

## CULTURAL TEXTS: POLISH AND RUSSIAN ALBUMS IN THE AGE OF ROMANTICISM

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The album – Polish *sztambuch* or *imionnik*, Russian *al'bom* – is an important yet little studied artifact of early nineteenth-century Polish and Russian culture, the conception of which was imported from Western Europe along with other cultural and literary fashions of the time. Albums were more or less ornate “scrapbooks” in which poets and other famous personages of the day and/or the album owner’s family and friends (these two groups may have formed at times one circle, if we consider the albums of aristocrats) wrote down their verse and prose, usually addressed or dedicated to the album’s owner. Diverse and collage-like, albums also contained autographs, drawings, letters, and personal memorabilia; the open form of the album allowed for writing, drawing or adding anything that the album could physically contain.

Albums flourished in the age of Romanticism because of its flexible definition and its position at the nexus of literature and fine arts, social life and domesticity, high and low culture. An important prop in the life of the Romantic salon, the album was not, however, confined to salon life; albums assumed many different forms and infiltrated various social settings, finally becoming a phenomenon of mass culture. Album enjoyed such popularity because it was an exceptionally versatile medium. They functioned as a carrier of individual and national memory, ensuring symbolic permanence against mortality through physical preservation of human traces. They allowed for rehearsing and performing various identities at a time when gendered and authorial versions of the “self” were only beginning to take shape. Albums surfaced at the defining moment of the professionalization of literature in early nineteenth-century Russia and Poland and served as a small but important stepping-stone in the process of literature becoming a social institution and the writer – a professional. The album can be viewed as a unique cultural object that illuminates fundamental questions about literature and its social status: genre and generic evolution; the relationship between text and

image; aesthetic judgments as to what constitutes literature and art; models of authorship and the rise of literary professionalism in the Romantic period; and gender relations in regard to the album and its social context.

#### ALBUMS AS TEXTS

The general methodological framework for my study of the album as text derives from two main sources. One facet of this analysis of the album draws on late twentieth-century anthropological practices exemplified by James Clifford and Clifford Geertz, who propose “viewing cultures as assemblages of texts”.<sup>1</sup> The album, read as one such “text”, allows us to infer information about cultural practices and processes that took place in the Romantic period. My second source of inspiration is Iurii Lotman’s semiotics and his analysis of culture as a readable “text”.<sup>2</sup> In this approach, a single element of culture – such as the album, in my interpretation – may serve as a semiotically charged sign within the larger sign system of a given culture. Throughout my analysis I posit that the album constitutes a text, and as such it is especially well suited for analysis utilizing Lotman’s model. The album oscillates between two semiotic fields – the linguistic (it includes poems and prose pieces) and the iconic (it includes drawings and material objects). In Lotman’s analysis, these two fields are treated as polarized languages that simultaneously stand in opposition to and complement each other. It is in the process of constant translation between these two codes that the reader/viewer discovers analogies and connections, thus generating meaning (37–8). A text cannot generate meaning in a vacuum; it needs to be read and decoded in a process of communication with the audience (144–46). At the same time, various languages of the text are in a “game-like” and “dialogic” relation to each other (145). Albums are very good examples of just such a dynamic, with their insider codes, intimate languages, and generally playful character.

We may thus view the album as a polysemic, heterogeneous text whose existence raises questions about communication between audience and text, as well as the relationship among the disparate elements and languages found in the text. The album functions as both a “literary fact” and an “extra-literary fact”, to use Iurii Tynianov’s terms.<sup>3</sup> This ambiguous and generic position allows the

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<sup>1</sup> J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, London 1996, p. 41; C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York 1973.

<sup>2</sup> I. Lotman, *Izbrannye stat’i v trekh tomakh. Stat’i o semiotike i tipologii kul’tury*, vol. 1, Tallinn 1992, pp. 34–45, 129–147.

<sup>3</sup> I. Tynianov, *Literaturnyi fakt*, Moscow 1993, pp. 123–130.

album to subvert rigid systems of genres and guarantees its longevity, since the notion of “album” is flexible enough to take on many different forms, including the modern day guest book or a social networking tool such as Facebook. The trajectory of the Romantic album genre shows its ability to function in many cultural contexts. The album moved from the periphery to the very center of the early nineteenth-century literary and cultural scene, reached its peak in popularity, became obsolete, and reappeared in a changed form at the beginning of the twentieth century.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF ALBUMS

The nineteenth-century album can be traced back to the Roman *album amicorum*, a book in which signatures of the rich and famous were collected, and also to the early sixteenth-century German *Stammbücher* (literally: books of the “tree trunk” in a genealogical sense) consisting of blank pages inserted into books or bound together, upon which people wrote their names, dates, and drew coats of arms. Later one could buy a blank pocket-sized album or one with pages framed by ornamental borders<sup>4</sup>; the oldest preprinted album comes from France (1560).<sup>5</sup> In Western Europe noblemen used albums during travels and albums circulated among students and professors at universities. A *Stammbuch* could serve as a recommendation letter if it included the “right” signatures.<sup>6</sup> One could have separate albums for patrons and friends.<sup>7</sup> While in the second half of the sixteenth century it was fashionable to use emblems with codified meanings to render a sentiment, epigrams and aphorisms become the norm in the mid-seventeenth-century. Subsequent decades brought about more varied themes of inscriptions (prudence, virtue, morality) and more pictorial representations (usually allegories related to the above topics). Albums began to have a strict internal order: one’s social position determined where one could write in an album. They became culturally significant enough to spark scholarly debates: in 1744, a German named Zedler wrote an encyclopedia article on albums in which he asked the rhetorical question of whether a student’s arrogance could be excused if he had written his album entry on a page preceding that of a count with an impressive genealogy.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> K. Kratzsch, *Stammbücher aus der Zentralbibliothek der deutschen Klassik Weimar, Burgk/Saale* 1988, pp. 8–11.

