MIKHAIL EPSTEIN

RUSSIAN SPIRITUALITY and the SECULARIZATION of CULTURE

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Professor Epstein's work represents a compendium of ideas that diverge from the existing paradigms in the humanities. His writings are full of proposals for new disciplines, for new genres and concepts, and for new words to describe them. *Semiurgy*, for example, would be the science of how to produce new signs, and *silentology*, the inverse of linguistics. This is actually what the humanities' enterprise may be: finding blank spaces in the languages of existing disciplines and trying to fill them. The contemporary humanities, according to Epstein, are in transition from the philosophy of analysis to the philosophy of synthesis. Each act of analysis contains the possibility for a new synthesis. The strategy of language synthesis, or what can be called constructive nominalism, now presents itself as an alternative to the analytical tradition. Inasmuch as the subject of philosophy—universals, ideas, general concepts—are presented in language, the task of a philosopher is to enhance the existing language, to synthesize new terms and concepts, lexical units and grammar rules, to increase the volume of the speakable and therefore of the thinkable. If in the 20th century philosophers concentrated on the analysis of language, in the 21st century they will focus on the synthesis of the variety of new languages (discourses, disciplines). Epstein calls his method potentiation and contrasts it with the traditional predominance of the actual (or real) over the potential in the ontology of Aristotle and Hegel. Analysis is focused on the actual, whereas synthesis looks into the multiple potentials hidden in any given actuality.

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Translated from the Russian
by Maria Barabtarlo

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On the front cover:
“Alexander Pushkin and Filaret, Metropolitan of Moscow.”
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Russian Spirituality and the Secularization of Culture

Preface

At end of the twentieth century, Russian culture was faced with a crisis of identity that radically called into question long-held views on a variety of religious and social issues. This book presents the challenges to the process of secularization in Russian society during the period of its dominance by the Orthodox Church, and subsequently during the Soviet atheistic era. Both are based on the binary opposition of values ("positive" and "negative," "sacred" and "profane") and do not admit of a 'middle ground' where truly secular culture develops. Gogol is generally viewed as marking the end of a century-long phase of secularism that lasted from Peter the Great to Pushkin, as well as the first writer to represent the cultural phenomenon of the 'New Middle Ages' (first described by Berdiaev) and renewed religious zeal, which was both opposed and complemented by Belinsky's 'religious atheism'.

The book explores the foundational categories of Russian spirituality, such as "the demonic" and "the apophatic," "poshlost'" (banality) and "vyvert" (inversion), drawing on the work of Russian writers and thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Gogol, Belinsky, Herzen, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Merezhkovsky, Berdiaev, Brodsky, Kushner, Lotman, Averintsev, Kabakov, Venedikt Erofeev, Vladimir Sorokin, and Dmitry Galkovsky. The dualities of Russian culture are explored against the background of a broadly conceived Western tradition that extends from Plato and

Aristotle to Derrida and Deleuze. I will consider modern Russian culture's need for a neutral 'middle ground' between its extreme polarities and, in this context, highlight Lotman's and Averintsev's plea for an orientation towards Aristotelianism and the 'ternary' model of culture. I will discuss the processes of secularization in Russian culture and posit the necessity of a third, neutral zone between the 'sacred' and the 'profane.' I will also explore the dangers of comprehensive neutralization in culture and the necessity of retaining elements of the dual model along with the introduction of intermediate elements. When combined, these theses do not cancel each other out, but rather produce a 'ternary' model of a cultural symbiosis between the extreme and the median, despite their apparent incompatibility.

This book grew out of my presentation "Russian Spirituality and the Theology of Negation," read at the international conference "Russian Culture at the Crossroads: Art and Society" (University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Nov. 24, 1997). I am grateful to Dmitry Shalin (the organizer of the conference), Sergei Averintsev and Konstantin Kustanovich for their important, detailed letters about my work in progress. Their critical remarks were a great help to me as I finished my revisions. I also wish to thank Elena Epstein-Yukina for her inestimable help and support at every stage of the manuscript's preparation.

The book was first published in Russian as "Russkaia kul'tura na rasput'ie: Sekuliarizatsiia i perekhod ot dvoichnoi modeli k troichnoi" (Russian Culture at the

Crossroads: Secularization and Transition from the Binary Model to the Ternary), in *Zvezda,* 1999, No. 1, 202-220; No. 2, 155-176. This work received an award from *Zvezda*, the leading St.-Petersburg literary journal, as one of the best publications of 1999.

The Failure of the First Secularization. The Church of Gogol and the Church of Belinsky[1]

The interrelation of religion and culture in Russia has been defined by the historical difficulties of secularization in regions dominated by Eastern Christianity. As we know, Russia did not experience a Renaissance and Reformation, and only entered the flow of European secularization at a relatively late stage, at the time of the Enlightenment. Thus the organic link between Christianity and humanism, Christianity and individualism, the divine and the earthly, which was imprinted upon European culture during the Renaissance and the Reformation, remained foreign to Russian culture, in which these two poles emerged only in their growing isolation.

In the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries Russian culture, coursing down the pan-European channel, passed swiftly through its stage of Enlightenment secularism—from Lomonosov to Pushkin. Essentially, Pushkin was the last representative of Russian secular literature in its uninterrupted century-long evolution from the time of Peter the Great's reforms.

The secularization of Russian culture was cut short with Gogol and Belinsky—in an ironic historical twist, almost concurrently with its acceleration in Europe, spurred by the revolutions of 1848. Specifically, the *Selections from Correspondence with Friends* (1847) and

Belinsky's letter to Gogol, written at the same time, initiated the epoch of "neo-medievalism" in Russia, which was predicted, as we know, by Berdiaev in his 1924 work, "Neo-Medievalism." The prediction proved all the more true by virtue of its being made essentially in hindsight, in the middle rather than the beginning of this epoch. According to Berdiaev, the world entered "neo-medievalism" in the twentieth century, when modern values—humanism, individualism, secularization—had been exhausted, "when the movement away from God ends and the movement toward God begins," when "God must once more become the center of our whole lives," and "knowledge, morality, art, government, the economy—all must become religious, but freely and from within, not coerced from without."[2] The second volume of *Dead Souls*, burned "freely and from within" by its author, became the first bonfire of this neo-medieval inquisition.

In my view, Russian neo-medievalism lasted 140 years and can be divided equally into two 70-year periods: the pre-revolutionary and the post-revolutionary. The first period, from 1847 to 1917, from Gogol's self-immolation to the "world fire in blood" (Blok), was characterized by the struggle between the church of Gogol and the church of Belinsky. Gogol ushered in neo-medievalism because his faith had ceased to be dogmatic, mixed in with the lukewarm traditional beliefs of the secular age; fire erupted from this faith once more, that fire which consumed Gogol's creative work. This modernist medievalism was the medievalism of a new age, when faith no longer lorded over

society's consciousness, but instead reasserted itself in the individual consciousness, in contrast to the tepid, secular condition of the world at large.[3] In this sense, Gogol is not only the first neo-medieval writer, but also the first Russian modernist. Modernism marks the end of the new era, when its secular reserves, its rationalism, humanism, and liberalism are exhausted, when new religious strivings and avant-garde projects to save the world crop up in the social arena, when the flow of time is reversed and the Middle Ages wind up in our future.

At the same time secularism can be rejected in two ways, as evidenced by Gogol and Belinsky, who bifurcated the paths of Russian new-religious culture. In Gogol secularism gives way to religiosity, while Belinsky elevates secularism to the level of strident dogma. Yet it is important to underscore that both types of religiosity have much in common; both are post-secular and thus under the same unbelievable, inhuman pressure involved in suppressing or crowding out the secular. According to Gogol, anything done in Russia should be done as though the heavenly kingdom were already at hand: "All of us should now serve not as in the old Russia, but as we would in the heavenly kingdom under Christ himself. . . We must remember only that our duties were undertaken for Christ's sake, and thus should be carried out according to his will, and none other."[4] This means that whether one is a petty copy-clerk or a great Russian writer, his direct supervisor is Christ. Here already is that very "church of the third testament" which Merezhkovsky and Berdiaev tried to establish in Russia

at the beginning of the twentieth century, blessed in Gogol's name. Merezhkovsky concludes his study *Gogol and the Devil* with the words "'Be ye not dead, O living souls!'—this is Gogol's final testament to all of us, not just Russian society but the Russian church as well. What should we do to fulfill this testament?"[5]

Gogol's super-religiosity and Belinsky's quasi-religiosity constitute a dual modification of the medieval religious spirit, because the new and old Middle Ages were already separated by the Enlightenment, that secular period which was now being displaced—hence the intensity of this new conversion, the willingness to bow down and to burn what was once precious. Neither the believer Zhukovsky nor the non-believer (at least in his earlier years) Pushkin ever displayed such an intense relationship to religion; both belonged to the secular age, when faith and the lack of it coexisted peacefully as private convictions, not interfering with friendly and even ideological alliances. A difference in faith did not even preclude like-mindedness, did not prevent Zhukovsky and Pushkin from being close in the creative and socio-cultural spheres; but one cannot imagine a friendship, not to mention a union of ideas, between Gogol and Belinsky in their later years. Both are heretics, each subject to excommunication from that church which the other serves so ardently. Post-secularism gives rise to remarkable, even grotesque fusions which could not exist in an exclusively religious culture or in a secular one—specifically, avant-garde fundamentalism (Gogol) and religious atheism (Belinsky). In that same letter to Gogol, Belinsky proclaims that "someone like

Voltaire, who used his wit to quell the fires of fanaticism and ignorance in Europe, is obviously more a flesh-and-blood son of Christ than all of your popes, archbishops, metropolitans, and patriarchs!"[6] Such 'inside-out' logic and biblical turns of phrase retained their persuasive power even seventy years later—for Bely in his poem "Christ is Risen" (1918) and for Blok in his poem "12" (1918). If Voltaire is the son of Christ, then why should Marx not be his beloved offspring as well? Why are the twelve red guards not his apostles? In his unsent reply to Belinsky, Gogol calculates this historical curve far into the future and anticipates the dogmatics of his heirs: "Who then, in your opinion, can best and most accurately interpret Christ these days? Can it really be these communists and socialists who claim that Christ bid them to steal property and rob those who had amassed some wealth? Come to your senses!"[7]

Of course no one came to his senses, and Belinsky was elevated to the leadership of Russia's non-believing intelligentsia. In the Silver Age, when the battle between the two post-secular churches intensified, the necessity arose for both to canonize their saints and provide a theological foundation for their respective teachings. As Ivanov-Razumnik wrote, death deprived Belinsky of "that crown of thorns which would have made his already great name holy. But even lacking that, we see this name encircled by the glowing halo of a fighter and a martyr . . . Belinsky was the banner of the Russian intelligentsia, and inscribed on that banner were the words: 'Under this Sign Be Victorious.'"[8] If the churches of Gogol and Belinksy were by

turns victorious in the pre-revolutionary period, then in the period following the revolution—also lasting seventy years—Belinsky's church triumphed and displaced Gogol's. Religious secularism—that is, pious atheism—routed post-secular fundamentalism. Russian neo-medievalism ended seventy years after the revolution, in the very same year (1988) in which Belinsky's church not only celebrated the millennial anniversary of Christianity in Russia with much official fanfare, but also issued an edict which allowed, and even demanded the re-publication of works by Russian religious thinkers for the first time in seventy years. Belinsky's heirs weakly extended a hand to the almost completely exterminated heirs of Gogol. Thus the second secularization of Russian culture was set in motion ten years ago.

To sustain itself, secularity must remain neutral toward religion; otherwise secularization itself takes on an anti-religious (hence religious and anti-secular) character. Secularity plays on its fine distinctions from religiosity, and these should never cross over to become their own opposites. There is nothing improbable about this; if the religious community in modern-day Europe is gradually becoming secularized—and is doing so immanently, without pressure from some foreign civilization—then it follows that there is room for secularity even in the most Christian of religions. Even the Gospels stipulate a place for the secular in human life; for example, in the parable about talent, or the one about the kingdom of Caesar and the kingdom of God. The very image of God becoming man carries great secular potential. In Europe, secularization

presents itself as a means to strengthen religious freedom and human liberty. Religion itself has begun to provide for a certain freedom from the predominant religion, for the possibility of divergence between personal faith and the national creed, for the freedom to believe or not.

Thus, secularization did not appear out of nowhere, as some primordial and proper state of mankind, but is rather the product of lengthy religious evolution, and is possible only in the context of certain religions (hence the difficulty of sustaining a secular society in Muslim countries). As Paul Tillich remarks, "the sacred is also open to secularization."[9] That secularization which undermines its religious foundation turns against religion and consequently against itself, becoming the worst variety of quasi-religion. And if secularization did indeed arise from religion, then it requires religious justification to the same degree to which religion needs secular society to acknowledge it as an independent, otherworldly sphere of being.

The above applies equally to Western art, which, as a secular phenomenon, grew out of Christianity when the ancient monotheistic prohibition on the visual representation of man was revoked by God's own appearance as a man on earth. The imagery in worldly art, as it arose during the Renaissance and remains to our day, is rooted in a specifically Christian imagery, which cannot be reduced to symbols, conventional signifiers of the infinite, or abstract vegetative ornaments, but which rather brings the entire sensory world into the realm of the depictable. Art itself is

another version of faith, just as expediency cannot be understood without a sense of its greater goal, presupposed by a believer's reason. In the writings of Kant, who did the most to distinguish among the three functions of human reason (the theoretical, the practical, and the aesthetic), we can find an explanation for this bond between art and religion: the aesthetic function of discernment and the religious function of reason are connected in the sense that both seek "expediency" and "the ultimate purpose." Art presupposes an intensity of experience and the representation of each phenomenon precisely at the moment when it itself becomes a form of expediency—that is, it is no longer connected to the idea of an outside purpose. "Beauty is a form of an object's expediency, because it is perceived without any consideration of its purpose."[10] In the contemplation of beauty the idea of God is not perceived as the ultimate purpose precisely because we have already formed our perception of the world and contemplate it immanently, as a purpose unto itself. The religious and the artistic converge in Christianity even more definitively than they did in the pagan days of antiquity, when the progressive tendency strove toward the suppression and ascetic rejection of the flesh, toward a religion of pure ideas, the unseen Whole, toward the eradication of art. After its eclipse in the Platonic and neo-Platonic perception of the world—or rather, rejection of the world—art was saved by Christianity. This is why Plato expels the poets from the ideal city-state, while Thomas Aquinas welcomes them back under the aegis of holy learning. "Poetry makes use of metaphors to produce a representation, for it is natural to man to be

pleased with representations . . . The ray of divine revelation is not extinguished by the sensible imagery wherewith it is veiled . . ."[11]

In Russia, even in the twentieth century and even in the most cultured circles, Renaissance art was still seen as spiritually alien, frightening, too physical and sensual. There is a startling note written by Alexander Blok a year after he traveled to Italy and worshipped at all the artistic shrines of the Renaissance: "In the Middle Ages the Church forbade the making of images. I was born in the Middle Ages. Thus, for me, the Renaissance is crimson, terrifying."[12] Blok was a man of the neo-medieval period. Is this not why he hastened to bury the epoch of humanism at the first opportunity, in his lecture called "The Collapse of Humanism" (1919), though in Russia this epoch had not even begun?

The Search for "Purgatory" in Russian Culture

While the Bolshevik revolution represented the collapse of European humanism for Blok, a score of other thinkers explained it rather as the result of the unripeness and inadequacy of Russian humanism, whose fruits rotted too early because they had no time to ripen (to use Diderot's famous expression regarding the fruits of the Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Russia). The philosopher Sergei Askoldov, ruminating about the causes of the Russian revolution in the compilation *From the Depths* (1918), describes the third starting point which never took root in the Russian soul as a simple human one: "In the makeup of any soul there is a fundamental essence which is holy, another which is specifically human and one that is animal. Perhaps the greatest peculiarity of the Russian soul lies in the fact that the middle, specifically human essence appears disproportionately weak compared with the national psychologies of other peoples. As a type, the Russian displays the predominance of the holy and the animal essences . . . Culture and humanism never took root as positive energies in Russia, but were disseminated and strengthened in the form of negative ones, seen as theomachistic or, at the very least, antireligious."[13]

In other words, Russian culture sorely needs some sort of middle ground, between the ideal of Sodom and the ideal of the Madonna. In direct contact, these two poles ensure extreme tension in this culture and a simultaneous imbalance which results in man (along

with everything human in Russia, including culture) hurtling "headlong" into the abyss. The poles are easily reversed because there is no intermediate zone between them. "The Russian people are polarized to the highest degree; they embody the intersection of opposites," writes Berdiaev.[14]

Structural/historical studies of Russian culture confirm this religious/philosophical intuition. According to the well-known definition put forth by Yuri Lotman and Boris Ouspensky, "the specific trajectory of Russian culture . . . is its principal polarity, expressed in its dualistic structure. In the system of Russian medievalism the fundamental cultural values (ideological, political, religious) lie in a bipolar field of values, bisected by a sharp line and lacking any neutral axial zone."[15] Thus, the afterworld in Russian medievalism is divided into hell and heaven, while Catholic conceptions allow a third to exist between these two—purgatory, a place for the souls of people who were not quite saints and not quite sinners, but who lived in an average, human sort of way and who, after enduring the trials of purification, might earn salvation. "Thus it became possible, in the real life of the Western Middle Ages, to have a wide field of neutral behavior and neutral social institutions which were neither 'sacred' nor 'sinful,' neither loyal to the state nor destructive of it, neither bad nor good."[16]

Of course, every culture needs a middle way—a specifically secular way—to prevent it from flailing from one extreme to the other, from piety to godlessness, from asceticism to debauchery. Strictly speaking, this

is what happened in Russian culture, where a dualistic model prevailed over the course of many centuries; the high and the low changed places while the middle ground, the "purgatory," lay fallow. Yuri Lotman, who researched these binary structures in Russian culture, concluded his last book, *Cultural Explosion* (1992), with the hope that Russia, after Perestroika and other reforms, might finally overcome "the harsh dictates of its historically binary structure" and "switch to the pan-European ternary system."[17] Dichotomy breeds a tendency toward revolution, toward a culture that evolves by virtue of explosions, with opposites rapidly changing places; it precludes gradual development, which can take place only in a neutral zone of judgment. "The progression from thinking oriented toward explosive bursts of change to an evolutionary consciousness," Lotman writes, "now takes on a special significance, since all the familiar cultures of the past gravitated toward polarity and maximalism."[18]

Such a strategic change demands that we reexamine the foundations of Russian culture and its initial philosophical reference points, as Sergei Averintsev did recently in an article on Christian Aristoteleanism. Two thinkers stand at the source of Western civilization: Plato, with his dualistic split between the material and the ideal realms, and Aristotle, who tried to mediate between these extremes by arguing that ideas were present in objects themselves, as their inherent forms. Russian civilization chose the Platonic model and developed it with a relentless consistency that led directly to the realization of Plato's ideal government, where the order of things was strictly subservient to

the order of ideas and where, as historical experience points up, the state is destroyed by its very materialism. Averintsev poses the question: In spite of the obvious Platonic leanings in Russian thought (as evidenced by everyone from Kireievsky to Losev), is it impossible, even at so late a date compared with the West, to orient this thought toward Aristotle, who is more sensible and tolerant of the human condition? "If Plato is the first utopian thinker, then Aristotle is the first thinker to look the utopian spirit straight in the eye and overcome it . . . The Aristotelean method is far more neutral toward religion than Platonic ecstasy . . . Aristotle's rule of right measure reigns in the natural world, where the good man finds the middle way between two fallacious extremes."[19]

Rather than the Platonic/Augustinian line of thought, which had such a deep effect on Russia's sense of the infinite, Averintsev invites Orthodoxy to approach the line of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, which accepts the middle way and presents a keen religious explanation of the natural world instead of jumping to condemn and reshape it, as though it were based in evil. Orthodoxy should follow the lead of Catholic philosophy and acknowledge "the realm of nature" which lies between "the heavenly realm of the supernatural and the infernal realm of the unnatural"[20] and which has its own juridical and moral law based on the social contract and regulating human relations in the gap between "do unto others" and "dog eat dog."

