part at refuting the enlightenment philosopher. Lomonosov knew Voltaire's works well. He owned a copy of the Lisbon poem, published together with the poem *La Religion naturelle* in 1756.²¹ In 1757 Lomonosov was asked to assist Voltaire by providing him with documents for his history of Peter the Great and on 2 September, four days before he pronounced his "Discourse on the birth of metals", he responded in characteristically blunt terms that Voltaire is "a dangerous man."²² Lomonosov's first extant statement about Voltaire reveals his guarded attitude, to say the least. In a letter to I.I. Shuvalov in 1752, Lomonosov

18 "Razmyshleniia o zemletriaseniiax, Iz Drezdenskikh uchenykh vedomostei pod n° 6, 1756 goda", *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia k pol'ze i uveseleniiu sluzhashchie*, part 1 (March 1756), pp. 274-285; "Pis'mo o zemletriaseniiax", *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia k pol'ze i uveseleniiu sluzhashchie*, part 1 (April 1756), p. 326-329.

19 M.V. Lomonosov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Moscow-Leningrad, Izd. ANSSSR, 1959, Vol. 8, p. 1062. N. N. Popovskii's translation was published with significant cuts and with sections rewritten by Archbishop Amvrosii to delete references to heliocentrism.

20 M.V. Lomonosov, "Letter to I. I. Shuvalov, 2 September 1757", *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Moscow-Leningrad, ANSSSR, 1957, Vol. 10, p. 525.

21 F.M. Korovin, *Biblioteka Lomonosova*, Moscow-Leningrad, ANSSSR, 1961, p. 344. It has not been possible to establish which one of the several editions of the *Poème* Lomonosov owned. But the fact that it came out together with the *Poème de la religion naturelle* indicates that he knew the final, more moderate version, which ends on a hopeful note. On changes to drafts of the poem, see R. Pomeau, *Voltaire en son temps*, op. cit., Vol. 1, pp. 818-827. Annotations in Voltaire's hand on a copy of the *Poème* found in St Petersburg suggest that Voltaire himself hardly believed the profession of faith in God, which he added to the ending of his poem. See George R. Havens, "Voltaire's pessimistic revision of the conclusion of his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*", *Modern Languages Notes*, 44, 8 (1929), pp. 489-492, quoted by M. Gisler, "Perceptions of the Lisbon Earthquake in Protestant Switzerland", p. 253.

22 M.V. Lomonosov, "Letter to I.I. Shuvalov, 2 September 1757", *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, op. cit., Vol. 10, p. 525.

branded him an “atheist” and, in a parody of Voltaire’s paradoxical mind, condemned his “half-clever wit, shameless honesty, and abusive praise.”²³

The two pieces by Gedeon and Lomonosov were published and could have been available to Bogdanovich in 1763, when he took interest in the *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*. But why did he proceed to translate the poem? Professor Reichel’s then recent attack against Voltaire echoed Lomonosov’s preoccupation with the social resonance of the *Poème*, and at a time of increased turmoil in the country, the issues raised by the poem could seem topical again.²⁴ The events of 1762, during which Peter III was deposed and subsequently murdered, as his estranged wife Catherine acceded to the throne, could heighten the sense of the instability of absolutist power. Just as important was the fact that the beginning of Catherine’s reign signalled an opening of the intellectual climate and a relaxation of censorship. Bogdanovich placed his translation in the April issue of *Nevinnoe uprazhnenie*, a magazine he co-edited with Ekaterina Dashkova, the future president of the Academy of Sciences, who had played a role in the *coup d’État* which brought Catherine to power. Dashkova surrounded herself with a small group of translators and took advantage of the new climate of openness to publish a series of translations from French Enlightenment authors, in particular Voltaire, along with original poetic works.²⁵ Over the six issues of this journal, she also published her own translation of an excerpt from Helvétius’s *De l’esprit*, which had been forbidden in France as an atheist challenge to absolutism.

Yet one should not overemphasize the political aspect of Dashkova’s and Bogdanovich’s activities at the time. The excerpt Dashkova chose to publish amounts to a sensualist explanation of the origins of passions and only very indirectly pertains to absolutist political theory. She herself indicated that she chose this section of Volume 2 of *De l’esprit* because “it better corresponded

23 M.V. Lomonosov, “Letter to I.I. Shuvalov, 3 October 1752”, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. 10, p. 474. On Lomonosov’s views of Voltaire, see P. Hoffman, “Lomonosov und Voltaire”, *Studien zur Geschichte der russischen Literatur des 18. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Helmut Grasshoff and Ulf Lehman, Vol. 28/III (1968), pp. 417-425.