<sup>5</sup> J.-U. Fechner, *Stammbücher als kulturhistorische Quellen*, Munich 1981, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> E. Wolbe, *Handbuch für Autographen-sammler*, Berlin 1923, p. 230.

<sup>7</sup> K. Goldmann, *Nürnberger und Altdorfer Stammbücher aus vier Jahrhunderten: ein Katalog*, Nürnberg 1981, p. XIII.

<sup>8</sup> K. Kratzsch, op.cit., pp. 12–15.

Polish albums date back to the sixteenth and seventeenth century when preprinted books of emblems were in vogue. Travelers to the West also followed the trend of collecting signatures: a Polish album from the 1620s includes over a hundred signatures of West European celebrities.<sup>9</sup> Russian aristocrats embraced the album as a Western fashion at the end of the eighteenth century. By that time, the initial shape of the album, a simple collection of autographs, changed in accord with eighteenth-century sensibilities. Literary forms such as compliments, panegyrics, epigrams, classicist miniatures, charades, and verbal games became incorporated into albums; erudition and wit reigned. The feminization of Polish and Russian culture toward the end of the century encouraged the album's increasing popularity. The practice of reading verse and prose, playing charades, staging theatrical plays and *tableaux vivants* turned private homes into "laboratories of cultural life", in the words of Lotman. He stresses the importance of game-playing in the rise of the new culture: "The game of literature becomes the literature of game-playing" ("Игра в литературу перерастает в литературу игры").<sup>10</sup> The album – playful by definition – served as the perfect place for trying out various forms of verbal and visual play. It was also a much-needed outlet for a new type of sensibility, which Lotman has called *al'bonnost'*, a sense of established intimacy or its semblance – "as-if intimacy" ("как бы интимность") – between the writer and the reader, which we may call the result of a shift from the public life toward the private life.<sup>11</sup> The album became appealing and fashionable precisely because it was the embodiment of what Tynianov calls "domestic small form[s]" ("домашняя малая форма") or "trifles" ("безделки"), appropriate for new literary and artistic interests. Related genres of the familiar letter and the almanac filled the same generic void and reflected the same need for a simpler, lighter style of expression.<sup>12</sup>

#### ALBUMS AS FORA FOR DISCOURSES OF MEMORY, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND AUTHORSHIP

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, albums became the space for individual creation and originality, and thus refracted many Sentimentalist and Romantic concerns, including memory, friendship, and the passage of time. At the peak of its popularity, the album was frequently compared to a cemetery, a garden, or a monument, comparisons that underscored its own role as an object that would

<sup>9</sup> A. Siomkajło, *Słownik literatury polskiej XIX wieku*, Wrocław 1994, p. 924.

<sup>10</sup> I. Lotman, *Sotvorenje Karamzina*, Moscow 1987, p. 249.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> I. Tynianov, op.cit., p. 131.

have the power of “stopping” time.<sup>13</sup> Various mechanisms of remembering were usually focused on the creation of an image or a verbal trace, often reduced to a personal signature. Remembering practiced through the creation of the album text could erase “death” on the symbolic plane, such as the inscribers’ belief that as long as the page on which they write is physically intact, their memory lives on.

Albums, with their reliance on acts of memory, served as tools used in the construction and preservation of national identity. Although Russian albums served mainly as entertainment or a friendly space for initial, hand-written “publication” of poetry (a function assumed later by journals), Polish albums’ much more political nature was conditioned by the historical moment in which they originated. The themes of regaining national independence and preserving national identity that dominate these albums are very different from the standard repertoire of Russian albums, which focused largely on themes of love and friendship. The political situation in which Polish albums appeared and circulated also influenced other themes of album verse written by Polish Romantic poets: invariably, they deal with the experience of exile and nostalgia for Poland, since the triumvirate of Polish Romantic poetry – Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and Cyprian Kamil Norwid – lived in Paris at the time they wrote the bulk of their album verse. Most Polish albums from this time period functioned as repositories of a national consciousness under siege during the partitions of Poland, which lasted all of the nineteenth century (1772–1918). The Polish Romantic album functioned as a “condenser of cultural memory” (a model proposed by Iurii Lotman) as well as a “*lieu de mémoire*” (“site of memory”, a concept developed by Pierre Nora).<sup>14</sup> Albums were also a place for discussing the concept of the nation-state that is one of the foci of Western Romantic movements. The album, free of censorship, allowed for constructing, imagining, or inventing elements of national consciousness, in ways that have been theorized by, for example, Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson.<sup>15</sup>

Since the album’s genealogy is inextricably linked to high society culture in Russia and Poland, albums played a significant role in the social setting of the salon. Albums served as props of salon hostesses (for example, the famous albums of Karolina Pavlova, Sofiia Ponomareva, Karolina Sobańska, or Maria Szymanowska), as well as an arena for poets who could put their work on display

<sup>13</sup> J. Jania, *O sztambuchu romantycznym*, „Prace Literackie Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego”, 1977, no. 19, p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> I. Lotman, *Izbrannye stat’i v trekh tomach...*, p. 131; P. Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, trans. M. Roudebush, “Representations”, 1989, no 26, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca 1994, p. 2; B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London – New York 2000.

at the time when professional publishing was just beginning in Russia and Poland. Album writing was helpful in rehearsing and performing identities, for example, that of a woman writer or an exiled poet. Albums were frequently instrumental in establishing authorship. Jürgen Habermas best summarizes the attitude of the court aristocracy toward writers at a time when being a writer was not yet a profession by saying that the court aristocracy “was not really a reading public... it kept men of letters as it kept servants”.<sup>16</sup> The phenomenon of the album was a small step in a series of events that eventually erased the system of patronage. The album allowed budding writers to show off their talents in a domestic environment. It nurtured the relationship between writer and audience: poems were read aloud and commented upon in an atmosphere of game-playing. Such literary practices were an important part of what William Mills Todd III has called incipient professionalization, the process of writers’ becoming professional authors in Pushkin’s time.<sup>17</sup>