Thus, the middle way benefits not only from a liberal/pragmatic justification, but also from an earlier

theological, and later structuralist foundation. Now at the end of the twentieth century, it would be madness to deny the necessity of this third, judgmentally neutral, centralizing, equalizing element in Russian culture.

Mediocracy. The Western Model

I believe I have adequately explained the need for a neutral space between the poles, and here I have relied on a well-formulated Westernist tradition in Russian thought. As I proceed, however, I will draw on another tradition—on critics of the West, who are nonetheless not Slavophiles. A purely Slavophile critique condemns the West precisely for its dualism, the divergence between heart and mind, between the juridical and the moral, subject and object, etc., preaching instead the unification of all of these far-flung extremes in a higher synthesis—hence Kireievsky's "integrated knowledge" and Soloviev's universalist theology. In addition, Slavophiles use a particularly Western baggage of ideas, from the Hegelian dialectic and categories of synthesis to Shelling's philosophy of identity, and so forth.

But there is another critique of the West which underscores not the split, but rather the depressing uniformity of the Western middle class. Long before postmodernism erased the difference between elite and mass culture, this same tendency toward a middle ground, assimilation, homogeneity, could be found in nineteenth-century Western society and elicited practically an apoplectic horror as the specter of a new "Sinoism." The struggle against the rule of the all-encompassing Average brought together the liberal Mill and the anti-liberal Nietzsche, the revolutionary socialist Herzen and the reactionary monarchist Leon-

tiev, as well as the apocalyptic revolutionary, anti-monarchist, and anti- socialist Merezhkovsky.

According to John Stuart Mill's observation, Europe, which was "wholly indebted to this plurality of paths for its progressive and many-sided development," began by the middle of the nineteenth century to "advanc[e] towards the Chinese ideal of making all people alike."[21] Herzen agrees with him: "Nearby, around the corner, everywhere lurks the thousand-headed hydra . . .the autocratic crowd of Mill's 'conglomerated Mediocracy' . . . Yes, my friend, it's time to acknowledge and accept that bourgeoisie is the ultimate form of Western civilization, its coming-of-age, its état adulte; it concludes the long line of dreams, the epic of growth, the romance of youth—everything that gave so much poetry and trouble to the lives of nations."[22] Despite all of their apparent differences in ideals, Leontiev agrees with both: "All grace and depth, everything remarkable in any way, all naiveté, everything refined, primordial or capriciously developed, everything brilliant and everything wild, all of it retreats in equal measure before the relentless onslaught of these gray people . . . I love mankind too much to wish this peaceful yet petty and degrading future for it."[23]

And so the question arises: If the Platonic line of development leads society toward an ideocracy, then does the Aristotelean line not lead to mediocracy? As the realm of natural law expands, Western culture passes more and more into a middle zone, avoiding edges and extremes, moving in the "neither holy nor

sinful" domain, neither exalted nor base. Western cultural development in this latest, postmodern period leads precisely to such an accelerated neutralization of opposites; perhaps its chief characteristic is the replacement of opposites with differences. As I proceed, I will not focus so much on Western culture per se—it is too rich and far-reaching for any such definition—as on those post-structuralist theories which attempt to define the future of this culture in terms of the value it assigns to neutrality and pluralism while simultaneously renouncing all dualism and all oppositions. The theory and practice of *différance* creates a new cultural space which can be called heterogeneous, since it consists of differences—in culture, in ethnicity, in style, among individuals—and at the same time can be called homogeneous because it contains (as does language in Saussure's definition) nothing but differences.

Such a culture does not permit judgment, for any judgment presupposes a scale of values and hence gradations and poles, pluses and minuses. A culture without values (which is un-judgeable), becomes a collection of scattered facts, lacking the resilience of interrelatedness. The constant references to "the alien" and "the other" in postmodern theory simply slip down the chain of mutually referential signifiers in a single textual field. It is a sort of semantic positivism based not on the perception of physically observable facts (as in the nineteenth century) but on the interpretation of signs. A methodological prohibition denies any access beyond the boundaries of the sign-signifier system, and any realities appearing beyond these

boundaries—that is, truly "other"—are critically grouped under the umbrella of the "transcendental signified." Therefore the category of signification itself becomes essentially obsolete, since any sign presupposes the relation of the signifier to the signified, that is, to something radically "other." So instead of a "sign," with its inveterate duality, deconstruction advances the concept of the "trail," which, despite the etymological prototype and grammatical treatment embedded in its meaning ("whose trail?") does not refer back to any original. In terms of postmodern theory one cannot even call this sign-monism, because such monism eliminates the very conception of a sign. This is medialism of the most radical kind, one which not only cannot ascend to a triad but which removes that tension, that frequently risky and predatory dialectic, that lives on in the dualistic model. The terms "other" or "otherness" are brought in to mean the "differences" among signs (or rather, trails) in order to remove the far more radical difference between the sign and the signified, between appearance and essence, superficiality and depth.

The result becomes a world devoid of the "other," consisting instead of perfunctory differences thinly sprinkled with signs. It is the exact same positivism denounced by Mill, Herzen, and Leontiev, only now it has become a positivism of trails and imprints instead of the material originals. Beneath the mask of all-encompassing *différance* all the different occurrences are decidedly indifferent to one another. Gone are the concepts of center and periphery, top and bottom, the spiritual and the carnal, essence and appearance, be-

ginning and end—all is crowded out by the ubiquitous and endless middle. In his book/manifesto on postmodern theology, Mark Taylor lays out this desired topography of the "middle kingdom":

"If die Mitte ist überall, die Mitte is not so much the center as it is the milieu. Moreover, this milieu is not restricted to a particular spatial or temporal point. It is everywhere and everytime. The universality of the medium implies that what is intermediate is not transitory and that what is interstitial is 'permanent.' Though always betwixt 'n between, the 'eternal' time of the middle never begins nor ends."[24]

One can, of course, understand the purported incentive behind the theory of a boundless middle—the desire to find boundaries everywhere, so that the game of crossing boundaries has neither beginning nor end. But such an endless expanse of boundaries—"the boundlessness of boundaries" in Taylor's words—annuls the restrictive nature of boundaries; that is, the very possibility of otherness and transgression.

Along with a neutral space between opposite poles, culture sorely needs a sharply drawn boundary between them. The fact that Russian culture is growing in a "bipolar field of values, bisected by a sharp line" (Lotman, Ouspensky),[25] has its positive value. If this model is annulled in favor of "changing to the pan-European ternary system" (Lotman), then the sharp line will become a wide neutral space breeding legal, scientific, and cultural institutions which are neutral in terms of the moral opposites "good and evil," "mer-

cy and cruelty," "virtue and sin," etc. But then Lotman himself proves brilliantly, in his books *The Structure of the Artistic Text* and *Among Thinking Worlds* that all events take place only along the boundaries. Any narrative—that is, any progression of events—is constructed as a series of intersections between semiotic boundaries: between the center and the periphery, the living and the dead, "the rich and the poor, the familiar and the alien, the orthodox and the heretics, the enlightened and the ignorant, people of Nature and people of Society [etc.] … A textual event is the transportation of a character across the boundary of a semantic field."[26] The sharper the line, the more eventful is its crossing, the more tightly wound the plot. The blurring of boundaries, their transmutation into a wide neutral space, leads to eventlessness, the annulment of plot, when social life begins to resemble a telephone book rather than an adventure novel. In this sense, Western society, with its cancellation of dichotomies and its sharp semantic boundaries diffused into neutral zones, structures itself more and more along the lines of a telephone book, where there is a place for every name, every address, but where there is not and cannot be a captivating plot. The telephone book is the structural prototype of that "matrix of differences" which was superimposed over society by the theory of *différance* and multiculturalism. Written in this telephone book of culture are the addresses of all different cultures and the names of all its representatives, from Shakespeare to Schoink, all in the same brevier. There is room enough for all differences, so that one name cannot be confused with any other, especially since all of them have or will soon be pro-

vided with their own coded sign, something like a "cultural security" number. All of the personages of world history can be found in this telephone book, everything, in fact, but the possibility of carrying on history itself. The history of Western society began as an epic, continued as a novel—and now concludes as a telephone book.[27]

On the brink of the 1990s the American sociologist Francis Fukuyama astounded the intellectual world with his prognosis about the end of history due to the eradication of the last dichotomy—the global rivalry between the democratic and communist political systems. Democracy triumphed and became globalized (with he exception of tiny totalitarian outposts such as North Korea, Iraq, Libya, and Cuba, which are shrinking like shagreen leather). The stormy narratives of world history had a happy ending, which is necessarily followed by a dull, potentially endless and eventless existence: "They lived happily ever after." What goes on after the end of history is no longer a sequence of events, changing significantly over the course of time, but is only the sum total of disparate facts from various fields: medicine, economics, law, etc. Telegraph agency reports are full of such facts, but nothing has epoch-making significance because no further change in epoch can be foreseen; only physical time and geo-cultural space remain. The world is approaching a placid state in which there is no narrative, a nebulous hybrid genre somewhere between an idyll and a telephone book. Such an end to world history seems somehow more dismal than the apocalypse promised by the Russian visionaries of the Silver Age—

Merezhkovsky, Berdiaev—who reiterated John's prophecy that "time would be no more." History, as T. S. Eliot once said, will go out not with a bang, but with whimper. Of course, history could still resume, Fukuyama supposes (quite in the spirit of Dostoyevsky's Underground Man), if mankind, wretched and crazed in its democratic boredom, decides to begin history anew. After all, man is a creature who thrives on events, accustomed to setting up and summarily destroying the boundaries of his own making. Perhaps the agony and insanity of an eventless existence will become an event in itself, laying history's new groundwork; that is, boredom will implode, much as nothingness must have imploded, giving birth to our ever-expanding universe with the "Big Bang."

The post-historical landscape, as conceived by the influential postmodernist theoreticians Deleuze and Guattari, for example, is a landscape without trees, with only an endlessly tangled, soft, and low-lying field of mushrooms. I refer here to their well-known conceptual metaphor for the future, laid out in the introduction to the book *A Thousand Plateaus*. If a tree represents a model of traditional Western civilization, with its dualism, its binary system of valuation, and its logical progression from cause to effect, then the rhizome, sprouting offshoots in all directions, signifies the polysemantic nature of the new post-historical order, with its incessant shifting of values and its nomadic encampments ("deterritorialization" and "nomadism" are two terms successfully introduced into postmodern theory by these two authors). "Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to

any other point . . . It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle from which it grows and which it overspills. It constitutes linear multiplicities with n dimensions having neither subject nor object . . . The rhizome is an antigenealogy. It is a short-term memory, or antimemory."[28] In spite of this Deleuze and Guattari do not notice that in their characterization of the two models, the tree model and the rhizome, they resort to the very one they criticize so harshly—the binary model of the trees—clearly, moreover, with a judgmental preference for one element of a dual opposition over another. "Binary logic is the spiritual reality of the root-tree."[29] The laws of binary, "treelike" logic allow Deleuze and Guattari to assert the superiority of "weeds." However, this paradox escapes the perception of the two authors, who insist upon a new metaphor in its head-on collision with the old.

Similarly, it is impossible not to notice that the examples on which Jacques Derrida builds his theory of *différance* are still the very same old oppositions: nature versus culture, consciousness versus unconsciousness, the written word versus the spoken. In his article entitled "Différance" Derrida writes,

"Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same (the intelligible as differing-deferring the sensible, as the sensible different and deferred; the concept as differ-

ent and deferred, different and deferring intuition; culture as nature different and deferred."[30]

But what sort of différance is this, really, when we remain concerned with the all-too-familiar opposition between the knowable and the sensible, culture and nature? Or take this explanation from Of Grammatology: ". . .the trace whereof I speak is not more natural . . . than cultural, no more physical than psychic, biological than spiritual. It is that starting from which a becoming-unmotivated of the sign, and with it all the ulterior oppositions between physis and its other, is possible."[31] Yet why is the "opposition" between nature and its "other", and not between nature and its opposite? In fact, Derrida always defines différance not in terms of actual difference, but precisely in opposition to such traditional conceptions as logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence.

What perspective, then, does the widening of this boundless middle space provide, already almost totally devoid of edges and judgmental poles, as it becomes more and more of a reality, if not in Western culture then at least in its dominant theories? A continuous and superficial game of sign differences without the transcendent signified resembles a colorful Mayan blanket, which must be flung back to discover the reality behind it—emptiness, an eternal nothing. The theory of deconstruction arouses such keen interest among Eastern theologists (Japanese, Indian, etc.) because it allows them to deconstruct all cultural realities from the "western" viewpoint, uncovering the nothingness which lies at their core. In Deconstruction Theory the apex of Western thought's criti-

cal/rationalistic tradition comes full circle to meet the negativism of Eastern religions. If we equalize the whole world of values on a relative basis, if we conceive it as an infinitely motley and interminable tapestry of differences, then the next impulse to grip transcendent thought, and indeed all eventful human existence, will be to tear down that tapestry; there will be nothing behind it besides Nothingness itself, because the entire world of realities will have been reduced to the flatness of a simulacre.

Herein lies the danger of that tendency toward total neutralization which germinated in Western culture as the progressive and interminable widening of its middle zone, pushing back and engulfing its outer poles. If everything elevated and lowly, sacred and sinful, is pulled into this middle zone, if culture is stripped of its hierarchies and oppositions, if all anomalies are equated with the norms, all centers with the periphery, all great canons with the minor ones, everything elite with the masses, then the opposite to this entire culture will shift into the realm of pure nothingness. And then we can foresee that the next step in the theory and practice of Western thought, after the conceptions of différance, simulacre, and hyperreality, will be "annihilation," playing with nothingness, escape into this nothingness which will have become the only alternative to a culture deprived of all oppositions. The uniformity which was described by Mill and Herzen will pass into a Buddhist renunciation of the world. Western man's existence and thought is impossible without transcendence, without the crossing of boundaries, and if all such boundaries

are removed from culture, if culture becomes a uniform field of differences, then the only boundary left in such an all-encompassing middle will be nothingness. This median culture will plunge into it as soon as it realizes the impossibility of obtaining transcendence from within.

The Ternary Model

Let us make a preliminary summary. The dual model may be destructive of cultural diversity, may condense any or all intermediate zones, reduce differences to nil and replace them with polarity and the battle of opposites. Yet neither does the crumbling of differences to dust when deprived of great dual tensions foster diversity. Dust tends toward monotony, settles into a lump, returns to an amorphous, indivisible mass.

Russian thought put forth its own idea of a "third zone," but not so much an intermediate, neutral zone as a sort of integral one, uniting all antitheses. Soloviev's idea of total unity and global theocracy, the joining of church and state; Merezhkovsky's "third testament" and "religious community"; Rozanov's "saintly flesh"; Fiodorov's concept of a literal resurrection of the dead and heaven on earth; Berdiaev's idea of the all-encompassing act of creation and the establishment of a new heaven and earth; all of these constitute projections of this third space as an all-encompassing synthesis which resolved all cultural contradictions. I bring to bear Merezhkovsky's words: "The unresolvable contradiction between heaven and earth, flesh and spirit, the Father and the Son—this forms the boundary of Christianity, only of Christianity. The final resolution of this contradiction, the ultimate union of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, forms the boundary of the Apocalypse. The revelation of the Holy Spirit is holy flesh, holy land, holy community—

a theocracy, with the church as the kingdom not only of heaven, but also of earth."[32] Obviously, such a project takes us far beyond the framework of culture itself, and represents religion's attempt to overcome culture. The very attempt to merge the secular with the religious is a super-religious, or quasi-religious act.

Having scaled the heights and the abyss of Russian polarity, Berdiaev followed Merezhkovsky in wanting to dissolve it in something greater yet, something which would lead to a deepening, rather than a resolution of this polarity. Berdiaev writes: "We seek a church which could include all the fullness of life . . . This dualism [between the church and the world—M.E.] can no longer be borne, it has become godless, it kills religious life . . . Everything we cherish and value should be able to be found in the church . . ."[33] At the same time, Berdiaev remained completely aware that by standing against dualism and its resolution on the medial, "bourgeois" level of culture, he was dangerously close to supporting the Bolshevik (or, as he put it, "Scythian") attack on the bourgeoisie. Thus Berdiaev was constantly forced to delineate his stance from Scythianism—his fierce hatred of the petty bourgeois middle was too reminiscent of the Bolsheviks'. "In its struggle against mediocrity and moderation, every culture will tend downward, toward the nether abyss, rather than the chasm above. These modern Scythians sing hymns not to a super-cultural, but to a pre-cultural condition."[34] Yet Berdiaev himself is fighting against the mediocrity in any culture: "The creative impulse aimed upward becomes weighed down

by the world and falls. We create cultural values instead of a new being, books and paintings and institutions instead new life, instead of a new world. Culture, books, paintings, and institutions belittle life itself . . ."[35] It happened just so, that two colliding critiques—the Scythian critique of culture "from below" and Berdiaev's "from above"—came together historically in the Russian revolution, which destroyed the entire "middle" culture and, consequently, came to be a crude yet precise parody of the anticipated apocalypse. As a result of the efforts made by Berdiaev and his confederates to overcome the dualism in Russian culture apocalyptically, it was not only unconquered, but terribly strengthened, since every fine middle layer of culture had been destroyed anyway. Instead of the anticipated union between the spirit and the flesh, between the churchly and the worldly, there came about, on the one hand, a ruined economy and the decay of soulless flesh trapped by militant materialism, and on the other the drying up of disembodied spirits, poised at the pinnacles of culture toward even greater heights, toward the realm of militant eschatology.[36]

The idea of a "third creative testament" or the "testament of the Holy Spirit," which Merezhkovsky and Berdiaev proclaimed and which echoed so resoundingly in the Silver Age, is dangerous in the sense that by combining religiosity and the social drive, the depths of the spirit and the depths of the flesh, it becomes intoxicated with this imminent unity and shuns the sober difference between religion and society, thus precluding the very possibility of secularization. In-

deed, according to Merezhkovsky, even the monastic life of spiritual asceticism is a lie, as is the state, since religiosity and the social drive should not exist in isolation from one another. The superiority of the "third testament" lies in its resolution of the contradictions in the first and second testaments; it erases the contrast between the godly and the human through the power of the Holy Spirit. Yet such a "hyper-existent" resolution of contradictions brings us back to the preexistent condition of the world, when it contained nothing but the Spirit itself, floating above the abyss; there is no distinction between light and darkness, heaven and earth, dry land and sea. This unifying Third is brought in to replace the Trinity itself, reducing it to One.

Yet therein lies the essential truth of the ternary model: It cannot be reduced to the third 'state' (in terms of Merezhkovsky's and Berdiaev's definition), which supposedly unites in itself the first and the second. The ternary model is always greater than the third. In this the ternary model differs from Hegel's triad, where the "third" is a synthesis greater by definition than the thesis and the antithesis, thereby negating their opposition within itself. The ternary can be reduced neither to polarity nor to unity, but presupposes the indivisibility and incompatibility of three, including the incompatibility of (1) the religious, (2) the social, and (3) the socio-religious; the corporeal, the spiritual, and the corporo-spiritual. No whole can or should negate the separateness of its components, or more precisely, its perimeters. No synthesis can ever quite reconcile the thesis and the antithesis, eradicate

their essential opposition. A synthesis exists alongside the thesis and antithesis, not in their stead. A synthesis can absorb the thesis and antithesis only incompletely; they remain beyond the boundaries of synthesis, just as they skirt the edges of their medial link, their plectrum. Neither unification nor mediation can exhaust every possible relation of the thesis and antithesis to each other: relations of irony and the grotesque, parody and paradox, ambivalence and tragicomedy. Neither the grandiose, harmonic synthesis nor the businesslike, efficient middle zone can contain that which is revealed in the direct interaction of thesis and antithesis—the irony and tragedy of their inversion, their transposition, their mutual amplification.