24 Joachim Klein speculates that contemporaries could have read Bogdanovich’s reference to a “deceived sage shouting all is useful” at the beginning of his translation as an allusion to Lomonosov. See Ioakhim Klein [Joachim Klein], *Puti kul’turnogo importa*, Moscow, lazyki slavianskoi kul’tury, 2005, p. 297.

25 These include, among others, the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité* and the *Essai sur la poésie épique*, along with the *Poème* and several smaller pieces. On Dashkova’s position at the time, see I.Z. Serman, “I.F. Bogdanovich – Zhurnal’ist i kritik”, p. 87, as well as R. Lauer, “Die frühen Madrigale von I.F. Bogdanovich”, *Zeitschrift für slavische Philologie*, Vol. 35.2 (1971), pp. 321-336.

to received opinion and to the existing order of things.”²⁶ She was careful not to include any discussions of Catherine the Great’s coronation festivities, which were celebrated in Moscow at the time, limiting herself to a satire of the aristocracy.²⁷ And her political views generally were less radical than her interest in English constitutional monarchy seemed to suggest.²⁸ Furthermore, Bogdanovich’s poetry of the time contained a fair amount of conventional providentialist imagery. In his Ode to Catherine written in 1763, he wrote, very much in the spirit of absolutism, that

God Himself comes to our rescue
Striking with your sword;
With your thunder He shall come
Show the wicked His and your wrath.²⁹

Finally, as I shall suggest, Bogdanovich’s translation from Voltaire plays down the political dimensions of the text.

The main difference between Voltaire and Bogdanovich lies in the fact that the Russian poet softens the philosophical tone of the poem, while enhancing its emotional rhetoric. Voltaire had framed the poem with an introduction and long notes, which Bogdanovich preferred to omit. I.Z. Serman maintained that Bogdanovich had to leave these out to satisfy the censor and that the best he could do was to refer readers to the original.³⁰ Yet in fact, Voltaire’s notes are less controversial than his verse. In them, as well as in the introduction, Voltaire repeatedly affirms his faith in God. Seeking to rescue Pope from caricatures of his ideas, he nonetheless rejects the premise of a necessary order to creation, affirming the need for revelation, yet warning against unwarranted exploitations of providentialist ideas.³¹ He expresses his hope for a new revelation, which would not only demonstrate the almightiness of God, but also His benevolence. The notes provide nothing

26 Quoted in Gaira Veselaia and Ekaterina Firsova, *Moskva v sud’be Ekateriny Dashkovoï*, Moscow, MGI im. E.R. Dashkovoï, 2002, p. 71.

27 *Ibid.*

28 For a reevaluation of her political views stressing their conservative dimension, see L.B. Tychinina, “Problema samoderzhavnoi vlasti v politicheskoi kontseptsii E.R. Dashkovoï”, in *E.R. Dashkova: lichnost’ i epokha*, Moscow, Moskovskii gumanitarnyi institut im. E.R. Dashkovoï, 2003, pp. 36-42.

29 I.F. Bogdanovich, “Oda ee Imperatorskomu Velichestvu Gosudaryne Ekaterine Alekseevne, samoderzhitse vserossiiskoi”, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, p. 151.

30 I.Z. Serman, “I.F. Bogdanovich – Zhurnalists i kritik”, p. 93.

31 Here are a few excerpts from the notes: “*la nature n’agit jamais rigoureusement*” (M, Vol. 9, p. 472); “*Tout est enchaîné ne veut dire autre chose sinon que tout est arrangé. Dieu est la cause et le maître de cet arrangement*” (p. 473); “*la révélation seule peut enseigner ce que l’esprit humain ne saurait comprendre*” (p. 475); “*la révélation détruit le doute, et met la certitude à la place*” (p. 479).

beyond what is already expressed in the poetry. What is new here is only the abstract philosophical discourse, which underpins the more ambiguous and provocative imagery of the poem and demonstrates the logical inconsistencies of several paradigms.

Already in the first lines of Bogdanovich's translation one senses a difference in purpose. Where Voltaire begins with a generalizing exclamation:

*Ô malheureux mortels ! ô terre déplorable
Ô de tous les mortels assemblage effroyable* (lines 1-2)

Bogdanovich zooms in on the geographic specifics:

*Neschastlivyi narod! Plachevnaia strana,
Gde vsekh uzhasnykh iazv zhestokost' sobrana!* (lines 1-2)

Unhappy people! Sorrowful country,
Where all cruel, horrible curses are assembled!