Albums raise and complicate the issue of authorship, a notion that was undergoing major changes in early nineteenth-century Russia and Poland. In light of Roland Barthes’ essay “The Death of the Author”, the author as authority and “owner” of either an album or an album text, was quite irrelevant: for example, poems were copied, rewritten and changed, without notifying or even acknowledging their creator. Therefore the album functioned as Barthes’ “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash”.<sup>18</sup> Examining the album in light of Barthes’ theory, we might then say that the existence of an author here is negligible, and it is rather the reader who becomes the point where the album’s “multiplicity is focused” (148); thus the album undermines the assumption of the importance of a unified author in modern culture. On the other hand, the authorial “I” was crucial for assertion of selfhood and authorship, especially for many young writers and women for whom “authoring” literary works may have been problematic and socially unaccepted. The album provided a space for the emergence of individual voices that lacked an alternative outlet for experimenting with their identities.

#### THE STRUCTURE OF THE ALBUM TEXT

How were albums constructed, both physically and semiotically? What were the “nuts and bolts” of an album? What was the internal dynamic of the album

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<sup>16</sup> J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Th. Burger and F. Lawrence, Cambridge 1998, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> W. Mills Todd III, *Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin*, Cambridge 1986, p. 105.

<sup>18</sup> R. Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, trans. S. Heath, New York 1995, p. 146.

text? The albums have rectangular covers of various sizes, bound in leather or fabric, usually with golden tooling, sometimes with the word “Album” and/or the name of the owner embossed on the cover or spine. Such is the album of “Adele Senkowski” – the wife of the critic and editor Osip Senkovskii (also known by his original Polish name Józef Sękowski); her name appears on the brown-red leather front cover of her album, while the word “Album” figures on the book’s spine. Similarly, Elizaveta Murav’eva-Apostol’s album has the name “Elise” engraved in gold against the backdrop of the brown leather cover.<sup>19</sup> Sometimes only initials are given, engraved on a gold metal plate (for example, “A. L.” on A. Lukina’s album) or embossed in leather (for example “A. Г.” [A. G.] on an album cover whose owner we no longer know).<sup>20</sup> These few examples show the extent to which the phenomenon of albums was linked to Western culture: despite the plethora of languages actually used in the album, the Latin alphabet predominates in the arrangement of information on the cover. Other details found on the covers also help to trace the source of the albums found in Russia: on some of them, we find labels of shops in which they were sold. On one of Czar Alexander II’s albums, we find an oval label that reads: “Nicholls & Plincke, Magasin Anglais à St. Petersbourg”.<sup>21</sup> Elizaveta Murav’eva-Apostol’s album (1809–12) has a label attached to its inside cover: “A l’Esperance, Rue S.-Honoré, entre la place Vendôme et la rue Neuve-Luxembourg, a Paris. ROUSSEA, Tient magasin de tout ce qui concerne l’écriture, le dessin et les bureaux” (At Hope, S.Honoré Street, between the Vendôme Square and the Neuve-Luxembourg Street, in Paris. ROUSSEA, the shop sells all that one needs for writing, drawing, and office work).<sup>22</sup> These two details are important insofar as they show the imported origin of albums, which were bought either in exclusive foreign shops in Russia or were retrieved during travels abroad.

Although a leather cover, at times personalized with the owner’s name or initials, is the most standard form, certain album covers show considerable

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<sup>19</sup> Adele Senkovskaia’s album (Hermitage 8955–8966 PP); Elizaveta Murav’eva-Apostol’s album (GPB f. 1000, op. IV, no. 120). The following abbreviations of the names of archives are used: IRLI: Institut Russkoi Literatury (Institute of Russian Literature), also called Pushkinskii Dom (Pushkin House), St. Petersburg, Russia; GPB: Gosudarstvennaia Publichnaia Biblioteka im. M.E. Saltykova-Shchedrina; (M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin National Library), St. Petersburg, Russia; Pawl.: Dom Pawlikowskich na Kozińcu (The Pawlikowskis’ House in Koziniec), Zakopane, Poland. The Pawlikowskis’ collection is currently housed at the Biblioteka Jagiellońska (The Jagiellonian Library), Cracow, Poland. I am grateful to all individuals, especially staff members of various manuscripts departments, who helped me with gaining access to albums in Poland and Russia.

<sup>20</sup> A. Lukina’s album (IRLI no. 9664); A. G.’s album (IRLI no. 9665).

<sup>21</sup> Alexander II’s album (Hermitage 5623–5705 PP).

<sup>22</sup> Elizaveta Murav’eva-Apostol’s album (GPB f. 1000, op. IV, no. 120).

variation and originality. They often contain emblematic images, which are a harbinger of the importance of symbolic codes in albums, such as the language of flowers or colors, a topic to which we will return. For example, a Polish album that belonged to Henrietta Dzieduszycka (dated 1821–33) displays the image of a golden lyre (Erato's instrument and a symbol of music and love poetry) on a green background.<sup>23</sup> The owner's name is embossed on the spine, indicating that the album was most likely custom-made; thus the chosen emblem might be a reflection of the owner's creative aspirations or a compliment paid to her by the album's donor if the album was a gift, as was often the case. One of Vassily Zhukovsky's albums has a large golden lyre embossed on the green leather cover.<sup>24</sup> This album – a gift commemorating Zhukovsky's stay in Moscow in February of 1841 and a tribute to him – contains poems by F.N. Glinka, M.A. Dmitrev, A.S. Khomiakov, as well as some poems written by children, all saluting Zhukovsky as the "poet laureate". The image of the lyre on the cover reinforces the praise that is the main topic and purpose of this "congratulatory" album.