This is why, in speaking of the ternary model, it is crucial to differentiate it from the unitary one, whether in its neutral-intermediate or in its integrated, unifying permutation (the model associated with Hegel and Soloviev). The elevated and the lowly are mediated, but cannot be reduced to their median; they can unite in some third, integrated state, but cannot be reduced to it. Otherwise we are left with the crude division between mediocracy and ideocracy, with a bourgeois culture or totalitarianism. Both Russian religious thought, which sought to resolve the opposition between "God and the world" or "Christ and this life" in the third testament, synthesizing the "spirit" and the "flesh"; and Western secular thought, seeking an objective middle zone where reason could be affirmed upon its own neutral foundation ("neither to cry nor to laugh, but to understand"—Spinoza), never generated a specifically ternary model for the development of

culture. Neither the Aristotelian model (the third as median, as moderation) nor the Hegelian (the third as One, as synthesis) can resolve the enigma of the Trinity, because it really cannot be resolved, if by resolution one means some sort of simplification, a reduction to two or to one. Neither the first, in the capacity of median, nor the latter, in the capacity of a Whole, can exhaust every possible interrelation within the Trinity.

Overall the ternary model has not yet been duly explored in the study of the humanities. Neither the recognized dialectics (Hegel's positive dialectic, or the Frankfurt School's negative one), nor Niels Bohr's concept of supplementation, or the structuralist view of binary opposition, or the idea of mediation, achieves the comprehensive richness of the ternary model. All of them reduce the tension between antitheses either to synthesis or to an intermediate link (a plectrum or an inter-thesis); or they leave them in a state of pressured confrontation, as inveterate contradiction and negation (Theodor Adorno); or else they stop on the very fact of dualistic opposition as the source of all meaningful distinctions among the elements. At the same time the third is either excluded or, on the contrary, replaces the first two strictly polar elements, in the name of either mediation (the neutral zone) or totalization (the merging of opposites). Yet the truth is that all three of these relations unfold and interact between the poles, and none of them is reducible to the others: (1) mediation (the model of Western worldly culture); (2) totalization (the German philosophical or Russian religious synthesis); and—the

least theoretically developed type—(3) direct interaction and inverse of the poles (opposition, inversion, transposition, and substitution).

Along with all of this, the introduction of an intermediate, "worldly" zone into the ternary model may preclude some kinds of direct oppositional interrelation, but preserve others. For instance, the resolution of the neutral zone might prevent a revolutionary inversion of the poles, when the absolute dominion of one is replaced by the same absolute dominion of the other. The middle layer keeps these poles in balance and prevents one from dominating the other, since this domination would require opposing not only the opposite pole, but also the middle zone, the mass and resistivity of which are too great to dominate successfully. In the ternary model the neutral zone generally owes its growth to political, social, juridical, and economic institutions, which fully take on a worldly character, separating themselves equally from both positive and negative (inverted, atheistic) religions. On the other hand, in the sphere of spiritual culture and private life (morality, religion, art, philosophy, all the different areas of human interest) direct interaction between the poles is retained (1) on the level of their distinction (i.e., the moral choice between good and evil, asceticism and hedonism, etc.); (2) on the level of their various combinations and transpositions (parody, grotesque); and (3) on the level of their paradoxical mutual augmentation when the extreme (or the flip-side) of stupidity becomes wisdom, when loquacity harbors silence, when filth turns into godly purity, etc. The middle zone prevents only the absolute do-

minion of one pole over another, not their transpositions and interactions. And conversely, the pressured opposition of these poles, passing into their paradoxical/ambivalent/grotesque forms of interaction, lessens the danger of violent, revolutionary subordination of one to the other.

The direct, unmediated relation of positive to negative, the elevated to the lowly (for example, wisdom and folly) consists, first of all, of a serious opposition of values (the opposition of wisdom and folly as presented, for example, in the teachings of King Solomon); second, it entails their revolutionary inversion (the fool ruling the wise man, and instructing him); third, their parodied mutual substitution (the fool takes on the guise of a wise man, the wise man pretends to be foolish); fourth, their grotesque juxtaposition (wise words combined with foolish actions); fifth, their paradoxical conversion, so that seemingly foolish words conceal the deepest wisdom, while wise teachings reveal pride and vainglory. Indeed, it is written that "the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God" (1 Corinthians 3:19), and conversely, foolishness of the "Socratic" or "idiot" type might contain a well of wisdom. All five indications—polarity, revolution, parody, the grotesque, and the paradoxical—are characteristic of Russian culture and create a wealth of meaning especially for the dualistic model, which cannot be realized in a neutral zone, but demands direct interaction between the poles. Heaven and hell, the sacred and the sinful can correlate in both a mediated and a direct way, as a passing through purgatory and as a headlong fall. Tragedy and comedy fit

not in a neutral zone, but along the harsh line dividing "the ideal of Sodom " and "the ideal of the Madonna," as does a fundamental and inadequately studied category of Russian culture, the tragicomedy. Nor is that ambivalence which is considered a particular feature of Russian culture a neutralization; on the contrary, it indicates the strengthening of both poles when faced with the possibility of transposition, so that love turns into jealousy and hatred, pride into shame and repentance, etc. The dualistic model is remarkable not for the struggle of opposites—for such a struggle actually bespeaks a tendency to monism, to one extreme crowding out the other—but for a growing tension between poles, even their mutual tragic amplification, as well as their comic superpositions, absurdities, and substitutions.

Inversion as a Category of Russian Culture

A certain misleading gesture is characteristic of Russian culture—distortion and substitution, when a visible object presupposes something quite opposite to its apparent nature. In the most general sense, this distorting mechanism can be characterized as irony or mockery, but it is important to underscore that this irony is rather objective than subjective; it is brought to bear when circumstances mock a person, when all of his plans turn inside out and against him. Western categories of "irony" (such as romantic irony, when the subject endlessly surpasses himself) or "alienation," when as a result of a long and objective historical process, man's creation separates itself and acquires its own power over him, do not quite apply here. They are akin to stepping on a rake and hitting oneself in the forehead. Russian historical experience has summarized this effect in a single common yet clever phrase, literally "what once we fought for, now we trip over."

Let us call this most common quality in Russian culture "inversion" (*vyvert*), when some store of pent-up effort is momentarily turned inside-out, its effect directed the opposite way. Russian history is rich with such inversions, the most obvious of which being the Bolshevik Revolution and the most recent being the August putsch of 1991. The inversion is not simply an overturn, when opposing sides, top and bottom, change places. If such an overturn had actually occurred in 1917, there would have been no so-called

"dictatorship of the proletariat," no collectivization, no party-ocracy or Lenin-Stalin regime. That was not an overturn, but an inversion—an overturn that cruelly mocked the very meaning of overturn, when the dregs, having risen to the top, became even more lawless and impoverished, while the elevated ones, having fallen, were forced beyond the country's borders into an alien existence, or even non-existence. For instance, when Lopakhin becomes master of the "Cherry Orchard" where his ancestors had toiled as serfs, it seems like a simple, "normal" overturn. But one can imagine what would have happened to the Lopakhins after 1917; even if they survived in the guise of certified peasants, the descendents of serfs, what would have become of them after 1929 as members of the "Kulak element," as the mechanism of "overturn" continued to come undone? As the writer Vladimir Sharov remarks about Chekhov's characters, "in those early years [the first overturn—M.E.] they didn't think it would be a ball that kept rolling and rolling . . . they saw a simple cube, which would flip from one face to another and then stay perfectly still."[37] The Russian model is not a cube flipped from side to side, but a spinning ball. Various Russian colloquialisms, from the words "idiosyncratic" to "stern," are literal variations on the word for "spinning." What spins in one direction can easily be untwisted in the other.

One of the latest of these inversions, so characteristic of Russian culture, is conceptualism, which proposes its own means to battle the Platonic ecstasies of the fatherland's history and ideology. This can be done the Aristotelian way, as Sergei Averintsev proposes in

his aforementioned work, or the Sorokhinian way, the Prigovian way, etc., without neutralizing, but rather by inverting the Platonic discourse. Conceptualism inverts Soviet ideology (as well as Russian psychology, and in a sense, that of all the world's cultures) in such a way as to push its values to an extreme, to some sort of ecstasy which, as soon as it reaches the terminus of its momentum, immediately inverts itself toward the exact opposite pole of cynical mockery. The conceptual world feeds on such bipolarity (that is, the art of eccentricities, overturns, fits of hysterical laughter). The contemporary conceptualist prosaist Vladimir Sorokin defines his writing method thus: "I am seeking some sort of harmony between two styles, trying to join the high and the low. The attempt to unite opposites is a dialectical act for me and flows out into the symbiosis of textual strata."[38] It might be more accurate to say that the union of the elevated and the base in Sorokin's prose rests not on harmony, but on the spinning and inversion of the poles. The same image unravels itself from one extreme to the other.

In any case, for the purpose of straightening our view, it appears no less productive to read Plato and Sorokin simultaneously, peering suspiciously from one to the other, than it is to read Aristotle. Let us try, then, to place Plato's dialogue on "Politics" side by side with Sorokin's book *The Norm*.

In Plato we read:

"Stranger: 'It is difficult, my dear Socrates, to demonstrate anything of real importance without the use of

paradigm . . . Example, my good friend, has been found to require an example . . . We have tried to discover the nature of example in general by studying a small and particular example of an example . . . Well, then, what example is there on a really small scale which we can take and set beside statehood, and which, because it comprises an activity common to it and to statehood can be of real help to us in finding what we are looking for?"[39]

In *The Norm* [40] Sorokin demonstrates this diversity of the little norms that make up the lives of ordinary Soviet citizens, who in turn comprise the one vast norm of the state.

"She sat once again, opened the desk drawer:
—I'll never manage the norm.
—Just do it.

Olia took out the packet containing the remains of the norm, began to pinch off pieces and eat them." (14)

"Down there the swollen, water-logged norm was floating, bumping up against the granite.
—Len, what is that, some sort of brick . . .?
—Wait, that's the norm.

The young man's face became serious." (30)

“On the packet the word NORM was printed in red. The packet was slightly torn. Georgii peeked inside.

—The norm . . . of all things . . . —Ekaterina Borisovna sighed.

—Can I look at it, Auntie Kate?—Georgii was turning the packet over and over in his hands." (51).

If, having read Sorokin, we turn back to re-read Plato, then the latter's words about "knowing the nature of the norm through its parts" and "the small satisfying norm" will also acquire a certain additional, "conceptual" meaning—that very meaning which unites our experience of the communist construction with Plato's utopian state. And it will become clear that Sorokin's play on the concept of "the norm," which the citizens of the Most Normal State are forced to swallow, suppressing their revulsion at its taste and smell, corresponds marvelously to Aristotle's critique of Plato's teachings about ideas. According to Aristotle, Plato duplicates the physical world in the world of ideas in vain, because these ideas are empty categories, adding nothing to the things they represent; yet, as Plato's social teaching makes evident, ideas still demand sacrifices of society, of real people. Perhaps Aristotle and Sorokin are not so divergent in their anti-Platonic worldviews—this "philosopher," the primary tutor of European thought, and the self-proclaimed "monster of Russian literature."

Of course, one cannot fail to agree with Averintsev that Platonic ecstasies proved to be the bane of Russian history, culminating in the literally realized project of a communist state. The failure of Soviet Marxism was, essentially, the failure of historical Pla-

tonism the world over, of the long quest for the kingdom of ideas incarnated on earth.[41] Pointing to Aristotle, Averintsev touches the sore spot in contemporary Russia's self-awareness. In such a blind rush toward some unknown goal, century after century, the moment of truth is missed. One regrets the lost centuries, regrets that in Russia "the meeting with Aristotle just didn't happen."[42] But the question is, can one begin anew and, having given up the Platonic line of thought, push Russian mentality back to that historical point where it is possible once again to assimilate Aristotle organically? Is this not the same as proclaiming post-Soviet Russia the spiritual descendent of Kievan Russia, and forgetting Batyi and Lenin like a bad dream? Or is there no other foundation to build upon besides these very same smoking Soviet ruins, besides the funereal Platonic trenches which appeared instead of the ideal Platonic state—that is, can one carry on only from one's own end, and not from another's beginning?

If this is so, then conceptualism, that frivolous technobabble replacing the stately ruins of Platonism, appears quite an appropriate, even an "organic" way out of the collapsed aluminum castle, a moment of clarity, a keen re-assignment of all native historical ugliness to a foolish and furtive art. Conceptualism became so fundamental to contemporary Russian culture because in its very essence this is a culture of spinning, overturning conceptions. The Russian tradition of inversion works to subvert Platonism here, instead of the neutral thought-mechanism to which Averintsev appeals in the Western/Aristotelian system. One extreme

answers the other. Of course, Prigov and Rubenstein, Sorokin and Kibirov are no Aristotles; their only, maybe ludicrous merit lies in their beginning from exactly the same spot where Soviet history left all of us. To stay put does not seem like much of a distinction, but in these authors, who appeared to freeze on command at the final threshold of the Soviet epoch, one can acknowledge a certain sentry-like dignity, or even the dignity of posts rooted deeply in the soil of their time.

Secularity and Banality

Yet why go to ancient Greece for the "rule of moderation" when Russia has its own Aristotles—that line of moderate realism which corresponds with political liberalism and with the attempt to build an ethic and an aesthetic upon a social foundation? While Averintsev writes of Christian Aristotelianism, there was also a version that was not Christian, not religious at all. Russia even has its "Aristotle" in the most characteristic area of culture—in belles-lettres. The acknowledged bearer of this title in the Russian pantheon is Chekhov, who wrote: "I lost my faith somewhere long ago, and can only be perplexed by any intelligent believer . . . The religious movement is one thing, and all of modern culture is another . . . Today's culture has begun to work toward a great future, and the religious movement [mysticism and Merezhkovsky's "neo-Christianity"] is a relic living out its last days."[43] Anton Pavlovich Chekhov is a dependable shield against all manner of Platonic ecstasies, the ecstasies of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Berdiaev and Merezhkovsky. As the last great pre-revolutionary liberal, Miliukov, wrote, "mental sobriety and the discipline of common sense protected Chekhov from all manner of utopias and illusions."[44] Chekhov's modesty endears him to Russians as a banner of their ripening secular culture. If Pushkin concludes Russia’s first period of secularization, then Chekhov begins the second, after Gogol and Belinsky, after Dostoyevsky, after Tolstoy. But this second secularization was never actually achieved—it was cut short by an anti-religious revolu-

tion. For precisely this reason, we need Chekhov now as never before. In the words of Dmitri Shalin, "Now more than ever before we need a theory and, more important, a practice not just of 'small' but of 'the very smallest acts' . . . This practice of intelligence and decency dates back to Stankevich, Granovsky, Chicherin, Chekhov, Gershenzon, Struve, and every other Russian liberal both of the last century and of this one who acknowledged the fact that civic society and civility are, in the end, one and the same."[45]

Chekhov turned out to be a sort of untouchable figure in Russian culture by the very virtue of his seeming moderation. Chekhov suffers in an imperfect world but does not permit himself to guide its course. The cult of Chekhov has outlasted Tolstoy's and Gorky's, Lenin's and Stalin's, and will outlast many more cults, of writers and non-writers alike. Dmitri Galkovsky remarks, "In light of the conditions that have grown up around Chekhov's name, writing about this person means surrendering one's own dignity. It's indecent. This is it, Chekhov has already been 'done' . . . Even Pushkin scholars, all right, something human will occasionally (occasionally) come through, but Chekhov . . . is a banner."[46] The banner of Russian secular culture is indeed this "most human of men," without pomp or ideological magic tricks. But if we want to determine the secular future of Russian culture we must understand why it wasn't realized in Chekhov, why it was interrupted mid-sentence. We will have to "undo" the already "finished" Chekhov—"undo" used in the Western sense of another verb, so ponderous-sounding in Russian: "to deconstruct."

Chekhov remains the most secular of Russian writers, yet his work presents a scathing critique of secularity under the name of "common vulgarity" and "philistinism." Thus, in terms of his artistic fate, Chekhov is the most well-off and "well-rounded" of Russian writers. As Victor Erofeev notes, "his secret is that he pleased everyone. He pleased the Reds and the Whites, progressives and conservatives, atheists and churchgoers, moralists and cynics. Moreover, Chekhov is readily accepted by two traditionally irreconcilable currents of Russian thought: the Westernizers and the Slavophiles. In this regard Chekhov is truly unique."[47] Erofeev himself doesn't offer a solution to this riddle, except to say that Chekhov's ideas were so widespread and self-evident that no one could disagree with them; that is, the author was as banal as his characters. For example, in "Gooseberries," while no one agrees with Chekhov's characters when they want to cultivate gooseberry bushes in their small garden, everyone agrees with Chekhov, who says that gooseberries are not enough for true and complicated happiness. Everyone understands that the sight of people trapped in a cage is common and repulsive. But at the end of the short story, when the veterinarian Ivan Ivanovich begins to hold forth against caged men, he is himself capable of expressing nothing but commonplace banalities: "To tolerate insults and humiliations, to dare not say that you side with free, honest people, and to lie yourself, to smile, all for a piece of bread, for a warm corner, for some little bureaucrat who's not worth two cents—no, I cannot live this way anymore!" This sounds trite, though not repulsive. But Chekhov

understands perfectly well that within the framework of his own secular worldview it is hard to criticize repulsive commonplaces from any perspective but that of some other, nobler commonplaces. Therefore he makes the following move, which lays bare his most "Chekhovian" quality. The teacher Burkin's retort to Ivan Ivanovich's noble commonplace closes the story: "'Well now, you're coming from a different opera, Ivan Ivanovich,' said the teacher. 'Let's go to bed.'"

This retort is not especially expressive, but it alone rings true from the writer's strategic perspective. Chekhov lets us know that Ivan Ivanovich's speeches are also pompous and trite—"from a different opera." What sort of speech, then, is not trite? Silence. Burkin suggests going to sleep; that is, he returns words to their subjective meaning, their "utilitarian function," thus putting an end to speech, making it obsolete. The characters go up to bed—this concludes their conversations and Chekhov's conversation with the reader. That is, to surpass the boundaries of repulsive banality and its opposing noble banality, one can only be silent and give in to a state of natural banality, so to speak—sleeping, eating, breathing. This is the third and final level to which we are led, no longer by Chekhov's words, but by Chekhov's silence.

And this is why everyone loves Chekhov, and why he satisfies everyone: with Chekhov one can crusade against banality and simultaneously recline on its soft bed; be noble and natural at the same time; rail against the well-fed philistines and at the same time eat with relish oneself, because when Chekhov eats, he is also silent—in Merezhkovsky's words, "a holy silence with

regard to holiness." So the noble Merezhkovsky comes to Chekhov to share his hatred for the philistines and strikes up a conversation about eternity, about the meaning of life, about "the single teardrop of a suffering child, which cannot be forgiven"—and in reply Chekhov suggests ordering the hot-pot at Testov's, and not to forget a large bottle of vodka. At first, Merezhkovsky confesses that "I was disappointed, even hurt: here I was speaking to him of eternity, while he's going on about his hot-pot. It was irritating, this indifference, even seeming contempt for universal questions."[48] But soon even Merezhkovsky sees the light and is moved: it turns out that the hot-pot stood for no more and no less than an entire system of apophatic silence about the most important things. From which it follows: "How joyful, how blessed it is to keep silent about the sacred."[49] Such is the current of Russian thought: it can find nothing better to bring forth against "catophatic" banality than "apophatic" banality. As an alternative to a hot-pot accompanied by philistine conversation and elevated conversation minus the hot-pot we get the hot-pot and a weighty silence. In Chekhov, Russia found its secular ideal—a secularity which defuses the culture's religious tension and simultaneously, in accordance with the culture's religious programming, comes forth as a critique of secularity. The result of this secular critique of secularity was, of course, not the flowering of social civilization, but rather absolute zero, a full-weight zero which silently appears to contain in itself the absolute.