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Localizing the scene and underscoring its emotional import, Bogdanovich eschews generalizing inferences. In the third verse Voltaire continues the philosophical evaluation of the events: "*D'inutiles douleurs éternel entretien.*" The emphasis is on the futility of pain from a rational standpoint and on suffering as a never-ending human condition, which again broadens the focus of attention. In contrast, Bogdanovich exclaims, "*O zhalost' vechnaia, vospominan'e slezno!*" ("O eternal pity, tearful memory"). He, too, posits a subject of enunciation, but one that reminisces and emotes, rather than one that coolly assesses the situation. Bogdanovich lays bare the temporal distance separating him from the events, but highlights their enduring emotional impact. At the risk of exaggerating the significance of this difference, I suggest that we discover here one fundamental feature of Bogdanovich's poetic design: his translation implicates an act of memory, as unlike the original, it arises not from a spontaneous response to a topical event. And memory, of course, elevates the narrative of the earthquake onto a moral, sentimental, and aestheticising plane, given that it involves a retroactive identification with the victims of the catastrophe.

As the poem continues, Voltaire challenges proponents of rational optimism to behold the spectacle of devastation. Bogdanovich addresses only one such philosopher, which lends his poem the tone of an intimate conversation with a specific, if unnamed thinker. Voltaire offers his readers a concrete depiction of the material fragmentation and ruination, showing, for example, the strewn body parts and debris from collapsed buildings. His description presupposes the complete visibility of the aftermath of the earthquake:

*Accourez, contemplez ces ruines affreuses
 Ces débris, ces lambeaux, ces cendres malheureuses,
 Ces femmes, ces enfants l'un sur l'autre entassés,
 Sous ces marbres rompus ces membres dispersés;
 Cent mille infortunés que la terre dévore,
 Qui sanglants, déchirés, et palpitants encore,
 Enterrés sous leurs toits, terminent sans secours
 Dans l'horreur des tourments leur lamentables jours ! (lines 5-12)*

The readers are treated to a list of what attentive observation will reveal. Voltaire assumes a gaze that is both deliberate and prolonged. Casting his description in the present tense, he implies the synchronicity between the agony of the victims and the philosophers' act of contemplation. And when he adds that the injured die "without assistance", he dramatizes the scandalous helplessness and uselessness of philosophers in view of the calamity.

A quick glance suffices for Bogdanovich to take in the calamity, but what he sees is much less concrete:

*Pridi, vzgliani na sei opustoshennyi grad,
 Na sei neschastnyi prakh ottsov, i zhen, i chad;
 Vzgliani ty na sii razrushennye steny,
 Pod koimi lezhat razdavlenny ikh chleny. (lines 4-8)*

Come, take a look at this devastated city,
 At the sorry remains of fathers, wives, and children;
 Glance at these destroyed walls,
 Under which their limbs are crushed.

The body parts are no longer visible as they are buried under collapsed walls. One can see only the remains of the victims, a much vaguer and less graphic image. The subsequent description of the agony of the residents of Lisbon is less harrowing than Voltaire's:

*Trepeshchut tam v krovi razbrosanny tela,
 Prekrasny domy ikh im sdelalisia groby,
 I, muchas', konchat zhizn' sredi zemnoi utroby. (lines 9-12)*

There scattered bodies tremble covered in blood,
 Beautiful houses turned into graves,
 And, in torment, they finish their lives in the earth's womb.

Switching to the perfect case as he evokes the passing away of the victims—which implies future tense—Bogdanovich, as it were, absents himself from

the moment of death. It is as if he turned his gaze away or as if he believed there is nothing to be seen and described. In a certain sense, this is, indeed, the case, as we deal with a vicarious, retrospective description from a safe temporal distance. Yet Bogdanovich offsets his physical aloofness from the events with the use of discreetly melodramatic devices, such as the reference to families with children wiped out or the contrast between the splendour of the architecture and its new function as a grave. In essence, Bogdanovich disregards Voltaire's exploration of the morality of contemplation in the midst of an unfolding catastrophe, which he had also addressed in *Candide*. This theme would be pointless eight years after the events, when the dead can obviously no longer be helped. Yet in Bogdanovich's rendition a new theme emerge, the link between poetry and the memory of ruination. Poetry becomes the organ of collective memory, which legitimizes Bogdanovich's anachronic translation.