On the cover of an anonymous Polish album dating from the same period (its earliest dated inscription is from 1820, its oldest (latest?) – 1840), we find a less conventional image that holds particular significance for our understanding of albums' symbolic function in the culture of Romanticism and possibly even later: the *ouroboros*, a snake swallowing its own tail.<sup>25</sup> If we read this image as the ancient (Greek and Egyptian first and foremost) symbol of eternity, then the album immediately introduces us to one of the fundamental topoi recurring in most albums, namely eternal remembrance, which the album "promises" through its very existence. The same image of the snake is used in a more complex context on the cover of a Russian album of another anonymous owner: on the front cover, we see a woman and a plaque that says "Souvenir".<sup>26</sup> The back cover repeats the image of a woman who, this time, is accompanied by a tall, thin vessel of sorts and the inscription "Constance". The woman is holding in her hand a snake that eats its own tail. This cover encapsulates the hopes invested in albums: the album's main function is that of a souvenir, since it reminds the owner of the people who marked its pages. The other two ideas represented on this cover – constancy and eternity – are logically linked to the first: the album serves as a "souvenir" that generates and guarantees "constant" memory, which will carry those who write in it into "eternity". This idea is most frequently expressed, however, simply by the word "Souvenir", which at times seems to function as the

<sup>23</sup> Henrietta Dzieduszycka's album (Pawl. AP 7) 1–2.

<sup>24</sup> Vassilii Zhukovsky's album (GPB f. 286, op. 2, no. 230).

<sup>25</sup> Unknown owner's album (Pawl. AP 7) cover.

<sup>26</sup> Unknown owner's album (Hermitage E 3080 PP).



album's "title". In the Olenin family album, for example, the golden metal plate placed in the center of the red leather front cover is shaped like a banner and engraved with the word "Souvenir". The triple golden tooling, which runs around the square cover, frames the engraved plate, thus producing the effect of a closed composition, akin to a book cover that clearly states the book's purpose.<sup>27</sup> This effect could also be achieved by turning the first page of an album into a make-believe page of an illuminated medieval manuscript, complete with elaborate initials and stylized cursive, as we see in E.V. Korob'ina's album from the 1870s. It seems that the later the album is, the more its owners want it to look "antique", thus artificially giving it an aura of "history" or "tradition".<sup>28</sup>

The fact that the album is framed like a book is telling: it emphasizes that albums were indeed an important mode of disseminating literature. Albums were hand-written *books*, similar in form and content to printed almanacs, which were, in Todd's definition, "elegant pocket-sized volume[s] that generally sought to meet the literary interests of a reading public that pretended to refinement" (79). Almanacs such as *Aglaiia*, published by Piotr Shalikov (1808–12) or *Al'bom Severnykh Muz: Al'manakh na 1828 god* (Album of Northern Muses: Almanac for 1828), published by Aleksandr Smirdin, display many features that are characteristic of albums, in their format as well as content (lyric poetry and "trifles" [*bezdelki*]) and style (light and sweet). The fact that both men owned substantial albums and were actively involved in popularizing almanacs and later journals, such as, for example, the famous *Biblioteka dlia chteniia* (Library for Reading) started in 1834 by its publisher Smirdin and main editor Senkovskii, provides an interesting link between albums and almanacs. The fact that the almanac *Album of Northern Muses: Almanac for 1828* actually has the word "album" in its title is quite significant: the two generic forms were so closely related that we may see the almanac as the more formal printed version of the album or, as Todd puts it, "as the portable, commercial equivalent of a lady's album" (80). A blurring of boundaries between the hand-written album and its printed equivalent took place later in the nineteenth century with the publication of books such as *Damskii Al'bom s stikhami i prozoi na russkom, frantsuzskom i nemetskom iazykakh, original'nyimi risunkami i notami* (1853; Women's Album with poems and prose in Russian, French, and German, and with original drawings and sheet music).<sup>29</sup> Such books looked like albums as far as their formal features and content were concerned, but they were printed not as facsimiles but as original compilations

<sup>27</sup> The Olenin family album (GPB f. 542, no. 768).

<sup>28</sup> E.V. Korob'ina's album (IRLI r. I, op. 42, no. 11) 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Damskii Al'bom s stikhami i prozoi na russkom, frantsuzskom i nemetskom iazykakh, original'nyimi risunkami i notami*, ed. K. Shreider, St. Petersburg 1853.

of material, using the hand-written album as their model. This phenomenon testifies that the homegrown album had become a fixed book form that could subsequently be used for standard publishing.

Although albums in the form of books or notebooks were most popular, occasionally we come across an album of more unusual form. An interesting variation is an album that consists of loose sheets of paper kept in a box that looks like an album, but is conceptualized by the owner as a “book”, complete with a table of contents that opens the collection (for example, A.N. Gasvitskaia’s album).<sup>30</sup> Another variation on the physical shape of the album is a double-sided album, which consists of two separate books with the back cover of one album and the front cover of the other one glued together, in which one could write starting with either side (for example, one of A.A. Voeikova’s albums).<sup>31</sup> While the former shape was more conducive to collecting loose sheets by the album owner and filing them away in a “box”, the latter shape testifies to the importance of game-playing in the album, in this case, encouraged and facilitated by the existence of alternative “entrances” to the album. This external feature of Voeikova’s album mirrored the practice of writing messages at the end of regularly-shaped albums. Also, we often see inscriptions placed upside down, diagonally, or at various angles on a page, a practice that an album such as Voeikova’s pre-empts to a certain extent, as if inviting more playful writers to “hide” on the other side.

Eccentric album covers raise questions about the definition of the “book” form: how far can we depart from the “two covers and some pages in between” formula and still consider an object a book? What does the album as genre gain by transgressing the traditional book form in its exterior and the traditional linear mode of inscription in its body? Games involving alternative covers and/or ways of writing in albums seem to be simulacra of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century salon life out of which the album grows – a milieu characterized by friendly conversation, witty repartee, jokes, and references to literature and art. The album is a kind of record, a transcription of this social situation and, by extension, of what has been said. However, as Susan Stewart writes, “The space between letters, the space between words, bears no relation to the stutters and pauses of speech. Writing has none of the hesitations of the body”.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the albums’ more unusual formal traits – be they two-sided covers or slanted inscriptions – are attempts at capturing what is in fact impossible: the aura of

<sup>30</sup> A.N. Gasvitskaia’s album (IRLI r. I, op. 42, no. 5).