Let us recall the short story "The House with the Mezzanine": the protagonist, an idle artist, is in love with a

girl whose older sister, Lydia, is a zealous activist in the field of rural enlightenment, fussing over hospitals and schools for the peasants. What happens? Chekhov chuckles a little at the artist, but even more so at the dry and callous 'activist,' who cannot accept the gentle love between the artist and her sister and whisks the girl far away from this loafer. What sort of social civilization could grow up in a country whose most prominent social writer dreams of such civilization blossoming on the one hand, and on the other condemns it as banal and philistine? He condemns a doctor for being nothing but a doctor ("Ionich," "A Dull Tale"), a landowner for being nothing but a landowner (*Uncle Vanya*), a teacher for only being a teacher ("The Literature Teacher"), the summer-cottage dweller for being nothing else (various stories and plays). The same thing takes place in *The Cherry Orchard*: on the one hand we have Ranevskaya and Gaiev, with their aristocratic mythology and lyricism; on the other we have Lopakhin, with his mercantile pragmatism. Chekhov points up the inadequacies of both—he is a social writer who, deep down, both loves and despises society. This was the Bolsheviks' reason for co-opting Chekhov into the ranks of their confederates, especially when taking a third force into account—the phrasemongering jester Petya Trofimov, who has a minor revolutionary past, but perhaps a great future. In Vladimir Sharov's novel *How Can I Not Regret . . .* Trofimov's fate is thus projected: "In the play he was already going bald, but here it is, 1917, and Trofimov's fortunes take a sharp upward turn. . . In the district he will start out heading the Cheka, move on the Party Committee, and then he will be summoned to Mos-

cow, where he will go into law practice."[50] The antitheses of society and anti-banality produced a synthesis in the form of a society which could provide a non-banal, historically universal solution—that is, in the form of Bolshevism, of a man no longer holding Gaiev's billiards cue or Lopakhin's country ax, but a rifle and a banner.

Alas, Chekhov's social criticism of banality and philistinism had only one possible resolution, only one way out—from behind a barricade. Since society came forth as a positive antithesis to religion ("survival"), society itself became rejected as the embodiment of banality and philistinism; the result of such a "rejection of rejection" could only be religious conviction of supreme worldliness—that is, the church of Belinsky and Lenin, anti-religious construction on a grandiose religious scale, the religious consecration of the social idea. Therefore the Bolsheviks' conclusions about Chekhov proved more correct than Merezhkovsky's; he was ready only to join Chekhov in holy silence about everything holy, while the Bolsheviks were eager to demonstrate how beautiful life on earth would be in five hundred years, and how a diamond-studded sky could be turned into "little lamps for Lenin." These are no longer the small crusades of Lydia Volchaninova, but social crusades so great that they become socialist, removing the antithesis from society and religion and merging one into the other.

Chekhov's paired images of feckless dreamers and narrow-minded pragmatists recall the interrelation between Goncharov's characters Oblomov and Stoltz;

here was another preeminent Russian social writer who also pleased everyone, especially with the character of "Oblomov." As a social writer, Goncharov cannot help but to be enraptured by Stoltz, with his European, enterprising nature. But as a Russian writer, Goncharov cannot fail to show the pettiness and inadequacies of precisely this sort of social activism. In effect, then, doing nothing, like Oblomov, is wrong, but doing something, like Stoltz, is also not too admirable. Would that one could "do everything," solve all the world's problems at once—but alas, this third option is not permitted. It is not permitted to anyone except social radicals, who enjoyed such success in Russia precisely because they addressed secular questions on a religious scale; instead of fussing around a gooseberry bush, they undertook a re-working of the soil itself. Happy-go-lucky Russian idleness and petty Western pragmatism came together in this doing of everything.

Chekhov is not just a social, but a socio-apophatic writer. He came up with a way to utter banalities with impunity, even eliciting compassion for his sorrow, as though implying that something underlies these banalities, some sort of breakthrough, a hope, a diamond-studded sky, etc., but that this could not be stated directly, since any words would come out trite, and so once again one could only grieve and hope. As an aside, the immortal phrase "the frost quickened," with which Chekhov rewards the hackneyed writer Vera Iosievna, wife of the tiresome Ivan Petrovich Turkin, in the short story "Ionich"—this phrase is very typical of Chekhov. In the same story we encounter

gems quite worthy of Vera Iosievna's pen: "the torchlight of the moon"; "in every grave you feel the presence of a secret, promising a calm, beautiful, eternal life"; "the moonlight inflamed his passion . . ."[51] Chekhov learned to write phrases along the lines of "rain dotted the courtyard" (from "Ionich") in such a way that revealed a gentle mockery of their inherent banality.

In those rare instances in which he actually does try to say something of his own, to express fully his worldview, he ends up with true rhetorical banalities, now devoid of any sorrow whatsoever, such as: "I hate dishonesty and violence in any form. . . My holy of holies is the human body, mind, talent, inspiration, love, and absolute freedom."[52] Here Chekhov speaks no better than his own characters, such as Ivan Ivanovich or Doctor Astrov, who pronounced: "Everything in man should be beautiful: face, clothing, soul, thoughts . . ." Both of these well-known formulations of the Chekhovian ideal are striking in their enumerative tone, reminiscent of greeting cards, anniversary salutations, or the perfunctory closing lines of a letter: "Dear friend! We are enraptured by your wit and talent and wish you happiness, health, love, inspiration, and great creative success!" As a matter of fact, Chekhov was himself a master of this epistolary genre. Chekhov's "social ideal" lacks any sort of meaningful tension; it is purely enumerative and could easily be any list of "good" things: "The human body, the mind, talent, interesting books, heart-to-heart talks, good food, acacias in bloom, a little cottage by the Black Sea,

sunshine, seagulls, salt-lipped kisses . . . love and the most absolute freedom."

As for Astrov's timeless aphorism "everything should be beautiful" (so frequently quoted that is no longer associated with the character, but with the author himself), it applies to Elena Andreyevna Serebriakova in *Uncle Vanya*, of whom it is said in the next sentence: "She is lovely, there's no question of that, but . . . all she does is eat, sleep, take walks, enchant us all with her beauty . . . and nothing else."[53] That is, even for Chekhov the socialite, it is not enough for beauty to embody everything good—it must also serve some purpose. Wherever Chekhov the thinker subscribes to the virtue of "good deeds" and activism as a social ideal, Chekhov the writer demonstrates the banality of the social ideal. But despite all this Chekhov's words remain within the rigid, now almost canonical perimeters of banality, which are made apparent only by the sudden leaps from one level of banality to another, from "everything should be beautiful" to "let's go to bed." Here, for instance, Astrov addresses Voinitsky in *Uncle Vanya*: "Yes, chum. In this whole district there were only two decent, intelligent people: me and you. But in these last ten years or so this philistine, contemptible life drew us in; it polluted our blood with its foul vapors, and we became just as shallow as the rest of them. (Hastily) But don't try to change the subject on me now. You give me back what you took from me."[54] With that little word "hastily" Chekhov immediately changes this trite monologue about banality from a high to a low register. And so it goes in all of Chekhov's writing: banality stands out in relief only

against the background of another banality, creating the illusion of contrast and shade, as one would pass from twilight into deeper darkness.

Chekhov had a remarkable ability to "seduce" into banality even writers whose work contrasted his in every way; for example, Merezhkovsky, who dedicated his sketch "The Asphodel and the Daisy" to Chekhov, meant that the latter was a pure and simple daisy among all the decadent asphodels. Is "Chekhov the daisy" not terribly trite? In response to his wife's requests to drop the mocking tone in his letters and to speak, finally, from the heart, Chekhov replied, "But what is there, really, for us to talk about, o crocodile of my heart? I already love you anyway." Everyone from Bunin to Gorky found Chekhov's habit of laughing off serious questions sweet; one imagined some underlying depth of feeling ('he suffered in silence, he understood better than anyone . . .'). It took a new generation of Russian writers, it seems, to find the key to Chekhov and to understand that the great exposer of banality was in fact himself quite on the level of what he denounced and grieved over. But such exposés of Chekhov—"hypocrite!"—also smack of Chekhov's eternal banality, from which there seems to be no escape. Even in exposing it one finds oneself repeating Chekhov's lines: "Yes, my lad . . . the philistine life is sucking us in . . . "One simply cannot discuss Dostoyevsky, Gogol, or Pushkin on the same level as Chekhov—they demand a different discourse.

Generally, "banality" is a crucial category in Russian culture, a negative signifier of the "average" or "mid-

dle ground" and hence so difficult to translate into other European languages. Nabokov's frequent use of this concept of "banality" underscores its untranslateability, bespeaks his identification with Russian culture despite all the apparent "Westernness" of his artistic etiquette, so far removed from all these hysterical chasm-gazers, all these Dostoyevskys and Merezhkovskys. The constant references to "banality"—the banality of Freudians, Marxists, humanists, romantics, realists, Goethe, Sartre, Pasternak, etc.—all reveal Nabokov to be a quintessentially Russian writer.[55] The disappearance of "banality" and "philistinism" as categories from the front lines of the cultural dialogue will mark Russian culture's tentative acceptance of the "middle" as a positive category.

The Demonic

And so, the poles in Russian culture do not so much move apart and make room for neutral space as they come together and join, creating unbelievable tension at their boundary, making it both threshold and precipice. The ideals of Sodom and the Madonna unite in a single heart, and the result (as Dostoyevsky tells us) is a rupture in the salon, a rupture in the peasant hut, and a rupture under the open sky. Russian culture is characterized by inversion and rupture, when opposites are not mediated or united in harmony, but rather generate extreme tension which "ruptures" its bearer—that is, weakens him to the same degree to which he carries inside himself this conjoining force that tears him apart. The words "strain" and "rupture" contain a semantic opposition: on the one hand is the excessive tension between forces pulling in opposite directions; on the other are the damage and collapse resulting from unbearable tension. Power crosses its threshold, exceeds its measure. Russia is breaking open, with its vast expanses being eaten away by emptiness from the inside. Wide is the land, wide is the man . . . Everything exceeds the measure and yet doesn't quite reach it either. All is both more and less than necessary, because the fault-line lies along the center, through the coordinates of norm and measure. Only an explosion can unite the poles—that is, an excess even greater than that contained in the poles themselves. For that third element which conjoins thesis and antithesis is actually neither synthesis nor middle ground, but an even greater extreme in rela-

tion to both. The heart that houses both ideals of Sodom and the Madonna is not a purgatory but a monster, simultaneous heaven and hell; it should not exist. The very ideals of Sodom and the Madonna are not so opposite in relation to each other as their combination is in relation to both. "Here," in Dostoyevsky's words, "the different shores come together, here all contradictions coexist." The main contradiction is not between the poles as such, but between their polarity (so comprehensible and monosemantic) and their incredible combination in one heart. This is not mediation, the smoothing and reconciliation of extremes, but is, on the contrary, an outlet to an even greater extreme, which elicits horror even from Dmitri Karamazov—and Russians call this the beauty that underlies culture. "Beauty is an awful and terrifying thing! . . . The horror of it is that beauty is not just terrifying, but also a mysterious thing."[56]

Russian culture is this "mysterious thing." The very existence of the culture entails an impossible rupture, because between the church, on the one hand, and the somnolent vegetation and demonic sport on the other, there is nothing. Andrei Tarkovsky expresses this vividly in his film *Andrei Rublev*: the claustrophobic interior of the church, surrounded by atrocity and emptiness outside. "Either/or." There is no place for culture; there is only the razor blade that slices it apart. There is only a threshold which cannot be trodden, only crossed. Russian culture shatters along the very line it crosses. Where parts should grow together, a new split occurs. After all, Dostoyevsky does not even mention the existence of decent people between the

ideals of Sodom and the Madonna, people who sin, who improve themselves, people of the world—the social ideal or the bourgeois reality. No: there is a distinct Sodom and a distinct Madonna, and the truly horrifying mystery is that they can coexist within a single person. In this torn and rupturing culture, "terrible" beauty conjoins extremes rather than accepting them. It crosses the fault-line at an even pace: church and the world, czar and the people, the aristocracy and the peasants, the intelligentsia and the uneducated; there is no way to fill in this crack. The reforms of Peter the Great added a new split to the old ones: the split between the West and the Russia inside Russia. Belinsky, Gogol . . . all are phenomena of this rupture in Russian culture, when one extreme becomes another, wild laughter turns into prayer, and love for mankind freezes on the lips in a curse.

In contemporary literature as well, everything creatively appreciable becomes immediately polarized—not along the lines of social classes, in monosemantic opposition to each other, but precisely along the line of an inner split. After all, even that thickening toxicity which is often identified as the ruling tendency in modern literature, its post-Soviet decadence—graphic realism, sadism, aggression, sexual deviance, absurdity, foul language, violence, cannibalism, necrophilia—in the writings of Mamleev, Sorokin, Petrushevskaya, Sharov, Nabrikova, Erofeev, Pelevin—all of it remains indicative of the same rupture, taken to some new level. One cannot agree that this contemporary literary "black magic" is being set off against the "white magic" of its classical traditions. Such a juxtaposition is made

on both sides—as much by those critics who denounce the new literature for its deviation from humanist ideals as by those who are happy to hold yet another funeral for humanism. Victor Erofeev, who compiled an anthology of contemporary prose entitled *Russia's Flowers of Evil*, rightly notes that in Soviet times, both official and dissident literature "shared a root system" of hyper-moral values,[57] but for some reason fails to notice that his precious "evil flowers," gathered from the fields of contemporary literature, share this same root system with nineteenth-century Russian literature. Moreover, the anti-moralism which links many of the writers in *Russia's Flowers of Evil* is nothing more than the continuation of that same hypermoralism (that is, the inveterate extreme written into the "hyper" prefix itself), and thus passes easily into its own opposite, as in hypertonia and hypotonia, hyperbole and litotes, praise and mockery. After all, any hyperbole (for example, "it is a rare bird that can make it halfway across the Dnepr" [Gogol]), is also a litotes: what kind of bird is this, if it can't even make it halfway across the Dnepr? Probably not an eagle or a hawk . . . The hyperbole of the river turns into the litotes of the bird. Thus, Russian literature's moral excess rendered it simultaneously pliant and vulnerable to toxicity.

The main point omitted in Erofeev's formula about "Russia's flowers of evil," about the new, openly negative Russian literature, which supposedly opposes both the "benevolent" classical and the pseudo-benevolent Soviet literatures, is that the poles of good and evil had always come together in Russian litera-

ture and continue to do so, remarkably without becoming isolated from each other, but creating linguistic catastrophes, short circuits: flashes of light alternating with sudden darkness. Who are Sorokin and Erofeev to teach Dostoyevsky and Gogol, Pushkin and Lermontov, about evil? The Party secretary munching on his own or someone else's excrement (a typical character in Sorokin's short stories) is nothing but a malicious child compared to Svidrigailov, Stavrogin, Iudushka Golovlev, Blok's and Mayakovsky's lyrical heroes, or even Pushkin's Salieri and Don Juan. The former is an innocent evil, a wild flower. Erofeev uses this 'wildflower' metaphor to juxtapose the literature of evil with the literature of good: "Literature once smelled of wildflowers and fresh hay, but now new smells arise, this stench. Everything stinks . . . Faith and reason no longer count for anything; the role of unfortunate accidents, of chance in general increases."[58] As if Smerdiakov (literally "Stinker") didn't stink in the nineteenth century, as if a stench didn't rise up from Raskolnikov's Petersburg in the summer, as if the Underground Man didn't negate faith and reason. Erofeev borrowed all of these problems, and even all of the vocabulary, from that very "good old Russian literature" exemplified by Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Schedrin, Rozanov, and Blok. Erofeev uses this dualistic model himself: "The pendulum swung away from lifeless, abstract humanism, the hypermoralistic tilt was straightened. A bright page of evil has been written into Russian literature."[59] Note how consistently Erofeev uses humanistic clichés in order to turn them inside-out. How many times have we heard the words "a bright new heroic page has been written into Rus-

sian literature (history, culture)"? Erofeev replaces heroics and humanism with "evil"—"a bright page of evil . . ." etc., still abiding by the rules of dualistic transposition.

But such a juxtaposition of new and old literature, while quite adequately contained within the perimeters of the "dualistic model," is unfair not only toward Russian classical literature, which penetrates the depths of evil, but also toward the new Russian literature, which simmers and despairs along the very same dualistic model, because it knows and sees, if not with its eyes then with the back of its head, in its bones, that somewhere out there is a gaping chasm of light. I bring to bear the words of the composer Alfred Schnitcke about Erofeev's stories, those plucked evil flowers: "You immediately experience that double effect of encountering something long familiar, yet absolutely unprecedented, that shock of seeing hell and heaven simultaneously, which is happening within all of us . . . You are not sure of what has left you breathless—your indignation at the profane subjects and characters, or the charged, hushed atmosphere, with its keenly perceptible martyr-like holiness."[60]

These words about the meeting of heaven and hell are a splendid formula not only for the new Russian literature, but also for the deep-laid model of all Russian culture. Centuries after centuries passed, but purgatory never appeared. Contemporary literature is based on that very blasphemy which is impossible without the experience or precondition of sanctity. Venedict and Victor Erofeev, Sorokin and Narbikova, Mamleev and Prigov all blaspheme—and their blasphemies

flow unimpeded into the Russian cultural tradition; they cannot oppose it, because the culture itself is characterized by the opposition of sanctity and blasphemy. Blasphemy and sacrilegious acts have been committed in Russia since time immemorial because people knew where to find the sacred, and how to use it. One can only blaspheme in the temple or before it, acknowledging the sanctity of that which is being blasphemed.

Even such a "super-irresponsible"[61] director of Soviet culture as comrade A. A. Zhdanov understood this dual code when he chose two authors for ideological censure in 1946—Akhmatova and Zoshchenko, the so-called aristocratic apex and democratic nadir of Russian letters, the erudite and the inarticulate. To have chosen these two specifically, Zhdanov had to make a mental effort, if not exactly equal to Merezhkovsky's "Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky" then at least utilizing the same dualistic models of Russian culture. He even picked an appropriately expressive quote from Akhmatova:

> But I swear by the garden of angels
> I swear by the icon of miracles
> And the heat of our fiery nights . . .

"Anno Domini"

The miracle-working icon and fiery fumes, Eden and the hyena, angel and beast . . . and in the midst of it all, "the raging lady" who was, according to Zhdanov (then again, plagiarized from Eichenbaum) "tearing back and forth from the boudoir to the chapel."[62] So all

of Russian literature races back and forth between "the angel and the beast," between "Anno Domini" and "A Monkey's Adventures" (the double objects of Zhdanov's censure). "Neither a nun nor a whore, but rather a whore and a nun, whose lechery is interspersed with prayer"—after all, this could be said not only of Akhmatova, but to an even greater extent about Tsvetaeva, Blok, Mayakovsky . . .