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Later in his poem, Voltaire refers to the famous philosophical motif of the contemplation of a shipwreck, which Lucretius had introduced and which spawned a rich philosophical debate.³² If Voltaire calls the witnesses "*tranquilles spectateurs*"—hinting at the peace of mind afforded by a rational worldview—, Bogdanovich brands them "insensitive hearts." At stake, for him, is not so much the nature of philosophical inquiry per se, as the importance of compassion, a spontaneous response he considers natural in view of human misery. In other words, he turns the moral dilemma Voltaire had explored into a plea for unreflected attitude to life. Addressing the philosophers, he explicitly calls on them to demonstrate sympathy with the victims: "*Zhestokoserdye! Imeite zhalost' k nim*" ("Hardhearted thinkers! Have pity for them"). And on five occasions he uses derived forms of the root *vop-*, "to wail," in relation both to the lament of the victims and the poetic response of the writer. Voltaire in this context uses various terms, which precludes the parallel between the cry of the victims and the voice of the poet. Likewise, Bogdanovich subtly changes the issue. If in Voltaire the philosophers incriminate the victims for their seditious pride, in Bogdanovich the thinkers only take offence with their emotional incontinence: "*Vy skazhete, chto v nas buntuiut tol'ko strasti*" ("You'll say that in us only passions are seething"). In short Bogdanovich articulates an apology of an unashamed emotional stance in life.

The words used in reference to God also suggest important differences between the two poets. Voltaire does not hesitate to use deistic formulas such

32 Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1997.

as “*cause éternelle*” or “*éternel artisan*.” Rather than trying to render such abstract concepts, Bogdanovich resorts to the standard *God, Creator*, or, the slightly less customary “*Moi sozdatel*” (“My Creator”). He clearly posits a personalistic conception of the divine. Not surprisingly, where Voltaire writes “*Je respecte mon Dieu, mais j’aime l’univers*,” Bogdanovich specifies “*Ia boga chtu, liubliu, no i liubliu vseleynu*” (“I respect, I love God, but I also love the universe”) (italics added). If Voltaire characterizes God as

*Il est libre, il est juste, il n’est point implacable.
Pourquoi donc souffrons-nous sous un maître équitable ?* (lines 77-78)

implying the existence of supreme rational justice, Bogdanovich prefers to underscore the benevolence of the Almighty:

*On sil’nyi, pravednyi i miloserdnyi tsar’;
Kogda tvorets tak blag, pochto zhe strazhdet tvar’?* (lines 77-78)

He is strong, just and merciful;
If the Creator is so good, why does the creature suffer?

The reference to the freedom of God yields to His charity. The negative determination “He is not implacable” turns into the more promising assurance of God’s mercy. Voltaire’s key philosophical *pointe*

*Quand l’homme ose gémir d’un fléau si terrible
Il n’est point orgueilleux, hélas ! Il est sensible* (lines 57-58)

is rendered in melodramatic, rather than philosophical terms:

*Kol’ stonut smertnye sredi tolikikh bed,
Ne gordost’ v nikh, uvy! muchen’e vopiet.* (lines 57-58)

If the mortal wail from such numerous miseries
It is not pride, alas, but torment that cries.

The key concept of sensibility disappears, but the use of the Church Slavonic verb *vopiat’* (“to wail”) lends an emotionally ringing tone to the rhetoric. A few lines later Bogdanovich finds the possibility to include the phrase “*chuvstivtel’ny serdtsa*” (“sensitive hearts”), which conveys Voltaire’s notion of sensibility, but in a more concrete application to the human heart.

The subject of Voltaire’s poem ranks himself among the members of an enlightened modernity, which rejects ancient manichean notions:

*De l’auteur de tout bien le mal est-il venu ?
Est-ce le noir Tryphon, le barbare Arimane,*

*Dont la loi tyrannique à souffrir nous condamne ?
 Mon esprit n'admet point ces monstres odieux
 Dont le monde en tremblant fit autrefois des dieux.* (lines 128-132)

Bogdanovich seems curiously much more tolerant of manichean representations and less eager to confine them to antiquity:

*I neissledima vsekh nashikh zol puchina,
 Ikh tot ne proizvel, kto nashikh blag prichina, –
 Ne Oriman li zlu nachalo, il' Tifon?
 K terpen'iu my chrez ikh osuzhdeny zakon,
 Odnako mudrykh sikh ucheniia ne priamy,
 Kotorym inogda nevezhi stroiat khramy.* (lines 127-132)

The abyss of all our woes is unfathomable.
 They were not created by the one, who is the cause of all that is
 [good,
 Is the origin of evil not Oriman, or Typhon?
 Their law condemns us to endure,
 Yet the teachings of these sages are not right,
 To whom the ignorant often pray.