<sup>31</sup> A.A. Voeikova’s album (IRLI f. 236, no. 22728).

<sup>32</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham and London 1993, p. 31.

hours spent with friends telling jokes or playing charades. Unlike a regular book, the album, with its custom-made covers, individually designed page layouts, and hand-produced texts and images, achieves what Stewart calls an “illusion of wholeness” (34) that a printed book can rarely have; we might say that in the album, to use Stewart’s terminology, “a series of correspondences are collapsed: binding and content, body and soul” (35).

The first and last pages of albums were marked in special ways. They provided a frame to this otherwise open, non-linear form: albums were not filled page by page but rather according to chance and the inscriber’s whim. It is important to note that albums are *interactive*, that is, they force the owner or an outside spectator to participate in their reading and often – as we will see later – to fill in information in order to read it, even beginning with the first page. If the owner’s name is not written on the cover, sometimes we can see it on the opening pages, as in Henrietta Dzieduszycka’s album where the first two pages tell us her name in a playful way, requiring some energy on the part of the reader to decipher it. First, we see a star-like shape which on the next page dynamically “bursts out”, revealing the name “Henriette, Comtesse Dzieduszycka” woven into the rays of the design. The reader and/or viewer is first puzzled by the unintelligible drawing on the first page, but if s/he does not give up and turn the page, the drawing will also “move” and assume a different shape, by virtue of the same principle we use to comprehend cartoons.

In accordance with the unwritten rules of album etiquette, first and last pages of albums were marked in the sense that not anyone could write on them and not anything could be written there. There were certain texts deemed appropriate for the first page and – to a lesser degree – for the last page. Pushkin was well aware of that tradition when he wrote in the fourth chapter of *Eugene Onegin*:

На первом листике встречаешь:

*Qu’écrirez-vous sur ces tablettes*

И подпись: *t. à v. Annette*;

А на последнем прочитаешь:

«Кто любит более тебя,

Пусть пишет далее меня». <sup>33</sup>

(On the first page you come across:

“*What will you write on these pages?*”

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<sup>33</sup> A. Pushkin, *Evgenii Onegin*, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 17 vols., Moscow 1937–59 vol. 6, 85.

And signature: “*Yours, Annette*”;  
 And on the last one, you read:  
*“Who loves you more than I,  
 Let him write below me”*).

Although the exact words used by Pushkin open only some of the albums, which as a genre rely on constant reworking of seemingly fixed models of album verse, Petina reports an inscription that starts exactly that way in Paulina Dal’s album, written there by Sophie Kühn in 1815.<sup>34</sup> The original French is preserved because Dal’s album is relatively old; by the 1820–30s – the apex of album culture – poems such as this one are paraphrased in many different ways and often creatively rendered into Russian. A good example of this process is a poem from E.O. Renne’s album, written on the verso of the first page by an unidentified “A. Ia”.:

Коль предоставила мне свой альбом начать  
 Могу ли пред тобой в словах сих умолчать  
 Что я люблю тебя, нелицемерно  
 Что дружество мое пребудет непременно  
 Здравой, счастливой тебе желаю быть  
 И тем же дружеством взаимно мне платить  
 Пусть правда чувств моих примером всем послужит  
 Да всякой искренно тебя душевно любит.<sup>35</sup>

(Since you gave me your album to start  
 Can I refrain from saying to you in these words  
 That I love you, truly  
 That my friendship will last forever  
 I wish you to be healthy and happy  
 And that you will pay me back with equal friendship  
 Let the truth of my feelings be an example to all  
 Let everyone love you sincerely, with a full heart).

This amateur poem presents an important paradigm of an album inscription in which the guest writer is remarking on being presented with a blank page. She acknowledges the honor of being asked to write in an album (hers is even greater

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<sup>34</sup> L. Petina, *Khudozhestvennna priroda literaturnogo al'boma pervoi poloviny XIX veka*, diss., Tartu 1988, pp. 52–53.

<sup>35</sup> E.O. Renne’s album (IRLI r. I, op. 42, no. 24) 1 verso.

because she was asked to start the album). Her writing is a compliment paid in return, since the owner has complimented her by offering her the blank album. The writer goes on to express love and gives her best wishes to the addressee, thus making two standard “gestures” of album writing. She hopes that this first poem will set an example for others to imitate, not only in the realm of feeling, but also – we might read – in the sphere of formulating album inscriptions that should be like hers: short, rhymed (however simply), making ample use of the topoi of love, friendship, eternity, and sincerity.

We see a different sort of figurative opening of an album for a friend in the case of A.O. Smirnova-Rosset’s album, which Pushkin not only bought for her but also “baptized” by outfitting it with a title page and the first poem. The poet wrote the title page – “Исторические записки/А.О.С.\*\*\*” (Historical Notes / A.O.S.\*\*\*) – and his poem – “В тревоге пестрой и бесплодной” (In harried, futile bustle) – on page two, leaving the first page empty, in accordance with an often-practiced rule which forbade writing on the first page. The title “Historical Notes”, as is known from Smirnova-Rosset’s account, was an attempt on Pushkin’s part to encourage her, an engaging storyteller, to write some notes. By providing an actual title of what could be a future book, Pushkin showed that an album could serve various purposes: the owner might use it as a notebook for creative work, while her friends would simultaneously fill the album with appropriate material. Pushkin wrote Smirnova-Rosset’s portrait in verse, which is yet another typical way of commencing albums. Above Pushkin’s inscription Smirnova-Rosset dutifully recorded: “Cet album m’a été donné par Pouschkine 1832 avec les vers qu’il a écrit chez moi” (This album was given to me by Pushkin in 1832, with the verses he wrote at my home). Thus not only did she acknowledge the distinguished giver but also sketched the actual social situation of giving an album: Pushkin came with an album and improvised (or seemed to improvise) the poem at Smirnova-Rosset’s home, which was indeed a typical and preferred way of writing in an album.<sup>36</sup>