What if a poet appeared in Russia who neither blasphemed nor prayed, who did not tear about madly between the boudoir and the chapel, who did not succumb to dark despair, cynical indifference, or religious rapture, but who quietly rejoiced and quietly sorrowed for life's quiet events—would this be a totally social writer? He would simply never be noticed, or would be disparaged much as Alexander Kushner was disparaged—an incredibly gifted writer who happened to be inclined toward the middle zone. Such a poet has no code of signs and symbols in Russian culture. As Andrei Ariev so rightly remarked, "Kushner is the Laodician angel of contemporary Russian poetry, that very one from 'The Confessions of John the Theologian': 'I know your ways; you are neither hot nor cold; o, would that you were hot or cold!' He is the one we've been missing . . . He is warm. It is the rarest case of poetic inspiration at 98.6 degrees."[63] But this precisely is the reason Russian criticism "vomits up" a great lukewarm/middling poet whom it needs so much. There can be no leisurely promenade along the razor's edge; one must side either with Sodom or with the Madonna or, even better, split into bloody halves, exist on both sides at once, but never rest in

the middle. Yet Kushner, in fact, loves this middle. "I don't like his hell or his heaven," he says about Dante, giving us to understand with the entire context of his poem "A Conversation in the Foyer" that he enjoys the chatter and arguments in the foyer far more than the expanses of other worlds. Purgatory is never mentioned—it is probably the very thing replaced by the foyer.

From Kushner's restrained yet tortured writings, in which he makes so many attempts to establish the middle measure of Russian poetry—to reduce it to Viazemsky, Baratynsky, or Innokentii Annensky—it is evident that he is well aware of the dire straits in which he is caught.[64] Russia is enmeshed between Blok and Mayakovsky, who in all their polarity are themselves split between the sacred and the profane, so that both enact in their poetry something like a black mass. The demonic is merely that confluence of Sodom and the Madonna which allows for no middle ground, when the worship of one turns into worship of the other. The heroine of Blok's poetry, the "stranger," is in fact the Madonna of Sodom, just as Mayakovsky's lyrical hero is Sodom's Christ; martyred, suffering, crucified, but a servant of Sodom.

The same occurs in philosophy. Between such heights of Russian thought as the prayerful (yet also blasphemous in his own way) Vladimir Soloviev and the profane (yet somehow pious) Vasilii Rozanov, no one notices the level plateaus of neo-Kantian or neo-Leibnitzian thought, some Aleksei Kozlov or Nikolai Korkunov. Russian positivists such as Chernyshevsky

or Pisarev arouse interest only because they were Russia's nihilists as well.

Both Belinsky and Gogol are, in their own way, demonic. Neither wants to acknowledge a boundary between the church and the world: Gogol represents the demonism of the universal church, which would later be expressed in Soloviev's theocracy and in Daniel Andreiev's "Roses of the World" project; Belinksy represents the demonism of the pseudo-church, which Lenin and Stalin subsequently elaborated with their party-ocracy. All of this is demonic, not worldly. The whole point is that secularism's opposite is not the sacred—these two actually complement each other—but the demonic. Demonism is a hyper-tense relation of the poles, rather than the creation of a neutral zone. Demonism is that cruel irony of a positive action which is carried out with excessive force, pregnant with the seeds of destruction. The spirit of negation, Mephistopheles, is not demonic; that is Faust, the spirit of creation, erecting a city in the swamp, moving the bounds of the land to enable the sea to engulf it. "You yourself prepare a splendid feast for Neptune, the sea-devil!" Mephistopheles tells Faust, who is basking in his victory over the sea. Peter I served as the likeliest prototype for Goethe's Faust (in Part II of the tragedy, where Faust comes forward as a city-builder).[65] In conversation with Eicherman Goethe brings up Peter as an example of what he terms 'the demonic.'[66] Curiously, when Eicherman asks whether some demonic qualities might not be attributable to Mephistopheles as well, Goethe replies, "No, Mephis-

topheles is too negative; the demonic prevails only as a totally positive, active force."[67]

How then does the demonic differ from the secular; why has Russian culture, starting with Peter's time, become secularized only superficially, while internally the process of demonization accelerated, beginning to be actualized in part by Pushkin and Lermontov, whose work forms the transition from the secular to the demonic? Secularism is neutral, equidistant from both poles, while the demonic is a doubly charged, positive energy, which becomes negative by means of "inversion and rupture."

The construction of St. Petersburg in a swamp where waves from the Gulf of Finland wash over it was a demonic deed. Cutting his path to the West, hurrying to civilize Russia, Peter built its European capital in a Finnish swamp.

Burning the second volume of *Dead Souls* was a demonic deed. In his frenzy to clamber to the spiritual heights, Gogol lurched backward from the ladder on which he had been standing, fell, and shattered.

Herzen was wrong in saying that Russia responded to Peter's reforms with the phenomenon of Pushkin. In fact, as a result of these reforms, the demonic prevailed over the worldly and social in Russian culture, so that the real response to Peter's deeds turned out to be the Gogol phenomenon. And how could it be otherwise, when the demonic was now contained in Peter's deeds and personality? The demonic is not anti-

religious at all; it is super-religious and quasi-religious. The demonic does not entail blasphemy, but rather the worship of Caesar as God, or the desire to worship God as Caesar, when the opposition of God and Caesar turns into a symbol of their linkage and interchangeability.

The flooding of St. Petersburg and the burning of *Dead Souls* occur in the same plane, just like the theocratic project mockingly worked out by Ivan Karamazov for Russia and the subsequently serious one concluded by Vladimir Soloviev and Daniel Andreiev (though these two had the forbearance to acknowledge, at least partially, the demonic nature of these projects[68]). The demonic entails the passage of one pole into the other, when excessive positive energy turns into the terrible energy of destruction and self-destruction, when man begins with the ideal of the Madonna and ends up with the reality of Sodom; when a poet worships his Beautiful Lady on bended knee and, not daring to touch her, finds solace in the treacherous embrace of the Stranger; when a writer preaches love for his fellow man so zealously that he forgets about his own loved ones, and values the labor of peasants so highly that he is willing to sacrifice every creation of the artistic spirit, including his own, on its altar; when a Christian thinker surpasses Christ himself with the wide sweep and grand promises of his sermons, proclaiming the physical resurrection of the dead or the obliteration of Caesar's kingdom by the universal church.

I do not believe that it is possible to banish the demons from Russian culture. Generally, in banishing its

demons, a culture falls even deeper into demonism; big demons flock to and engulf the small ones. The demonism of Belinsky was loosed upon Gogol's, the demonism of autocracy was attacked by the demonism of the Bolsheviks; Dmitri Karamazov's demons, with their "Sodom and Madonna," fled before the far more terrifying demons of Ivan Karamazov and Smerdiakov. Demons must exist according to the definition of the state of the world, since it is written that "the devils also believe, and tremble" (James 2:19). So let Russia's demons believe and tremble; nothing more is required of them.

In speaking of "the demonic," I refer to this concept in the descriptive, not the judgmental sense. The demonic is just as legitimate and necessary a cultural category as "the apophatic" or "the secular," and belongs in the same conceptual sphere. Demonism should not be confused with satanism—that is, open and conscious opposition to God. The demonic might merge with the satanic, as in Mayakovsky's work, or it might oppose it, as in Gogol's. Unlike the word "Satan," the word "demon" comes not from the Hebrew but from Greek mythology (the Latin equivalent is "genius"). Aleksei Losev defines the demonic as

"a generalized conception of some undefined and formless divine power, evil or (rarely) benevolent, frequently determining man's fate in life. This terrible fatal force appears and disappears in a moment; it cannot be named, no relationship can be established with it. Like a sudden wave, it acts with lightning speed and immediately vanishes without a trace. Evi-

dent in this image are elements of so-called sudden pre-animism (to use G. Uzner's terminology, a demon is nothing more than a 'god of the given moment')."[69]

Significantly, the demonic lacks a monosemantic moral slant; it can be benevolent (there is even the epithet "devilishly happy") or, more often, malevolent. The point is, however, that it lies beyond good and evil—not in the neutral, but in its opposite, extreme zone of greatest tension, where a single moment proves as weighty as a sharp turn of fate. The demon is just that—the god of the moment. It is no accident that Dostoyevsky, the most demonic (and anti-satanic) of Russian writers, has such a penchant for that little word "suddenly," like fine beadwork woven through the cloth of his narrative. The demonic spirit is one of inversion and rupture, as opposed to drawn out, gradual evolution. That is why Kierkegaard insisted: "the demonic is sudden."[70]

The Apophatic

Another component of Russian culture is apophatism, a negative theology and aesthetic whose highest ideal can be presented only as a denial, a step back, as something unattainable. According to the founder of apophatic theology, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagit (fifth-sixth century CE), since the divine exceeds human understanding and there are no accurate means to know and to describe God, it is more precise to describe not what God is, but what he isn't. God is not truth, reason, light, goodness, etc.; he is not the pinnacle of all we know and say. Therefore it is better either to keep silent about God altogether, or if speaking of him, to choose comparisons that are most blatantly incompatible with God. For example, in some sense it is more correct to speak of God's insanity than of his reason, because it is easier to confuse God with reason than with insanity. The lower the comparison, the less danger of substitution.

"So it is that scriptural writings, far from demeaning the ranks of heaven, actually pay them honor by describing them with dissimilar shapes so completely at variance with what they really are that we come to discover how those ranks, so far removed from us, transcend all materiality. Furthermore, I doubt than anyone would refuse to acknowledge that incongruities are more suitable for lifting our minds up into the domain of the spiritual than similarities are."[71]

For instance, God is compared to a sweet-smelling ointment or a sharp-edged stone or a lion or a panther; the lowliest, most inappropriate—and hence the most pious—comparison is of the Messiah to a worm in the messianic psalm: "But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people" (Psalms 22:6). This negative theology was actually inspired not only by Pseudo-Dionysius's teaching, but by the example of Christ himself, the "heavenly king" appearing in a "beggar's guise," as well as by the example of his parables, where the greatest is likened to the lowliest (for instance, the kingdom of God and the mustard seed).

Russia's spiritual tradition is marked by the prevailing influence of apophatism not only in theory: the central figure of saintliness in Russia is the *yurodievyi* (a wandering holy fool), whose filth, rough speech, obscenities, disgraceful behavior and appearance serve God's purpose with "befitting incongruity." It is not surprising, then, that Russian literature, particularly from Gogol onward, started to use the apophatic method to express the "artistic ideal" through distinctly incongruous imagery. It makes sense that Gogol's work became the first (in fact, so far, the only) object for the study of Russian artistic apophatism.

The first precedent of which I know for this kind of approach to Russian material is Robert A. Maguire's article about Gogol's stylistic interpretation of apophatic theology, particularly in the negative syntax of descriptions and metaphors, when an object is characterized by the denial of its indicators and the very

possibility of describing it. Maguire also relates Gogol's creative impotence during the last decade of his life, the burning of the second volume of *Dead Souls* and the author's subsequent ascetic self-mortification to the Pseudo-Dionysian aesthetic of progressive silence, when speech itself "arises to extinguish speech."[72]

Gogol's lesson, as the American scholar reminds us, is certainly important for the entire subsequent history of artistic apophatism in Russia, since that history largely incorporated Gogol's characteristic techniques of negative imagery, silence about the important things, and expression of the secondary. To this I must add that "deadness," that universal quality of Gogol's world, can also be seen as a sort of apophatic image, directing us toward true life and greatness of the spirit beyond the bounds of the expressible. If God is neither light nor spirit, then an adequate representation may be the gloom and soullessness which reign in all of the mature Gogol's imagery. The writer creates an aura of "godly shade" around every object to suggest the possibility of its godly enlightenment, which simply does not lend itself to description, and lies outside the author's own power: A beauty "untold and indescribable," to use the apophatic expression of Russian folklore. This is especially relevant to such a religious subject as Russia was in Gogol's eyes. If in the first volume of *Dead Souls* he undertakes an apophatic description of Russia based on visible, inert indications which do not correspond to its true poetic essence, then in the second volume he tries to approach this elevated subject catophatically (positively), picturing

Russia in terms of positive images—"light," "wisdom," "grandeur"; here he met with failure.

After Gogol, apophatism became the prevalent tendency in Russia's artistic culture, forming a distinct aesthetic structure for "critical realism." According to this structure, which Belinsky formulated specifically on the basis of Gogol's works, Russian reality has no events, faces, or characters which might be artistically rendered as positive images. The artist sins against truth if he creates ideal characters. This does not mean that the artist should lack an ideal—but that ideal can be convincingly expressed only by criticizing anything that falls short of the ideal, in a negative approach to reality. The time for idealistic poetry is past. Realistic poetry does not openly present an ideal; it only suggests it, secretly and indirectly, while mercilessly exposing anything that pretends to embody that ideal. The entire theory of the naturalist school and critical realism rests on an apophatic foundation, a negative conception of the ideal which is "neither this, nor this, nor that" (this negation includes all strata of society, all types of worldviews; and those writers who dared to retreat from negativism and create "ideal" images, such as Dostoyevsky or Fet, were forced to justify themselves in the face of accusations of reaction and the idealization of vile reality). The charms of this critical theory, intuitively buttressed by centuries of Eastern apophatism, were so great that only Symbolism in the beginning of the twentieth century dared to challenge it openly and, using the spiritual legacy of the Western-European middle ages, affirm a different aesthetic principle of a positively-visualized ideal.

The apophatic aesthetic tradition extends to the present day; it is evident in the prose of Yuz Aleshkovsky, Sasha Sokolov, Venedict Erofeev, Victor Pelevin, Vladimir Sorokin, and in the poetry of Joseph Brodsky and the conceptualists. Thus, in Erofeev's prose-poem "Moscow-Petushki" Venichka (the author/narrator) can find no better evidence for the existence of God than "the hiccups," which strike and abate so suddenly. "The law is above all of us. The hiccups supersede any law . . . We are trembling creatures, but they are omnipotent. They—that is, God's right hand, which is raised over all of us . . . He is inaccessible to the mind, consequently He exists. And so, be perfect, as is your Heavenly Father."[73] This "sixth" proof of God's existence—the hiccups—might seem profane or at best a humorous parody, but it reveals the apophatic spirit of Russia's new religiosity in the same way as did the eccentric, "blaspheming" behavior of the Russian *yurodievyi*. There is the same logic of a negative knowing of God—through something that renders human will and reason powerless, such as the hiccups, a series of involuntary spasms at arbitrary intervals of time. Comparing God to the hiccups is just as much a "befitting incongruity" as comparing the Messiah to a worm. This is why Erofeev says (as though quoting from a tract on apophatic theology), "He is inaccessible to the mind, hence He exists."

Like demonism, the apophatic is a leap, an inversion, not only in the realm of literature but also in the artist's life, and in its socio-mythological interpretation. It turns out that Venichka Erofeev—both as author and

as protagonist—drinks and carouses not for pleasure, but as punishment. It is his cross, and he compares his drunkenness to St. Theresa's stigmata. Venichka's friends (the philologist Vladimir Muraviev, the poet Olga Sedakova) share this interpretation of his "heroic feat": the intoxication which costs Venichka his voice and then kills him was some sort of schema, almost voluntarily undertaken. The same mournful and elevated public perception applies to Vladimir Vysotsky's self-destructive beginnings, both in life and artistically. All of this is evidence of the Russian tendency to skip over the middle, human level and to connect directly the sacred and the bestial. Everything animal, undiluted, passionate, unrestrained, disordered, natural, immediately and spontaneously begins to represent everything elevated, godly, wise, supernatural: without complete rupture, but with some sort of tearing and inversion. Animal-prophets and holy drunkards are revered in the work of Esenin, Vysotsky, and Erofeev. They leap from the natural to the sacred, bypassing the cultural, which is crowded out and denounced from both sides as insufficiently natural and as an obstacle to the supernatural. It was thus in Tolstoy's simplification as well: a belching peasant, with his "reckon"s and "ain't"s, embodies more wisdom and divine truth than Shakespeare and Beethoven. Tolstoy does this seriously, Erofeev ironically, yet in both cases lowly, natural bodies are the preferable metaphors for the divine because they are not so easily confused with it, and in order to "conceal the truth from the unenlightened" (Pseudo-Dionysius). Why does Christ find evidence of the heavenly kingdom in the most humdrum things, such as the mustard seed?

Why is his first miracle the turning of water into wine, temperance to intoxication, thereby comparing the heavenly kingdom to a wedding feast, the union of bride and bridegroom?

But in negative theology this comparison underscores the absolute incongruity of the earthly and the divine, while Russian apophatism would perceive a catastrophic proximity, two disparate levels sticking together, a small rip instead of a rupture, when insufficiency becomes excess, when the not-quite-human is passed off as superhuman. A worker or a peasant is taken for the savior of mankind, a criminal for a saint. This resembles those sects, particularly the Khlysti (literally "whips"), that achieved purification through its opposite—riotous behavior, intemperance, the pleasures of the flesh; by giving the earthly back to the earth in full, these excesses somehow raised man up above the earth, unburdened, empty, free, and open to accept the higher power. Stavrogin, having exhausted himself with permissiveness and debauchery, seeks out the saintly Tikhon and can achieve, in Tikhon's perception, even greater saintliness. That is, the key to saintliness is sin, unrestrained immersion in sin and the curing of like with like, the eradication of a sinful nature through the multiplication of sins. Hence the blindly drunk Venichka's conversation with the angels—for they are also sacred creatures who fly down to a debased creature, their brother. Truly, here is Askoldov's "angel-beast." Of course, the creatures called angels in "Moscow-Petushki" act coldly and mercilessly, and deliver the hero into the hands of his killers; that is, they are probably "fallen" angels, whose

voices are therefore the only ones Venichka can distinguish.

Brodsky's apophatic poetry deserves particular mention. In it, the compression of physical details serves rather to subtract than to add them to the picture of the world, which is consequently emptied and voided and placed in an elegant oval frame. Brodsky actually calls his muse "the muse of deduction with no remainder," "the muse of zero" ("Lithuanian Nocturne: to Thomas Wentslow"). His poetic attention focuses specifically on those things that cancel themselves out, thus allowing one to imagine nonexistence itself. Such is the butterfly, for example, in one of Brodsky's best poems.

> You are better than Nothing.
> Rather, you are nearer
> And more visible.

"The Butterfly"

Brodsky's most vivid and memorable metaphors generally contain some sort of perceptible deduction, a dent or a gaping crater. Decaying teeth in the mouth are cleaner than the ruins of the Parthenon . . . A bird, having lost its nest, lays an egg in an empty basketball hoop.

> A passerby with a crumpled
> Face, is in the dark like
> A ring removed from a finger . . .

"The Lagoon"

. . . when the book was slammed shut
and nothing was left of you but your lips, like that cat.

"New Stanzas for Augusta"

Generally, the machine of poetic reduction is constantly at work in Brodsky's poetry. Thus time is subtracted from man—only words are left.

Subtracting the greater from the lesser,
Time from a man,
Only words remain . . .

"In England"

From all of man, you are left with a part
Of speech. A part of speech in general. A part of speech.

. . .at the Russian word 'imminent' . . .

Or, on the contrary, man is subtracted from language.

. . .peering at the inscriptions
of personal names, in a place where we are not: a place
where the sum depends on subtraction.

Frozen syrupy shore. Hiding in the milk . . .

In space, in time, and in name Brodsky uncovers a kind of loss and absence, completes the deductive process, and is left with a remainder of zero or even something less than zero (his book of essays is entitled *Less Than One*). Any sum in Brodsky's poems "depends on subtraction"—it is a sum of differences, a sum of remainders, which when added result in an opposite, negative value.