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Bogdanovich takes for granted the popularity of manichean ideas. He does not share Voltaire's awareness of modernity, the rejection of the past inspired by the ideology of enlightenment.

Bogdanovich's views on nature stand in sharp contrast with Lomonosov's faith in natural sciences. Bogdanovich translates almost literally Voltaire's formula that "*La nature est muette, on l'interroge en vain,*" yet he offers an even more dismal view of nature than Voltaire. Where the French poet writes of "*l'empire de la destruction,*" Bogdanovich specifies "*I razrushenii lish' priroda stala sviaz*" ("And nature became a chain of pure destructions", line 182), hinting at a causal mechanism that ineluctably leads to ruin. Hence, contrary to Lomonosov's ideas, the understanding of the laws of nature augments our pessimism.

Yet the ending of Bogdanovich's translation centres on our lack of self-knowledge. Here, too, Bogdanovich highlights something that Voltaire had mentioned only in passing:

*Que peut donc de l'esprit la plus vaste étendue ?
 Rien ; le livre du sort se ferme à notre vue.
 L'homme, étranger à soi, de l'homme est ignoré.* (lines 197-199)

Bogdanovich renders these fairly general words in the following manner:

Chto mogut samye prostranneishie umy?
Nichto; svoei sud'by ne postigaem my,
Neznaemy soboi v svoei neschastnoi dole; (lines 197-199)

What can the most encompassing minds achieve?
Nothing, we do not understand our fate,
And are unknown to ourselves in our sorry destiny.

Eschewing Voltaire's use of the generic "*l'homme*," Bogdanovich transposes the lack of knowledge onto an individual plane. His is not simply an abstract inability to understand the human condition as in Voltaire, but a personal self-estrangement, despite all efforts toward self-knowledge.

In the conclusion of his poem, Voltaire facetiously recalls a caliph who at the end of his life returns to God, bringing the Almighty what He lacks, as if to complement His perfection. The list of human qualities summing up earthly existence is nothing but startling. For Voltaire, the balance sheet of human life represents "*Les défauts, les regrets, les maux et l'ignorance*," underscoring the objective flaws of human beings. Bogdanovich's recapitulation is different: "*Grekhi, neveden'e, bolezni, slezy, ston*" ("Sins, ignorance, illness, tears, and groans"). *Sins* replaces Voltaire's *défauts*, which lends a religious slant, implicating human will, to what in the original sounds more like an intrinsic, congenital flaw. In second place Bogdanovich names ignorance, which comes last in Voltaire, echoing a verse he coined, which has no counterpart in the original: "*Khochu uchitel' byt' – i nichego ne znaiu*" ("I want to teach, yet I know nothing"). The last two words, *tears* and *groans*, are meant to render Voltaire's *regrets*, but they also evoke a meta-discursive theme. The poet is unable to teach as he doesn't dispose of any superior knowledge, yet with his song he can call on others to demonstrate compassion towards their fellow men. This call for compassion represents Bogdanovich's interpretation of Voltaire's poem, as well as his idea of the legitimacy of poetry in the face of destruction.

In summary, if Gedeon used the Lisbon earthquake to pass judgment on modernity, which in his eyes condones sinful behaviour, and if Lomonosov decided to take advantage of the occasion and teach his contemporaries about the importance and achievements of the natural sciences, in particular for the state, Bogdanovich saw fit to convey through his rendition of Voltaire's poem an apology of the poetic word, as a conduit for human empathy. His call for compassion is rooted in a basic faith in God, combined with complete agnosticism as to the laws and meaning of earthly existence. This uneasy combination between faith and scepticism determined the main

theme of Bogdanovich's translation: the turn towards individual feelings and memories instead of the exploration of the laws of nature. In such a manner Bogdanovich radicalises what Voltaire's poem left implicit. In keeping with his diffidence towards philosophy, his translation stays clear of Voltaire's philosophical language, replacing it with a rhetorically elevated idiom that reflects a subjective, emotional response to the earthquake. This text, in fact, represents one of the first manifestos of Russian sentimentalism, and as such it set the tone for the Russian poetics of ruination.