Sometimes the owner herself fills the first page, explaining the album’s origin and/or function: for example, we read in one of Voeikova’s albums that it is a gift from her mother (“cadeau de ma bonne Maman”), given to her in 1815.<sup>37</sup> Voeikova is remarkably consistent in recording the purpose of her albums, probably because she owned quite a few of them. For example, she notes on the first page of another album: “Album de l’année 1821 – Petersbourg. Donné par

<sup>36</sup> Smirnova-Rosset’s album (IRLI f. 244, op. 1, no. 180). A.O. Smirnova-Rosset, *Zapiski A.O. Smirnovoi urozhdennoi Rosset (s 1825 po 1845 gg.)* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1999) 295.

<sup>37</sup> A.A. Voeikova’s album (IRLI f. 236, no. 22727) front inside cover.

Maman, pour les extraits de mes lectures” (Album of the year 1821, Petersburg. Given by Mother for excerpts from my reading).<sup>38</sup> However, album owners at times felt compelled to provide more extensive information about an album’s role, and they often did so in literary form, thus setting the tone for the inscriptions to come. For example, V.I. Panaev’s album starts in the following way:

Приятное и может быть, горестное воспоминание!  
 1816 года  
 С. Петербург  
 Придете ль вы назад  
 Минуты радостей, минуты восхищений?  
 Иль буду я одним воспоминанием жить? <sup>39</sup>  
 (Pleasant and perhaps sad remembrance!  
 Year 1816,  
 St. Petersburg  
 Will you come back,  
 Minutes of joy, minutes of ecstasy?  
 Or will I subsist on remembrance alone?).

The first page, just like some of the covers mentioned earlier, functions here as a title page (also through its graphic arrangement) that explains to the person reading the album the purpose of this object (a gadget, as we might say today). Apart from anchoring the album in time and space (date, city), the mere four lines of this initial inscription are saturated with references to memory and the passage of time, which are key to understanding the album phenomenon. Instead of having the word “Souvenir” engraved on the golden plate on the cover, as we have seen with the Olenin family album, Panaev personalizes the message and tells his future inscriber that his album is meant to guard “remembrance” (*vospominanie*), a word/concept that is repeated twice in four lines. While the tense of the inscription is future (*pridete, budu zhit*’), there is also an idea of backward movement, expressed by the word *nazad* which provides a link to the past: “minutes of joy, minutes of ecstasy” occurred in the past, and the question is whether they will ever come back. If not, a “remembrance” will serve as a substitute for the real event, and the album will serve as a container for memories.

It is curious that men more often than women write original texts on first pages of albums rather than laconic information, as we have seen in the case of

<sup>38</sup> A.A. Voeikova’s album (IRLI f. 236, no. 22728) 1.

<sup>39</sup> V.I. Panaev’s album (IRLI f. I, op. 42, no. 21) 1.

Golitsyna's or Voeikova's albums. While women usually treat the album as a literary/domestic "toy", men who participate in album culture usually seem more aware of that the album is an outlet for some kind of literary expression. Men seem to know the rules of the album game better than women perhaps; albums as not as innocuous as they may seem at first glance and they do allow for playing complex power games. Like Panaev, A.P. Novosiltsov also addresses potential writers on the first page of his album: "Пишите милые вот мой для вас Album. Что скажет сердце вам, иль изберет что ум" (Write my dear ones; here is my Album for you. [Write] what the heart will tell you or reason will choose).<sup>40</sup> The owner introduces his album, the name of which is set apart from the rest of the text through the use of the Latin alphabet and underlining, thus drawing attention to the importance and also to the unique, foreign character of the object he possesses. By writing his own address in the form of a rhymed couplet, finding a visual rhyme between words that belong to two different languages, he also hints at the literary character of this object and the activity it ignites. Moreover, Novosiltsov sets up the Romantic juxtaposition of feeling and reason as mutually exclusive, transplanting the philosophical thought onto the more mundane ground of album writing, which is but one example of the ways in which albums – even provincial, "unimportant" ones – reflected the Romantic concerns that permeated public debates and everyday lives alike.

The album, being an open, fluid form, usually has no closure of the kind we expect from a book: a final line, a period. If we consider Jacques Derrida's distinction between the book and the text, that is, between the material object and the proliferation of meanings it offers, we might say that the arrangement of album materials falls somewhere between the book and the text. In the case of albums, their non-linear (lack of) composition points to and reinforces the idea that writing has no boundaries: as Derrida puts it, "The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing".<sup>41</sup> In an album a formal ending of the text is unnecessary because of the implicit understanding that inscriptions will multiply and the collection will grow *ad infinitum*, a growth which corresponds to the idea of limitless meanings. In a sense, closure would restrict the album's potential to store memories and intangibles – friendship, love, affection – that cannot be finite. An exception to such programmatic lack of ending in the album is a game, observed by Pushkin in the passage from *Eugene Onegin* quoted above, in which someone writes on the last page a variant of the inscription to the effect: whoever loves you more

<sup>40</sup> A.P. Novosiltsov's album (IRLI f. 244, op. 21, no. 9) 1.