"The people who have forgotten me could make up a city.
I entered the cage in place of the wild beast . . ."[74]

Brodsky's poetry is like Platonism turned inside out; his world consists of minus-ideas, negative essences. His city-state is made up of people who have forgotten the poet—a sort of ideal community based on a negative indicator. Of course, Brodsky's apophatism directly contrasts religious apophatism, which uses negation in order to approach the positive pole of being. In Brodsky's work, on the other hand, the meticulous registry of details serves to subtract them from existence and to present graphically, as the ultimate reality, nonexistence itself. In "A Lullaby for the Promontory at Tver" Brodsky writes of his love for the long things in life. The ocean is longer than the earth, a string of days is longer than the ocean, but "the thought of nothing" is a hundred times longer than everything else. Length is a space from which all measurements but one have been subtracted; reduced even further, it gives way to nothingness, which is longer than anything else precisely because it no longer even has length, not even a single dimension. Nothingness is final; in relation to it, all other subtraction is but an exercise.

I have already written at length a about the apophatic qualities of conceptualist art, particularly that of Kabakov, Prigov, and Rubenstein, so there is no need to cover the same ground here.[75] Nor is there any further need to prove the apophatism of such classical figures in twentieth-century Russian literature as Andrei Platonov and the Oberiut writers. In Platonov's writing all the human figures can barely conceal the world's melancholy emptiness, which serves as some sort of vague negative to what might be called "Platonov's ideal" in the spirit of the realist aesthetic; its positive definitions might range from Marx's communism to Fiodorov's immortality to the Buddhist nirvana. Yakov Druskin, the Oberiuts' representative in the field of philosophy, is one of the most openly apophatic Russian thinkers; moreover, like Kharms, he is a religious thinker who consciously chose the apophatic path. Neither, incidentally, has a demonistic bent, an affirmative peacemaking zeal; they are conscious believers, though despairing of ever finding a "way across," a positive framework for their faith.

The Demonic/Apophatic

How does Russian cultural apophatism relate to its demonism? These are, essentially, the two main components of Russian culture, the two embodiments of its polarity. Demonism embodies positive energy which, pushed to its limit and beyond, becomes its own opposite—destructive and self-destructive action. Such were the lives of Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Blok, Esenin, Mayakovsky, Tsvetaeva, and more recently, Vysotsky, Erofeev, and Brodsky. Apophatism embodies negative energy which, having reached its limit by exposing the worthlessness, emptiness, and pointlessness of material life, directs one to the greater realms of silence, inaccessible to sight and hearing.

Thus apophatism and demonism set themselves in opposition to social art, which is constructed along catophatic (affirmative) lines, in which some spiritual or ideal content is expressed in a corresponding form and everything is structured around a "proper likeness." Within this affirmative realm, resembling the relation between form and spirit, expression and embodiment, are the two main categories of European culture, as defined by Nietzsche: the Dionysian and the Apollonian, musical pressure and sculptural completion. These are the two kinds of positive aesthetics which move between the poles of the excessive and the commensurate, the elevated and the beautiful, spontaneity and rhythm. But neither the Dionysian nor the Apollonian has that characteristic Russian quality—inversion, rupture, substitution.

Demonism and apophatism share that "middle" realm which, in secular culture, is aligned between its positive and negative poles. The demonic is the passage from positive to negative, bypassing the middle. Apophatism is the passage from negative to positive, bypassing the middle. Demonism and apophatism form a kind of ring of permutations and passages between extreme poles—a ring made up of "inversions" and "weird flourishes," spinning around an empty center.

This is why demonism and apophatism often complement each other in the work of the same author. For instance, in Gogol one frequently finds both types of polar linkage. When Gogol creates images of pettiness, vacuity, and worthlessness, one senses behind them the presence of some positive pole. Akakii Akakovich, for example, has an apophatic existence, though turned inside-out. The character is a humble man who, unbeknownst to others, leads the life of a spiritual ascetic, a serene copyist immersed in a world of pure signs and wanting nothing to do with the physicality and materialism of the world—and it is this that, ultimately, seduces and destroys him. Wherever Gogol minimizes, creating the image of a humble man, he also sketches an invisible figure of exaggeration, a figure of saintliness. And contrarily, when Gogol begins seriously, at the height of his artistic zeal, to elevate something, he discovers the demonic qualities of his gift—as, for example, in the lyrical image of Russia , built upon the same principles as his images of evil spirits, witches, and sorcerers ("everything inside you turned its unblinking eyes on me").[76]

Like Chartkov, the artist in the tale of "The Portrait," whenever Gogol tries to draw saints' faces, he finds devilish features winking out at him. Is it not Gogol himself who, having decided to portray Russia and its incalculable richness of spirit—"a man gifted with divine goodness" or "a marvelous Russian girl" (*Dead Souls*)—suddenly "saw with horror that he had given almost every figure the eyes of a usurer. They looked out at him so demonically and seductively that he shuddered in spite of himself" ("The Portrait")?[77] The positive energy of Gogol the artist acquires a demonic cast, while the negative grows apophatic. But in both cases we are dealing with the orbit of poles around a gaping, empty center.

The demonic and the apophatic have a different combination in Brodsky's poetry. First of all we find a demonism of language, which uses man as its instrument. Brodsky has voiced many opinions on this theme; one need look no further than one of his Nobel Prize speeches: "No one knows better than a poet that what we commonly call the voice of the Muse is actually the dictate of language; that language is not his instrument, but he is the means by which language propagates its own existence . . . Man . . . becomes dependent upon this process (writing poetry) in the same way that he becomes dependent upon drugs or alcohol. A man addicted to language in this way is, I suppose, what is called a poet."[78] This is Brodsky's fundamental aesthetic and ethical credo: a poet is the instrument of language. Yet such a relation between the speaker and his language turns out to be a source of demonism. The apostle James writes: "Even so the

tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue ..." (James 3:5-8). Brodsky's apophatism flows out of this possession by language, since language, being everything, presents everything as nothing from the outside, and anything that gets caught in language, that is named by language, becomes subtracted from existence, leaving behind a gaping hole. Adam was given language so that he might name the things around him; for Brodsky, language names things and robs them of existence, turning them into "things of language."

> The air is a thing of language . . .
> That is why it's pure.
> Nothing in the world is more irreproachable
> (except for death itself)
> than white pages.
> The whiter, the less human.

Man leaves nothing behind but his spoken words; things leave nothing but their names. But in the end, even the names are gone, and only air remains—"the things of language." By making language the instrument of his demonic power over the world, the poet apophatically objectifies this world, turning it into symbols of nothingness. The fullness of language is

the emptiness of the world, and therefore equals the purity of air and of death.

If the overwhelming majority today values Brodsky much more than Kushner, despite the relative commensurability of their poetic worlds (harkening back to St. Petersburg neo-classicism), it is partially because Brodsky is a demonic figure, in some sense even an apophatic one, while Kushner is a purely social figure, and thus, according to the rules of Russia's artistic code, "pettyish." Both in his poetry and in his essays, Kushner consciously defends life on a moderate material/spiritual scale, but in order for the "soft screams" to be heard, Russia 's artistic culture must change its code, must switch to a ternary, or at least a medial one. Incidentally, Pasternak managed to arouse interest in that same quiet flow of daily life to which Kushner tried to call attention; the result, however, became two polar movements crossing the central zone in two opposite directions. First he fell into unprecedented complexity, then veered abruptly into unprecedented simplicity, which had the virtue of being "heretical"; that is, among the sacred traditions of the Russian avant-garde, it was perceived as Pasternak's "profanation of self," as his sacrilegious challenge to those very shrines which he had once upheld. This "unprecedented simplicity" merged easily into the binary code of Russian culture which, in Berdiaev's words, categorizes all thought as orthodoxy or heresy.

Generally, Pasternak loathed the "middle" aesthetic and made every attempt to avoid it, even risking blatant tastelessness—a principle consciously espoused

in *Doctor Zhivago*. "Gordon and Dudorov . . . did not know that the plight of average taste was worse than the plight of tastelessness." [79] In twentieth-century Russia one finds many writers embodying various means of "rupturing the center." For instance, Gorky, Mayakovsky, Blok, and Tsvetaeva were all artists of a demonic cast, while the Oberiuts and conceptualists were mainly apophatic. Khlebnikov and Platonov have at times combined the demonic and the apophatic, while Nabokov and Brodsky could mix in the secular as well. Perhaps it is hardest to find a strictly secular writer in twentieth-century literature—if you think about it, the main contender for this title would be Alexander Solzhenitsyn, precisely because he is a secular-religious writer. In this sense he most closely resembles the eighteenth century, when religion and worldliness were easily combined without falling into contradiction. One can distinguish neither the demonic nor the apophatic behind the common sense and common faith in Solzhenitsyn's writing.[80]

To classify writers according to these four indicators—religion, secularity, demonism, and apophatism—is tricky. In general, studies of these two coordinates—"authors" and "tendencies"—can only cross at certain points, and never be wholly superimposed on one another.

Orthodoxy and Culture

What place, then, can Orthodoxy occupy in this burgeoning ternary model of Russian culture, when its basic premise and precondition is duality?

In the context of the second secularization now beginning, the significance of Konstantin Leontiev grows; he combined extreme conservatism, even fundamentalism, in his religious views with a broad and even radical, quite secular view of the blossoming diversity of cultures. There is no crude contradiction between these poles of Leontiev's thought, but a complex mutual supplementation, especially if we direct his thought toward culture's postmodern condition, in which extreme, avant-garde movements have been exhausted and everything else is becoming increasingly mixed up. In this impulse toward the middle Leontiev sees "the ideal and the means of world destruction" and contrasts it with the colorful polarity of the Byzantine and Slavic traditions:

"An aesthetic of life . . . the poetry of reality is impossible without this variety of positions and feelings which develops as the result of inequality and strife . . . Aesthetics saved my civility . . . I began to love the monarchy, began to love the military and the soldiers, began to pity and value the aristocracy . . . even to defend Orthodoxy, of which, I am ashamed to say, I understood absolutely nothing at the time, but only loved it with my heart and my imagination."[81]

As the site of the world's greatest diversity, culture cannot fail to view religion as the site of greatest remove from the world, as an alternative to the world. Without its religious component, secular culture loses the radical "other" which lends it its colorful polymorphousness.

In the dual structure of Russian culture, the Orthodox Church occupies a firm, definite place because in many ways it formulated and predetermined this dualism, the sharp distinction between the things of this world and of the next. Western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, differs in its long history of activism, directing the social, moral, scientific, and professional life of its congregation outside of the church. At the same time the church concerned itself with many of the world's needs and affairs, changing in letter and in spirit, adapting to historical changes, imbibing the spirit of the times, responding to the needs of society. Hence the neutralization, the formation of a watery middle zone between the church and the world. In Eastern Christianity the church remains much more aloof from the world and allows the world to stay aloof from it; it surrounds itself with high walls and cherishes the monastic spirit and the immutability of doctrine inside this fortress. The Orthodox Church did not actively shape the world, and so remained politically helpless, dependent on worldly powers. Yet it also retained a dualistic tension in its relation to the world. The Orthodox Church remains alien, radically "other" in relation to the world, and maintains that powerful tension and polarity in culture which has disappeared in the

Catholic and Protestant worlds. In this sense, due to its essential traditionalism, its lagging behind the times, its position outside of social culture, the Russian Orthodox Church can mark a most important moment in cultural diversification.

Ivan Kireievsky remarks that

"this untouchability of the limits of divine revelation, affirming the purity and steadfastness of faith in the Orthodox Church, on the one hand protects its teachings from the misguided interpretations of natural reason, and on the other hand protects reason from the misguided meddling of the church's authority. This is why an Orthodox Christian will always question equally, how Galileo could be burned at the stake for his disagreement with the opinions of the church hierarchy, and how one can deny the veracity of the apostolic missives because of a disparity between their truth and the opinions of some man or of some time."[82]

And although Kireievsky insists in the very next sentence upon "the tendency in religious thought to reconcile reason with the teachings of the faith … for there is but one truth," his previous discussion points up precisely the duality of faith and reason underlying Russian culture, while the Western churches are, on the contrary, directed toward monism, toward the union of faith and reason; on the one hand this results in scientific criticism of the Scriptures and on the other, the church's persecution of scientific thought. A series of accords and compromises between faith and reason in the West has established a neutral middle

ground in which the tension among values has been weakened.

The presence of the Orthodox Church always lends something alien and otherworldly to society, something not quite comprehensible and difficult to accept, a sort of irrational or other-rational residue which cannot be dissolved in ideas of freedom, equality, expediency, humanity, or purpose. In this way, society is guaranteed a certain minimal diversity, an inner heterodoxy, without which even the freest society can succumb entirely to the neutral zone, losing that otherworldliness that stands fast inside the world, or at least on its edges. Culture must have such a firm, multicultural education if not to fulfill religious needs then at least for the sake of the purely cultural and even aesthetic ones.

Despite all this the threshold between the Orthodox Church and the world is so steep that it is difficult for culture to cling to it, to maintain its balance. Within the very core of Russian culture lies the idea that it might not have existed and perhaps should not exist now, the idea of self-denial. The Russian intelligentsia lacks spontaneity—it is no wonder that it appeared as an "intelligentsia," beginning as a self-reflective, self-created entity. Russian culture constantly questions its right to exist: either it denies itself in the religious sense, taking cover under the aegis of temples (either canonical or heretical), or it denies religion itself, seeing judgment in its countenance. Russian culture exists in a deep existential cellar, and it shares all the underground man's complexes and neuroses—a hys-

terical mixture of pride and self-abnegation. This is a culture of the catacombs, still unsure of itself even when the state supports it with all its might. Even the state, "Caesar," has religious justification in the Orthodox world, while culture has none.

In the dual model of the "sacred/sinful," the sinner is more justified than the un-sinning, un-saintly man. Culture—the earthly analogue of purgatory—is a battleground on which heaven and hell close in on each other in earnest. In "Art by the Light of Conscience" Tsvetaeva writes: "(Art) is the third kingdom with its own laws, from which we so rarely manage to escape into a higher realm (and how frequently, into the lower!) . . . Art is a purgatory between the heaven of the spirit and the hell of birth into this earthly life, yet no one wants to leave it for 'salvation.'" As a Russian artist, Tsvetaeva saw art as the "third kingdom"—therefore even more seductive, more sinful than any ordinary sin. "Art—artifice—is perhaps the ultimate temptation on this earth, the keenest, the one which is impossible to withstand."[83]

Russian culture is besieged; the threat stems from the culture itself, from its radical self-doubt. No one blames Russian literature for all the evils and pitfalls of Russian history except the critics and writers themselves. They blame their profession for the sins of revolution and totalitarianism, which literature supposedly nourished with its poisonous criticism of Russian reality and its destructive longing for the golden age. Neither the workers, nor the peasants, nor the police, but the intelligentsia itself proclaims the need

to put an end to the intelligentsia. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, political radicals and religious liberals agreed upon the necessity of 'suicide,' that is, the end of the intelligentsia. There was nothing else that Bolsheviks and Vekhovtsy, Marxists and idealists, attacked so zealously as the intelligentsia—either because it was not social enough, too mystical, or because it was not spiritual enough, too civic-minded. The churches of Gogol and Belinsky came together in their goal to destroy that cultural middle-ground on which they might have truly met; they agreed in their hatred for the lukewarm petty bourgeoisie, agreed precisely upon those extreme opinions in which their differences were so irreconcilable.

In general, concern over excessive "literocentrism" and the methods of its elimination seem to be more significant aspects of contemporary Russian self-consciousness than literocentrism itself. In the absence of social interest in literature, literature takes to heart the saying "disparagement is worse than pride." In the fight against literocentrism, literature rises to a new level of egocentrism, a collectively pretentious self-flagellation which sounds like self-praise. One might say, 'literature gnaws to death our way of life and our history; the people rave deliriously about poetry and confuse building blocks with Blok's poems. How strong are we, if our literary ancestors—the Belinskys and Tolstoys—toppled an entire government with a single flap of their wings? They shattered the country—we'll shatter the shatterers in turn—the country should be grateful.'

Let me repeat: all these attacks on literocentrism are being made by writers themselves; nothing of the sort is heard from the engineers, the mathematicians, even from politicians. Literature hurts no one and even helps some—not by being "armed to the teeth and beyond" but in the sense of "song healing an ailing spirit." And only literature, having lost all the government's attention, stubbornly claims to be the source of power itself, that the pen is mightier than the sword. The same can be said of the intelligentsia's attempts to debunk the intelligentsia, to lay all the horrors of bolshevism at its doorstep. Western observers have been known to assess this modern-day battle of literature and the intelligentsia against themselves as an expression of "masochism," which is supposedly a traditional quality of Russian society. But one could also view Russian society's habits in a healthier light, and come to think that this noisy battle with literocentrism is but a cunning attempt on the part of Russia's rapacious literature to reestablish itself at the center of communal attention.

However paradoxical it may seem, this constant cultural self-denial, its fierce self-doubt or clever self-disparagement, has gained in Russia a value which other, more confident cultures lack. Russian culture has no spontaneity; it knows that it exists only in spite of itself, and thus its existence in the Orthodox sphere takes on both a demonic and an apophatic character.

Rozanov asks: What is culture from a Christian point of view? What would Christ, who never wrote a word, or laughed, have to say about elegant literature, about

a laughing Gogol? What could the apostle Peter possibly say about astronomy, or Paul about the theatre? In Rozanov's opinion, "neither Gogol, nor literature in general, in terms of a game, mischief, smiles, grace, as the flower of human existence, can be compatible with that mono-flower, 'Sweet Jesus.'"[84] And if Russia's Orthodox society attends the theatre, then this is an inversion—either a jolly demonic challenge thrown down to faith, or a melancholy apophatic silence about that same faith. Culture is antiquity's heir; this was organically incorporated in the Christian West, but remained alien to the East. Russian culture is ashamed that it is a culture; it struggles, trying to overcome itself in this capacity—or else it attempts to launch its own insolent and desperate counterattack. Hence Rozanov's attacks on Christianity, which, with its otherworldly sweetness, embittered the fruits of this world. In reply to Merezhkovsky's lecture which attempted to prove Gogol's compatibility with the Scriptures, Rozanov gave his own lecture (1907) in which he asserted that Gogol was not compatible with Scripture, that aesthetics were not compatible with Christianity, and that therefore Christianity, as a religion of death, was itself doomed (this later became the central theme in *The Apocalypse of Our Times* [1918]). Let us remember that all of these lectures were read in a religious/philosophical society, so the dualism of the sacred and the secular, and the attempt to reconcile them, were already familiar, essential themes.

In the meantime, Rozanov answers his own question: "The beggar is always more attractive than the rich man: even poets render beggars in verse. Who has

described the rich man? He is the subject of satire. Thus, one of the world's great mysteries lies in the fact that suffering is ideally and aesthetically superior to happiness—it is melancholy, dignified … Is the entire world's interment in Christ not the most aesthetic phenomenon of all, the highest pinnacle of beauty?"[85] If one follows this logic, the highest pinnacle of beauty in the world is not the interment, but the resurrection of Christ and life in Christ. But even if one were to stop at interment, Rozanov's words clearly indicate that death in the world comprises its greatest beauty, and that the reason for the greater, healthier flowering of aesthetics in the Christian world (as opposed to the pagan) is that Christian aesthetics are not limited by images of earthly flesh, but can express the depletion and the overcoming of this flesh. The denial of a sensual, sculptural, Greek type of beauty leads to the creation of a new, more inclusive and contradictory beauty in Christianity. Christianity deals three blows to aesthetics: when God makes his son flesh; when this flesh is crucified and dies for the sins of the world; and when the flesh is restored in glory and transcendence. All three instances embody a beauty which supersedes the Apollonian beauty of the Greek world. What further proof of cultivation can Rozanov demand of Christianity?

It is remarkable that right after his admission that Christianity was "the highest pinnacle of beauty in the world," Rozanov seems to ignore the answer he himself uncovers and gets carried away by the sheer scope of his antitheses, pushing onward in his conviction of the incompatibility of Christianity and aesthetics.