<sup>41</sup> J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore 1976, p. 18.

than I will write below my words. Indeed, several albums contain such pages, with the words written at the very edge of the bottom of the last page, a practice that obviously precludes other participants from writing anything. For example, a person signed “Anne Loutkovsky” writes on the last inside cover of A.V. Lutkovskaia’s album: “Кто более меня вас любит/Тот может на следующей странице написать (“Who loves you more than I, can write on the following page”). Could it possibly be the album’s owner writing to herself and expressing self-love via this humorous gesture?<sup>42</sup>

While the covers of albums provide physical boundaries to the otherwise open form, and the fairly ritualistic treatment of first and last pages serves a similar function of framing the content, what we find between the covers varies greatly and depends on what type of album we are holding in our hands. “Album” is an umbrella word for many different kinds of albums. Such distinguished scholars as Mikhail Alekseev and Vadim Vatsuro have proposed possible taxonomies of albums.<sup>43</sup> Alekseev differentiated between early (eighteenth century through the first quarter of the nineteenth century) domestic or intimate (*zavetnye*) albums, containing inscriptions by the owner’s family and friends, and later “public” albums that served mainly for collecting signatures or samples of handwriting of the rich and famous, with the aim of flaunting one’s connections in the world. He also suggested another way of contrasting the two major types of albums: the former were “collections of domestic relics”, while the latter could grow to the point of becoming “archives” (8–9).

Vatsuro has shown chronological development in the different types of albums, starting with the sixteenth-century *Stammbuch*, and moving through family albums and personal notebooks for writing down original poems and/or copying others’ verse, akin to German *Poesiealbum*. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, Vatsuro writes, the genre of the “album in the precise sense of the word” (6) had become fully crystallized, largely because of the formation of socio-literary groups and circles, and later salons. Such “real” albums originated when there was a critical mass of participants engaged in literary and cultural activities within a group, revolving around a host or a hostess (7). Such albums, if indeed focused to a high degree on literary matters, can be called “literary” (*literaturnye*), and can be contrasted with the albums of the “litterati” (*literatorskie*), which belonged to professional writers and served as space for their creative work (10). A related variant is a literary-domestic (*literaturno-*

<sup>42</sup> A.V. Lutkovskaia’s album (IRLI no. 73) 54.

<sup>43</sup> M. Alekseev, *Neizdannye pis'ma inostrannykh pisatelei XVIII–XIX vekov*, Moscow – Leningrad 1960, pp. 3–122; V. Vatsuro, *Ezhegodnik Rukopisnogo Otdela Pushkinskogo doma na 1977 god*, Leningrad 1979, pp. 61–78.



-*domashnii*) album in which a professional writer would include both original work and other materials, usually related to his or her family and friends, as was in the case of A.E. Izmailov or S.D. Ponomareva's circle (12). These three kinds of albums, depending on the relationships between the writers, could also be called salon (*salonnye*) albums or friendship (*druzheskie*, 19) albums, as opposed to society (*svetskie*, 37) albums, which were more a status symbol than a reflection of lively cultural exchanges. Among other kinds of albums in Vatsuro's taxonomy we find pedagogical albums, given to children with the goal of influencing their upbringing (14); albums that are collections of autographs (30); commemorative albums and their opposite, album-anthologies (33). Finally, Vatsuro also distinguishes among albums that belonged to girls and young women, professional artists, booksellers, and students (33–44). All these subcategories are important because they show us the range of the album phenomenon and account for the hybrid nature of albums: the social place of the owner often determined the form and content of the album.

Albums may include the following verbal materials: original poems and prose, quotations, aphorisms, *pensées*, words of advice, wishes for the owner, compliments, and original song lyrics as well as lyrics written to existing tunes (sometimes accompanied by musical notations). Short poetic forms are privileged: charades, acrostics, *impromptus* (*eksprompty*) which were improvised on the spot, and *bout-rimés* – lines composed to a given set of rhymes. Visual materials in albums consist of drawings, watercolors, silhouettes, and cutouts, which most often fall into the categories of portrait, landscape, caricature, vignette, and genre scene; quite a few of these served as illustrations to texts written in albums. We also encounter collages, pictorial puzzles, rebuses, pictures cut out of journals and books, religious pictures, obituaries, as well as material objects such as pressed leaves and flowers, embroidery, letters, envelopes, calling cards, telegrams, recipes, pieces of fabric and ribbon, tickets, invitations, and locks of hair. A special place is reserved for signatures, autographs, and sheet music (usually a short fragment of a work accompanied by the composer's signature). These materials are often elaborately framed as "treasures" and incorporated into albums in so many different ways that they constitute a subgenre of album materials to be discussed later. We also come across mathematical computations and special "secret" alphabets, presumably used only by the owner's circle.

Despite such an abundance of incongruent elements in albums, there was a method to this madness: there were certain internal structures, which in fact maintained strict order of album material. Assumptions of dialogicity and playfulness made this varied material more manageable than it may seem at first glance. As I mentioned before, the interactive nature of album materials made

them more interesting for readers, who had to participate in deciphering messages: in order to understand an acrostic written in 1822 in L.A. Bakunina's album, the reader had to put together the first letters of each line, which formed the word "Aimée", the name of the album's owner – Liubov' (Love) – in French.<sup>44</sup> Sometimes inscriptions were of an unusual shape (circular or forming a flower or a postal stamp), so the reader had to turn the album in order to read them. In "Liza's" album we can see an inscription shaped like a rose and written with different colors of ink (1812).<sup>45</sup> At times, the reader had to participate physically in the reading of a message, as with A.N. Gasvitskaia's album, in which the reader had to lift the spirals made from cut paper in order to see a drawing.<sup>46</sup> Charades in the form of painted collages invited the viewers to create narratives. For example, a watercolor made to look like a collage in L. Bode's album from the 1810s invites the reader to put together pieces of information about a person and guess his or her identity. Elements of the collage, such as a theater ticket, a playing card, a map of an estate, and a piece of a French newspaper, are supposed to tell the viewer who the mysterious person is; the poetics of fragment is used to paint a portrait.<sup>47</sup> Rebuses required saying words aloud in order to arrive at a meaning which was a result of naming images and combining them with supplied letters, a process that yielded new words and new meanings. For example, the French letter "à" plus a picture of a roof (French "toit"), when said aloud, sounds like "à toi". Combined with the rest of the rebus, it gives us: "Souvent je pense à toi" (I often think about you). The other three rebuses in a series of four from E. Lizogubova's album express the following sentiments, after adding their various parts together: "La musique est le clé des cœurs" (Music is the key to one's heart), "J'ai fléchi son cœur" (I conquered his/her heart), "Les yeux sont le miroir de son âme" (The eyes are the mirror of one's soul).<sup>48</sup>

Both readers and writers knew the rules of the album game; they were using common languages, transparent to them, less obvious to us today. One such language was that of specific emblems and symbols, such as flowers, colors, and stones. While some were glaringly obvious and overused, such as the image of a forget-me-not for expressing this very thought, other symbols were more obscure and required explanations, often in the form of short lists which could

<sup>44</sup> L.A. Bakunina's album (IRLI f. 16, op. 6, no. 56) 11.