"Gogol cannot be inlaid in the Scriptures; thus, he cannot be inducted into Christianity either; he should simply be thrown out. Not from an earthly point of view, but specifically from the monastic one, like a sweet death in Christ. Gogol loved the world and tied us to it. This postpones the end of the world"[86], etc. The writer's thought is immediately dulled and diminished by this attempt to condemn Christianity in Gogol's name. Gogol's beauty, his "love for the world," has nothing to do with the admiration of the flesh, yet it is a laughing and crying beauty, pierced through with Christian grief and pity for the world. If Gogol laughs at the world, then it is precisely because Christ himself never laughed. For therein lies the difference between man and God-as-man: the path to salvation is revealed to man but he cannot save himself. Gogol's "laughter through tears" is born from this combination of necessity and impossibility.

Sergei Averintsev recently stimulated discussion of this dilemma between "laughter and Christianity" by introducing his concept of the carnival into a respectful debate with Bakhtin. Averintsev proves convincingly that laughter is by far not always benevolent and liberating, but is at times a tyrannical, satanic force. "All in all, Orthodox spirituality mistrusts laughter far more than the Western faith . . . Gogol, who did not know how to combine within himself a comic genius and a pious man, is a very Russian case in point." But Averintsev simultaneously shows that Christianity created its ethics and culture of laughter as a "charm against feebleness"—that is, at once an admission and an overcoming of feebleness by man,

"self-mockery, a destructive attachment to oneself."[87] Gogol insisted that through his characters he mocked himself first, his own petrification and insensitivity. Piety, if it remains human, without demonic pretension to the status of God-as-man, is fully compatible with comic genius.

So even stern Orthodoxy has its own beauty and meaning for culture; perhaps the difficulty of establishing Russian aesthetics lay not in the church's opposition but in the inseparability of church from beauty. In fact, the Orthodox faith was adopted in Rus' precisely for its beauty; that is, Russian religion and aesthetics flow together from the source. In the ancient Russian chronicle *Tales of Bygone Years*, this was the impression made upon Prince Vladimir's emissaries sent to seek the best faith for their people:

"And we came unto the Greek land, and they brought us into the place where they worship their God, and we did not know where we were, in heaven or on earth; for there is not such a spectacle and beauty in all the world, and we do not know how to speak of it. We know only that God abides with the people there, and their ritual is better than in all the other lands. We cannot forget this beauty, for every man, having tasted of the sweet, will no longer take the bitter . . ."[88]

The lavish services and beautiful rituals precluded the separation of beauty from ritual for many years, preventing the separation of two spheres, the aesthetic and the religious. So even disregarding the Christian justification of culture, Russian culture itself cannot

exist without the aesthetic justification of Christianity as the "highest pinnacle of beauty in the world."

Admittedly, Russian literature of the religious period preceding Peter's reign created nothing of world significance—nor, come to think of it, did secular literature after Peter. The eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries were historically important but aesthetically a dim period for literature. The pinnacles were Pushkin and Lermontov, but they mark the end of Russian literature's social period and presage the demonic, which, along with the apophatic, will prevail in Gogol's writing and much that comes after. Pushkin was a bright flash before the imminent eclipse of social literature. Only the post-secular, neo-religious period, with its dualistic tension and the struggle between the worldly and the religious gave rise to truly great and world-renowned literary phenomena: Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy. The reign of Alexander III during the 1880s and '90s marked a sort of secular renaissance, but this was the dullest, least expressive time in nineteenth-century literature. It yielded only Chekhov, and even his most significant quality is an apophatic depth that stands out only later, against the backdrop of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy; he seems to keep silent about the things they said aloud, and appears to be hiding some other, more important, unspeakable mystery.

Chekhov has Burkin, the teacher in "The Man in a Case," say this about the *khokhlushki* (Ukranian girls), who "either weep or laugh, and have no mood in between."[89] But this phrase could just as easily pertain to

the *khokhol* himself, who, having become a great Russian writer, says of his own work that it reveals "a laughter visible to the world through invisible, secret tears." Laughter and tears—they form two halves, with nothing in between. But even the prophet Jeremiah, whose words "I will laugh at my own bitterness" are etched on Gogol's tombstone, [90] never seemed to express "middling moods." Chekhov himself, who strove to render his tales precisely in this "middling mood," the hushed tones of a gray day, "early twilight," became meaningful in Russia only because he shaded this middle ground with sorrow and mockery around its edges.

Much has been said already about the Orthodox Church's historical inadequacies and weaknesses, but one must acknowledge that without this tense duality between spirit and flesh, between church and the world, without these dizzying turns and inversions, Russia's artistic culture would not exist: there would be no Gogol with his "dead souls," no Dostoyevsky with his "ideals of Sodom and the Madonna," no Tolstoy with his paganism and asceticism, no Platonov with his dull and empty physical world. Even in the marvelous, worldly work of Nabokov—classics of American literature—one suddenly stumbles across "gnosticism"; that is, the concept that a world immersed in evil is actually illusory and could fall apart under the influence of unseen powers, as in *Invitation to a Beheading* or in the author's following direct assertion: "This world is but a shadow, a companion to true existence, and neither the buyers nor the sellers believe in it deep down, especially in calm, reasonable

America."[91] One should probably not seek the sources of Nabokov's "gnosticism" in the works of the gnostics themselves—they are more likely to lie in a more familiar spiritual heritage, in the dual worlds of Russian Orthodoxy, which do not allow for "real existence" and tensely await its end. Nor would that dualistic phenomenon known as "Russian religious philosophy," with its taut limits imposed upon reason and faith, be possible without Orthodoxy. In Western culture the very expression "religious philosophy" is associated with the middle ages, with Thomas Aquinas, because in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries philosophy and religion have existed separately, almost never touching; for a philosopher, any suggestion of religious predilection or theological intent would be an insult to his professional honor. Moreover, even theology is pulling further and further away from religion; the knowledge of God is pulling away from faith in him. The majority of contemporary Western philosophers are non-believers—not some sort of desperate non-believers thirsting to believe, but serene non-believers, worldly people who study church history or holy Scripture as dispassionately as a paleontologist studies the remains of fossilized organisms. Unlike Western theology and philosophy, Russian religious philosophy is not pluralistic, but dualistic. The difference between the two is not so much the number of fundamental starting points (two or many) as the means of their interrelation. Pluralism assumes separate, independent starting points which are tolerant and even indifferent toward each other. Dualism, on the other hand, presumes starting points which are passionately involved with each other, which can nei-

ther merge nor totally separate. Without Orthodoxy there would be no Soloviev, with his ideas of total unity and God-in-man; no Merezhkovsky, possessed by the battle between Christ and the antichrist; no Rozanov, with his incompatibility of God and the world; no Berdiaev, with his sermons and his prophecy of that compatibility.

Berdiaev is, of course, correct in his criticism: "Orthodoxy, particularly Russian Orthodoxy, is not justified by culture; it has a nihilistic aspect toward everything that man creates upon this earth."[92] Yet such denial, particularly such denial of one's self, is a crucial aspect of Russian culture, introduced by Orthodoxy. The dying need the Orthodox Church more than the living, the sick more than the well, the suffering more than the happy, the ignorant more than the educated. It stands at the very edge of the world and it cannot, it will not participate in the affairs of culture. Yet this unyielding stance outside of culture sets up the polarity of cultural space itself. Orthodoxy contributed to the creation of Russia 's artistic culture not by blessing or cursing it, but precisely by its non-participation, its 'outerness'[93]. Orthodoxy created that dualism between the worldly and the otherworldly which set up the pressure behind all of Russia 's artistic stirrings, behind its utopian quest to bring about the kingdom of God on earth and its tragicomic awareness of this impossibility. Russian culture should thank Orthodoxy for its abstention from the affairs of culture.

The Second Secularization and the New Crossroads

Two essential models of Russian culture separate it from the West. One model is developed in the conception of "total knowledge" and "the unity of all," by thinkers from Kireevsky to Soloviev. Russian monism stands in opposition to Western dualism—the split between subject and object, faith and knowledge, reason and the stirrings of the heart, etc. Kireevsky asserts:

"There you have a split in spirit, in thought, in science . . . a split between the moral and the heartfelt states of mind . . . ; in Russia, on the contrary, there is an essential drive toward a wholeness of inward and outward being, the public and the private, the speculative and the pragmatic, the artificial and the moral . . . Division and wholeness, rationality and reason will be the ultimate expressions of Western European and ancient Russian erudition."[94]

The other model is Russian dualism, its polarity contrasting with that Western monism which is characterized by mediation, neutrality, bourgeois prosperity, and the appearance of contentment. This motif is expressed most emphatically by Dostoyevsky, Leontiev, Herzen, Merezhkovsky, etc. Berdiaev remarks that "Dostoyevsky revealed the polarity of the Russian spirit to be its most profound quality. How the Russian spirit differs in this from the monistic spirit of the Germans! When a German probes the depths of his

soul, he finds divinity, all polarities and contradictions are eradicated . . . The Russian is more contradictory and antinomic than the Western man; he combines the Asiatic and the European spirits, East and West."[95]

Thus in one coordinate system Russian culture is to the Western as one is to two (wholeness vs. division), while in another Russian polarity contrasts with Western monism as two to one. Perhaps this is the point at which both cultures are called upon to become ternary within themselves. Could this not constitute a new perspective on the convergence of the two cultures: one and two in Russian culture, two and one in the West, finally adding up to three?

As I have already stated, the ternary model cannot be reduced either to duality or to a median. Not only must purgatory appear between hell and heaven, but that purgatory cannot remain a singular, isolated space in the topography of the new world—it cannot crowd out our conceptions of hell and of heaven. Life in the neutral zone is dangerous because it leads one to forget boundaries, dulling any feeling or awareness of them. It leads to the end of eventful existence, for events always take place along boundaries, crossing over them. Purgatory can be the most eventful place in the world, a place of salvation, of crossing the boundary between hell and heaven, but it can also become the most uneventful if it establishes itself in place of boundaries as the only possible site of existence, where all entrances and exits are either closed or seen as "false entrances and false exits" (Jacques Derrida) in an endless, one-sided system of differences. The third,

"central" position is always dangerous because its convenience can make the middling zones the only possibility, pushing the other two back into a realm of safe indifference. This is why it is so important to retain a sense of boundaries, for only that sense can uphold the center in its function as a true central zone, the third as the third; only that sense can prevent he center from becoming a single placid, endlessly flat and convenient abode for "stress-free" post-historical existence.

Such dangerous entropic processes are already at work in Western culture, turning a third, intermediate space into a single central one: mass and elite cultures, socialist and capitalist economies, left and right-wing politics are mixing and evening out in a way that leaves no room for duality. What was third now becomes both the first and the last. In order to maintain its difficult, flickering, borderline existence the third needs the other two—although one should allow in advance for the risky possibilities of their direct interrelation, bypassing the third: eclecticism, grotesque one-sided stubbornness, avant-gardism, fundamentalism . . . But only when the two both have their own separate source of power and act independently of the third can the third be a place of eventful existence along the boundaries.

Despite his critique of Russia's binary tendencies, Yuri Lotman understood perfectly the dangers of a "ternary" structure of the Western type, which easily rids itself of inner tensions and dualities and becomes medial. He only hoped that Russia would avoid this

danger as long as possible and could, for the time being, concern itself with overcoming its binary tendencies and establishing a third zone. He writes: "Ethical maximalism has become so rooted in the very foundations of Russian culture that one likely will not speak of the 'danger' of asserting an absolute golden mean; even less likely is the fear that resolving contradictions might halt the processes of creative explosion."[96] Lotman puts the word "danger" in quotes yet warns us at the same time that in Russia the very processes of mediation might occur in bursts. "We even want to realize gradual development by applying explosive technology. However, this is not the result of anyone's lack of thought, but the harsh dictate of a historically binary structure."[97] Russia perceives the ternary in a "dualistic" way, as the opposition to binary culture, as the eradication of duality itself; therefore the ternary might "suddenly," unexpectedly, explosively turn into mediality, into a kingdom not of gold but of tin and aluminum.

At the close of the twentieth century, as one thinks of Russian culture at the millennial crossroads, it is useful to bear in mind not only proximate but also distant perspectives; not only the imminent necessity of turning the binary model into the ternary, but the frightening possibility of the ternary becoming the medial, a flat unitarian center which would soon no longer be supported even by the binary nature of the traditional Russian model. In order to assimilate the ternary model Russian culture needs to enrich itself with neutral zones and not reject the productive aspects of the binary model itself. Its experiences with the dual

model and explosive processes may prove to be Russian culture's most valuable contribution to the modern, excessively flattened and medial, "post-historical" state of Western culture. Perhaps that is the essential meaning of global processes, that static in one region is balanced by the dynamics of another; at this point, when history has democratically been pronounced "finished" in the West, Russian history has resumed turbulently after the prolonged experience of communist "post-historicism." Russian culture is woven from myriad plots, narratives, and anecdotes, both in the semiotic sense and in the sense of history and everyday life. Western culture on the brink of the third millennium and gravitating toward a telephone-book-like structure might well find quite a few explosive collisions for itself there.

I am not speaking of social upheaval—in this area the neutral zone of political and legal institutions worked out in the West would serve as a safeguard—but rather of semiotic upheaval, that explosive model with all of its demonic, apophatic, grotesque, and tragicomic components, which Russian culture now struggles to overcome but perhaps will not be able to, will not want to overcome completely. The foundation of the new secularization should perhaps include a model of directed and controlled explosion. Not the kind that blows off the "dynamiter's" arm, as it so often happened in Russian culture—from Lermontov to Gogol to Mayakovsky to Tsvetaeva—but one that uses the energy of highly charged poles to create dynamic, imbalanced, paradoxical situations in culture, to create

characters and narratives which zigzag sharply across the boundaries of meaning.

I suspect that the originality of Russian culture will lie in the colorful interplay of extremes radiating out from its ever-widening neutral and "natural" zone in both directions for some time yet. Russia will give birth not only to "Newtonian minds" and level-headed physicists, but also to its very own "Platos"—metaphysicians of the most radical sort, such as Soloviev, Fedorov, Berdiaev, Bogdanov, Tsiolkovsky, Rerikh, or Andreev, who feel the need to raise the dead, to attribute soul to nature, to make man immortal, to unite the worm with God, to build the ideal state, to create heaven and earth anew, to establish paradise on earth, to make the sun fall from the sky and burn in man's breast. And a necessary counterweight to metaphysical radicalism will be conceptual game-playing with all of these lofty ideas, exposing their many frivolities. Whenever the ecstasy of "the final battle," "white communism," "the Eurasian mystery," "the great tradition," right- and left-wing "internationales," "Aryan Platonism," and "Orthodox-Islamic fundamentalism" crops up, there will also be no lack of apophatic mimicry and nominalistic deflating of these grandiose 'realities.' Whenever followers of Fedorov and Rerikh, the Dugins and Kurginians congregate, one will also find the Prigovs, Sorokins, Kibirovs, Komars, and Melamides. Wherever one finds Ilia Glazunov with his iconic, 'monumental' panoramas, one will also encounter Ilia Kabakov with his trashy 'communal' installations and creative therapy for patients in the insane asylum. Wherever Peter Verkho-

vensky is, with his inflammatory agitation, the burning and cries of the Russian soil, so will Captain Lebiadkin with his cockroach ditties. The spirit personified by these two will, I suspect, live on in Russia even after centuries of normal and natural development along the path of mankind. Even the most social Chekhov has his Vershynins and Solionyis, his Tuzenbach and Chebutkin, his own projection and his own Oberiut, his own "diamond-studded sky" and his own "hullabaloo."

These extremes cannot be eliminated. One can partially mediate them, direct the country's socio-economic life toward the channel of natural law and pragmatism, but the volatile mix of the most radical metaphysics and the most unpardonable conceptualism cannot be eradicated from the culture. It is precisely this mix of Verkhovensky's spirit with Lebiadkin's that lends a peculiar charm to Russian culture, neither quite Eastern nor Western. Let political leaders in the middle zone worry about the balance of power or social conventions which are far from the ideal of brotherly love but which also prevent that excessive intimacy which leads to hatred. If the millions don't exactly embrace one another, neither do they elbow others out of their way, and at a political distance they even greet each other with a polite, almost indifferent smile. But along the periphery culture should still reel and flabbergast us, creating its ideal states and utopias—Thomas More's islands, not Stalinist archipelagos; the finest conceptual garbage should flood museum halls—not the Volga and Lake Baikal.

For now, one can only guess what will come of Russia's attempt to combine a new style of political mediation with its traditional cultural polarity. Having failed to totalize its dual model (sacred matter, heaven on earth, the church-state, etc.), Russia now starts down the path of polar neutralization: the middle class, bourgeois culture, the mediation of mass and elite cultures, the second secularization . . . But in Russia the secular and the religious most likely will not retain such balance and neutrality as is characteristic of America, where religious fundamentalism, with its anti-secular escapades, is a rare and exceptional thing, not to mention the even rarer atheistic or anti-clerical bouts of liberalism. In Russia one can expect very tense relations between the religious and the secular, not so much on the plane of confrontation—that is in the past, though excesses cannot be excluded—as on the plane of their interaction and attempts at synthesis, union based upon this or that, more secular or more religious foundation. The Merezhkovsky-Berdiaev model still has prophetic force, and as soon as it is found that the overcoming of Russian dualism has taken a bourgeois, intermediary turn, the temptation will arise to follow the unifying path, with new specters of religious community and the merging of heaven and earth looming on the eschatological horizon. A direct perspective of secular and religious merging will be defined—junction rather than crossroads. This means that we can expect more religious art from Russia, both inside the temples and outside their boundaries.

The Russian crossroads is more complicated than the division of one road into two. It is rather the division of two into three, the change from a binary system to a ternary—with an irrational repeating decimal of sixes signifying a sort of apocalyptic remainder of a path rationally chosen.

The trick is to resist the temptation of "either/or" and from the point of "crossroads," the separation of two roads, to begin to clear a third—a road of natural law, an Aristotelean road, a Chekhovian road . . . But it is even more difficult to resist the temptation of "both" and, diverting the outer roads toward the middle, flattening them with smooth asphalt into a uniform, seamless middle way. Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy should not be fitted into a single elegant Chekhovian picture-frame. Is it even possible to squeeze into compact common sense that vast religious experience which shook Russia's nerves and its government to the core and simultaneously produced Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Soloviev, Rozanov, Berdiaev, Blok, Mayakovsky, Platonov . . ? In walking the middle path it is important to retain a sense of the edges, to take along a sense of the "crossroads" even if it has passed long ago. Maybe Russia will be delivered, as always, by its "troika"—not of fiery stallions kicking up dust in their wake, but a "troika" of the roads themselves.

We now approach the true meaning of that crossroads at which Russian culture now stands (and essentially, has always stood). The crossroads is not the sudden possibility of choice—that is hardly the most stable or characteristic quality of Russian culture. Blok wrote

about such a point of two crossed paths in his oddly titled article "Timelessness," written during the peak of Russian time acceleration, in 1905. "Then it seems that the end is near, and literature can no longer exist . . . Perhaps there is not a single literature that has survived so many revelations and so much helplessness at this shaky point, as has Russia's."[98] Russian culture itself might be defined as a culture of crossed roads. Following the above discussion one might conclude that Russian culture will never be able to move past its crossroads, that instead the crossroads will always be drawing closer, representing the necessity and the futility of choice.