<sup>45</sup> "Liza's" album (IRLI r. I, op. 42, no. 19) 43.

<sup>46</sup> A.N. Gasvitskaia's album (IRLI r. I, op. 42, no. 5) 6.

<sup>47</sup> L. Bode's album (*Gosudarstvennyi Literaturnyi Muzei* [National Museum of Literature, Moscow], KP 12125/66), reproduced and discussed in A.V. Kornilova's *Mir al'bomnogo risunka: Russkaia al'bomnaia grafika kontsa XVIII-pervoi poloviny XIX veka*, Leningrad 1990, pp. 78–83.

<sup>48</sup> E. Lizogubova's album, IRLI r. I, op. 42, no. 36, pp. 29, 39.

have been in turn copied from books on the symbolism of objects or colors. In S.A. Urusova's album, for instance, we find a short dictionary of precious stones assigned to months ("Janvier – Hyacinthe, Fevrier – Améthiste, Mars – Jaspe...").<sup>49</sup> Such lists were not only curious in themselves but were used in practical ways: they governed the color of ink used for writing and the color of the page on which a person wrote (a few pages in most albums were pre-colored). To write on a green page meant hope, on blue – constancy of feelings. In the example of Voeikova's album, a certain P. Polonskaia explains her choice of a blue-colored page, referring to an undefined source of her knowledge on color symbolism as "they say":

Хочу писать на голубой бумаге  
милый друг Саша, голубой цвет  
говорят означает постоянство.  
Если так когда-нибудь (чего не  
может случиться) усумнишься ты  
в моей привязанности то взгляни  
на этот листок и разуверь себя.  
– Любить тебя будет всегда боль-  
шое счастье для меня – возможно ль  
с доброй воли лишить себя счастья?<sup>50</sup>

(I want to write on blue paper,  
my dear friend, Sasha, the color blue,  
as they say, means constance.  
If you ever (which cannot happen)  
doubt my attachment to you,  
then look at this piece  
of paper and don't lose faith.  
– To love you will always be a great  
happiness for me – is it possible to  
deprive oneself of it willingly?).

Like colors, flowers constitute one of the most widespread codes used in albums. They are endowed with meaning on the basis of the "language of flowers" – a concept so popular in early nineteenth-century Europe that there were

<sup>49</sup> S.A. Urusova's album (IRLI f. 244, op. 8, no. 106) 60.

<sup>50</sup> A.A. Voeikova's album (IRLI r. I, op. 42, no. 2) 61. The writer's signature is partially illegible.

manuals of what each flower meant.<sup>51</sup> Combined with the “language of colors”, the flower code yielded the mixed language of flower colors, which could subsequently produce new meanings if a certain drawing were placed on a page of a given color. The most frequently employed flowers were roses, forget-me-nots, and pansies, which stood for, respectively, love, hope that one would not be forgotten (the Russian word for a forget-me-not conveniently preserved this meaning: *nezabudka*), and thought about often (from the French *la pensée*). One example can be the image of a forget-me-not from L. Bornovolokova’s album, with a poem in Russian that reinforces the image.<sup>52</sup> In Henrietta Dzieduszycka’s album we find a symbolic rose combined with an image of a garland standing for the concept of binding something together, as well as eternity – akin in its circularity to the aforementioned image of the snake swallowing its tail – which combined to produce the idea that love will bind two lovers together for eternity.<sup>53</sup> The same album demonstrates another usage for such basic schematic flower symbolism: we see a picture of a bouquet of flowers made up of forget-me-nots, a tulip, a hydrangea, and (probably) geraniums, symbolizing remembering, perfect love, friendship/devotion, and true friendship/affection, respectively.<sup>54</sup>

These examples suggest the fundamental skills required of a reader who would be album-literate and reveal how the album served as a focal point for many languages of the new culture that developed at the turn of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries in Russia and Poland. This culture was indeed genuinely new, even as it emulated and creatively reworked cultural and literary paradigms of the West European Classicism, Sentimentalism, and Romanticism. The multidimensionality of the album as a phenomenon of material culture and the semiotic complexity clearly belies the apparent frivolity of a mere salon toy or domestic bibelot. From the cover to its content and the internal languages that govern its arrangement and decoding, the album complicates its status as text.

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<sup>51</sup> Books on the language of flowers include Du Vignan’s *Le Language müet ou l’Art de faire l’Amour sans parler, sans écrire et sans se voir*, Hollande, 1688; J. Franeau’s *Jardin d’hiver ou Cabinet des Fleurs*, Pierre Borremans 1616; L. de Cortambert’s, *Le langage des fleurs*, Paris n. d.; *Iazyk tsvetov, ili Opisanie emblematiceskikh znachenii simvolov i mifologicheskogo proiskhozhdeniia tsvetov i rastenii*, St. Petersburg 1849.

<sup>52</sup> L. Bornovolokova’s album (IRLI r. I, op. 42, no. 74) 48.

<sup>53</sup> Henrietta Dzieduszycka’s album 17.

<sup>54</sup> Henrietta Dzieduszycka’s album 41.