Yet at the same time the crossroads itself keeps changing along the way and now it takes the form of an unusual choice: between the crossroads itself and the single straight path of social culture. Russia has never had such a clear opportunity to take the middle way, one which splits the entire dilemma in two and renders it obsolete. And yet I suspect that Russian culture will add the middle path to its dual model not to replace divergent extremes but as a different, third extreme. According to Berdiaev, Russians can be extreme even in their ordinariness. Or, as the writer Dmitri Galkovsky recently defined the creative "we," "we are neither worthless nor saintly, but mediocre. We are mediocrities, but exceptional ones, expressing baseness and saintliness at their maximal levels." [99]

One of the most recent milestones on this extreme-middle road is Galkovsky's interminable novel/self-commentary entitled *Endless Dead End*. Galkovsky's

thought turns out to occupy an extreme middle ground between radical metaphysics and the conceptual shaking and draining thereof. The author calls his method "the reining in of a mentally ungraspable idea in the philological sphere at the expense of reconciling it with one's own realism and even cynicism."[100] Galkovksy tries to combine aspects of both Berdiaev and Lebiadkin in his fictional counterpart Vladimir Odinokov and in his real-life behavior as a news-rag metaphysician and refined boor and buffoon. Galkovsky's two essential themes are "I will destroy you all" and "Nobody needs me," an oxymoron reflected even in his protagonist's name: Vladimir Odinokov (literally "world-ruler" "always alone").

Galkovsky combines metaphysical wistfulness and pathos with "mad raving will," cynically inverting his own metaphysics with vulgar, streamlined, practical decisions that are immediately parodied and undergo a fine-toothed aesthetic sorting, which is followed by the opposite: escape behind the looking glass, disappearance. "I am a thinking parody . . . a parody which becomes aware of itself as such disappears . . . The chain of parodies continues into infinity, becoming more and more complex and grandiose. It reaches the Absolute, that is, it parodies eternity."[101] The novel is constructed as a never-ending split among pathways of thought, crossroads multiplying, becoming self-referential dead ends. Essentially it is a microcosm, Russian culture modeled as an endless series of inversions and ruptures. Every decision is taken to a metaphysical extreme and therefore contains the mechanism of its own derangement. "A Russian will be hang-

ing himself, will already have jumped from the stool, and then, at the last moment, will grab the vase." [102]

Galkovsky's "endless dead end" seems to suspend the drawn-out moment of Russia's crossroads in time—this crossroads which appears to be a dead end with no way out precisely because it wants to remain a crossroads, continue as a crossroads. Grabbing a rope with one hand and a vase with the other. Life or death—and in between, "culture." But if the crossroads continues like this, it will move onto a new, meta-cultural level, where it will be defined as the choice between a crossroads and a fixed, straight path, the middle way. This will mark Russian culture's passage from the dual model to the ternary, because the third way will not be a detour but will rather produce a further deepening of the crossroads' essence, as well as a renewed awareness that it never ends.

1996 – 1998

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2 Nikolai Berdiaev, "Novoe Srednevekovie. Razmyshlenie o Sudbe Rossii i Evropy." Fenix (1990): 25.

3 Tsvetaeva found Gogol "more than medieval—he committed his creation to the flames with his own hand" (Marina Tsvetaeva, Sobranie Sochinenii v. 5. Moscow: Ellis Lake, 1994), p. 355

4 N. V. Gogol, Vybrannye Mesta iz Perepiski s Druziami (1847), ch. XXVI: "Strakhi i Uzhasy Rossii." Sobranie Sochinenii v. 6 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1986), p. 297.

5 D. S. Merezhkovsky, V Tikhom Omute: Statii i Issledovaniia Raznykh Let (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel, 1991) pp. 308-309. Compare with Berdiaev: "Russia's religious/moral character begins with Gogol, with his messianic quality. Herein lies the great meaning of Gogol . . . Russian artists will thirst to pass from artistic creation to the creation of a perfect life." Nikolai Berdiaev, Russkaia Idea: Osnovnye Problemy Russkoi Mysli XIX i Nachala XX Veka (Paris: YMCA Press, 1971) p. 85.

6 V. G. Belinsky, Sobranie Sochinenii v. 3 (Moscow: OGIZ, 1948) pp. 709-710.

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14 Nikolai Berdiaev, Russkaia Idea ed. cit., p. 5.

15 Y. M. Lotman and B. A. Ouspensky, "Rol Dualnikh Modelii v Dinamike Russkoi Kulturi (do Kontsa XVIII veka), in Ouspensky, Izbrannye Trudy v. 1 (Moscow: Gnosis, 1994) p. 220.

16 Ibid., p. 220

17 Lotman, Kultura i Vzryv (Moscow: Gnosis, editorial group Progress, 1992) p. 270.

18 Ibid., p. 265.

19 S. Averintsev, "Khristianskii Aristotilism kak Vnutrennaia Forma Zapadnoi Traditsii i Problemy Sovremennoi Rossii" in Ritorika i Istoki Evropeiskoi Literaturnoi Traditsii (Moscow: Shkola "Iazyki Russkoi Kultury," 1996) pp. 320, 322, 325.

20 Averintsev, ed. cit., p. 325.

21 John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism. On Liberty (New York: Meridian, 1962) p. 203.

22 A. Herzen, "Kontsy i Nachala" (1863) in Sobranie Sochinenii v. 16 (Moscow: Izdanie Akademii Nauk USSR, 1959) pp. 140-41, 183. These words of Herzen's serve as a departure point for Merezhkovskii in his article "Velikii Kham" (V Tikhom Omute, pp. 350-51, 358).

23 Quote from Filosofia Tvorchestva, Kultury, i Iskusstva v. 2, by Nikolai Berdiaev (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1994) p. 253.

24 Mark C. Taylor, "Erring: A Postmodern A/theology" (1984), in From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology, ed. By Lawrence Cahoone (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) pp. 526-527.

25 Y. M. Lotman and B. A. Ouspensky, "Rol Dualnykh Modelei . . ." p. 220.

26 Lotman, Struktura Khudozhestvennogo Teksta (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1972) p. 282.

27 This explains the popularity of Avital Ronell's book The Telephone Book: Technology—Schizophrenia—Electric Speech (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) in American theoretical circles; in it, the telephone book is a model for contemporary Western civilization.

28 Ibid., p. 21. One can't help but to recall Leontiev: "All of this is but the tool of mixture—a gigantic pounding, crushing everything in a single mortar of pseudo-humane banality and prose: this is all a complex algebraic formula, trying to reduce everything and everyone to a common denominator.. The goal of it all is the average man, the bourgeois, serene among millions of identically average people, also serene." Leontiev, Izbrannoie, ed. cit., p. 95.

29 Gilles Deleuze and Fe'lix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) p. 5.

30 Jacques Derrida, "Différance" in Margins of Philosophy. Transl. By Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982) p.17.

31 Derrida, Of Grammatology, transl. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) p.47.

32 Merezhkovsky, V Tikhom Omute p. 345.

33 Nikolai Berdiaev, Filosofia Tvorchestva . . . vol. 2, p. 289.

34 Berdiaev, "Filosofia Neravenstva" (1923) in Sobranie Sochenenii, v. 4 (Paris: YMCA Press, 1990) p. 573.

35 Ibid., p. 571.

36 All of Berdiaev's ruminations skip one crucial link: both the old earth and sky (as described in the beginning of the Old Testament) and the new earth and sky (described at the end of the New Testament) are created by God, not through the efforts of man, for whom culture provides quite a sufficient, even grand field of activity. Boris Paramonov wrote prolifically and convincingly about the silver age's gnostic poisons, when bolshevism and eschatologism were mixed in precise quantities.

37 Vladimir Sharov, "Mne li ne Pozhalet . . ." in Romany (Moscow: Nash Dom-L'Age d'Homme, 1997) p. 8.

38 Postmodernisty o Postkulture: Interviu s Sovremennymi Pisateliami i Kritikami (Moscow: LIA R. Elinina, 1996) p. 25.

39 Plato, Sochinenie v. 3, ch. 2 (Moscow: Mysl, 1972) pp. 37-39. In S. Ia. Sheinman-Topstein's translation the Platonic concept of paradeigma is rendered as "example."

40 Vladimir Sorokin, Norma (Moscow: Obscuri Viri, 1994). Page references given in the text.

41 On this subject see Mikhail Epstein's "The Phoenix of Philosophy: On the Meaning and Significance of Contemporary Russian Thought," in Symposion: A Journal of Russian Thought vol. 1 (Los Angeles: Charles Schlacks Jr., Publisher, 1996) pp. 35-74.

42 Averintsev, Ritorika i Istoki Evropeiskoi Literaturnoi Traditsii p. 328.

43 Quote per P. N. Miliukov, Ocherki po Istorii Russkoi Kulturi vol. 2: Vera, Tvorchestvo, Obrazovanie (3rd ed. 1902) (Moscow: Progress, 1994) p. 319.

44 Miliukov, ed. cit., p. 319.

45 Dmitri Shalin, " 'Skazkobyl': Zametki o Retsessivnykh Genakh Russkoi Kultury," Zvezda no. 6 (1995) p. 197. For more on the "Chekhovian path" see also Dmitri Shalin, "Intellectual Culture" in Russian Culture at the Crossroads: Paradoxes of Postcommunist Consciousness ed. By Dmitri Shalin (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1996) pp. 59-64, 85.

46 Dmitri Galkovsky, Beskonechnyi Tupik (Moscow: Samizdat, 1997) p. 542.

47 Victor Erofeev, "Mezhdu Krovatiu i Divanom (A.P. Chekhov)" in Strashnyi Sud: Roman, Rasskazy, Malenkie Esse (Moscow: Soiuz Fotokhudozhnikov Rossii, 1996) p. 454.

48 Merezhkovsky, V Tikhom Omute p. 49.

49 Ibid., p. 50.

50 Sharov, "Mne li ne Pozhalet . . ." Romany p. 10.

51 A. P. Chekhov, Sobranie Sochinenii vol. 8 (Moscow: GIKhL, 1961) pp. 322-23.

52 Chekhov, letter to A. N. Plescheev (October 4, 1888) in vol. 11 (1963) pp. 251-52.

53 Chekhov, ed. cit., vol. 9 (Moscow: GIKhL, 1961) p. 502.

54 Ibid., p. 525.

55 One needs only to re-read all the pages that Nabokov dedicated to the "impenetrable banality" of the bourgeois world, especially in "calm, sensible America," in his essay on Gogol. Vladimir Nabokov, "Nikolai Gogol" trans. E. Golyshova in Romany, Rasskazy, Esse (St. Petersburg: Entar, 1993) pp. 290-297.

56 F. M. Dostoyevsky, Bratia Karamazovy in Sobranie Sochinenii vol. 14 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976) p. 100.

57 Victor Erofeev, preface to the anthology Russkie Tsvety Zla in V Labirinte Prokliatykh Voprosov: Esse (Moscow: Soiuz Fotokhudozhnikov Rossii, 1996) p. 235.

58 Erofeev, ed. cit., p. 237.

59 Ibid., pp. 249-250.

60 Quote from Victor Erofeev, Izbrannoie, ili Karmannyi Apokalipsis (Moscow-Paris-New York: Tretia Volna, 1993) p. 5.

61 Along the lines of Zoshchenko's neologism "super-uncreative."

62 Speech by Comrade Zhdanov about the journals The Star and Leningrad (OGIS. Gospolisdat, 1946) p. 13.

63 Andrei Ariev, "Malenkie Tainy, ili Iavlenie Aleksandra Kushnera" Zvezda (1989) no. 4, p. 202.

64 In one of his last essays Kushner singles out Innokentii Annensky from all the other silver age poets: " . . .All of them were magicians and oracles, androgynes and mystics, demons, knights and palladins, and only he (Annensky) remained a man." (Kushner, "Sredi Liudei, Kotorye ne Slyshat . . ." Novyi Mir (1997) no. 12, p. 193). 'They' are Blok, Sologub, Ivanov, Balmont, Briusov, Bely . . . Annensky is the "best poet of the twentieth century" because he is the only human being among these super-human and inhuman creatures, whose poetry, according to Kushner, is "the lyrical confession of an eagle or a crocodile."

65 For more on the demonic in Goethe and Pushkin, see Epstein, "Faust i Petr na Beregu Moria" in Paradoksy Novizny: O Literaturnom Razvitii XIX-XX Vekov (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel, 1988) pp. 41-64.

66 Johann Peter Eicherman, Razgovory s Gete v Poslednii Gody Ego Zhizni trans. Natalia Man (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1986) p. 407.

67 Ibid., p. 404.

68 See Epstein, "Roza Mira i Tsarstvo Antikhrista: O Paradoksakh Russkoi Eskhatoligii" Kontinent (1994) vol. 1, no. 79, pp. 283-332.

69 Mify Narodov Mira vol. 1 (Moscow: Sovetskaia Entsiklopedia 1980) p. 366.

70 Soren Kierkegaard, "Bolesn k Smerti" in Strakh i Trepet (Fear and Trembling) (Moscow: Respublika, 1993) p. 219. The link between "genius" and "the sudden moment" is keenly felt in Pushkin's poem "K???" ("I remember that charmed moment . . ."). Here he does not mean "pure beauty" as some eternal essence, but rather "the genius of pure beauty," and for this precise reason it appears in such a stormy, sudden fashion: "the charmed moment," "the fleeting vision." Blok also marked the moment of creating his poem "12" with this sense of suddenness: "Today I am a genius." Tsvetaeva wrote, of that same poem, "The demonism of the Revolution's given hour . . . has possessed Blokk . . ." (Sobranie Sochanenii vol. 5, p. 355).

71 Pseudo-Dyonysius. The Celestial Hierarchy in The Complete Works, trans. by Colm Luibheid. (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987) p. 150.

72 Robert A. Maguire, "Gogol and the Legacy of Pseudo-Dionysius" in Russianness. Studies on a Nation's Identity. (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1990. pp. 52-53). I should also mention here the Edward Robinson's article "Apofaticheskoe Iskusstvo Kazimira Malevicha," in which the author finds "something profoundly just in the fact that abstract art was first fully taken to its logical end in Russia" and underscores the tenacity with which Malevich "pursued the main idea, which later came to dominate his art: an idea that is irrefutably connected to the apophatic tradition of the Orthodox Church, in the line of consecutive ideas which have their beginning in the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius himself" (Chelovek 1991, vol. 5, p. 64).

73 Venedikt Erofeev, Ostavte Moiu Dushu v Pokoe (Moscow: Kh.G.S. 1995) p. 71.

74 These examples could go on and on. I've culled them from my lecture entitled "Stikhovychitanie Iosifa Brodskogo" delivered at a seminar devoted to his poetry. Russian Summer Language Institute, Middlebury, Vermont; July 1990.

75 See the chapters "Apofaticheskoe Soznanie: Kontseptualizm" and "Pustota kak Priem" in Mikhail Epstein's book Vera i Obraz: Religioznoe Bessoznatelnoe v Russkoi Kulture XX Veka (Tenafly, New Jersey: Hermitage Publishers, 1994) pp. 31-79 and 140-169.

76 See Epstein, "Ironia Stilia: Demonicheskoe v Obraze Rossii u Gogola," Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie (1996) no. 19, pp. 129-147.

77 Gogol, ed. cit., vol. 3, pp. 107-108.

78 Joseph Brodsky, Forma Vremeni: Stikhotvorenia, Esse, Piesy vol. 2 (Minsk: Eridan, 1992) pp. 460, 462.

79 Boris Pasternak, Sobranie Sochanenii vol. 3 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1990) p. 474.

80 Solzhenitsyn can be grouped with the "catophatic" writers, who seek a positive embodiment of the ideal—yet who, for that very reason, constantly cross over from the realm of secular writing into the religious. Russian culture tends toward a particular type of catophatism, which by virtue of its "extreme" assertions bursts across the boundary of the social and enters into the realm of religious/moral preaching, as in the examples of the Idiot and Zosima in Dostoyevsky, Father Sergei and Nekhliudov in Tolstoy, Ieshua and the Master in Bulgakov, Yuri Zhivago in Pasternak, Matriona in Solzhenitsyn . . .

81 Konstantin Leontiev, "Dva Grafa: Aleksei Vronsky i Lev Tolstoy" in Izbrannoie (Moscow: Moskovskii Rabochii, 1993) p. 188.

82 I. V. Kireievsky, Izbrannye Statii (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1984) p. 259. (Kireievsky apparently means Bruno, not Galileo).

83 Tsvetaeva, Sobranie Sochanenii vol. 5 (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1994) p. 362.

84 V. V. Rozanov, "O Sladchaishem Iisuse i Gorkikh Poldakh Mira" in V Tiemnykh Religioznakh Luchakh (Moscow: Respublika, 1994) p. 420.

85 Ibid., pp. 425-26.

86 Ibid., p. 426.

87 Averintsev, "Bakhtin, Smekh, Khristianskaia Kultura" in Rossia/Russia vol. 6 (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1988) pp. 122, 129.

88 Izbornik (a collection of ancient Russian literature) (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1969) p. 69. Incidentally, let us note this acknowledgement made by the emissaries: "We do not know how to tell of this." Even this earliest evidence points to the source of Russia's apophatic stream, which during the first seven centuries of Christianity condemned Russia to "an inability to express the most profound and sacred conceptions in its religious experience" (G. P. Fedotov, Sudba i Grekhi Rossii: Izbrannye Statii po Filosofii Russkoi Istorii i Kultury vol. 1 [St. Petersburg: Sofia, 1991] p. 307).

89 Chekhov, Sobranie Sochanenii vol. 8 (Moscow: GIKhL, 1962) p. 291.

90 Merezhkkovsky, V Tikhom Omute p. 305.

91 Nabokov, "Nikolai Gogol" in Romany, Rasskazy, Esse, ed. cit., p. 292.

92 Berdiaev, Russkaia Idea, ed. cit., p. 132.

93 In the words of M. Bakhtin, "in the realm of culture, 'outerness' is the most powerful lever for understanding. An alien culture reveals itself most fully and profoundly in the eyes of another culture . . ." (Bakhtin, Literaturno-Kriticheskie Statii [Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1986] p. 507). Orthodoxy occupies such a radical position of 'outerness' with respect to social culture that it aids in a keener understanding of Orthodoxy, much as common foods acquire rich taste after a period of fasting.

94 Kireievsky, Izbrannye Statii (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1984) p. 235.

95 Berdiaev, "Otkrovenie o Cheloveke v Tvorchestve Dostoievskogo" in Filosofia Tvorchestva vol. 2, p. 174.

96 Lotman, Kultura i Vzryv, p. 265.
97 Ibid., p. 270.

98 Blok, Sobranie Sochanenii vol. 4 (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1982) p. 30.

99 Ibid., p. 21.

100 Dmitri Galkovsky, Beskonechnyi Tupik, p. 21.

101 Ibid., p. 659.

102 Ibid., p. 21.

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MIKHAIL EPSTEIN

Russian Spirituality and the Secularization of Culture

This book explores the challenges to the process of secularization in Russian society during the period of its dominance by the Orthodox Church, and subsequently during the Soviet atheistic era. Both are based on the binary opposition of values ("sacred" and "profane") and do not admit of a 'middle ground' where truly secular culture develops. The book presents the foundational categories of Russian spirituality, such as "the demonic" and "the apophatic," “banality” and “inversion” drawing on the work of Russian writers and thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries: Gogol, Belinsky, Herzen, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Merezhkovsky, Berdiaev, Brodsky, Kushner, Lotman, Averintsev, Kabakov, Venedikt Erofeev, Vladimir Sorokin, and Dmitry Galkovsky. The author considers modern Russian culture’s need for a neutral ‘middle ground’ between its extreme polarities. He also explores the dangers of comprehensive neutralization in culture and the necessity of retaining elements of the dual model along with the introduction of intermediate elements. When combined, these views do not cancel each other out, but rather produce a ‘ternary’ model of a cultural symbiosis between the extreme and the median, despite their apparent incompatibility.

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