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The Intelligentsia without Revolution: The Culture of the Silver Age

Andrei Arieu

The most effective definition of "the intelligentsia" might read: "Russian intellectuals who are generally opposed to the government." But even Russia's traditionally powerful government has collapsed at times, leaving a vacuum of authority. This was precisely the historical situation at the beginning of the twentieth century. It made an indelible impression both upon thinkers, such as Rozanov, and on politicians, such as Lenin.

I do not want to dwell on politics, but upon culture, and what happened to it when "authority collapsed" and the artistic intelligentsia had no one to oppose but itself.

Chronologically, this period can be dated from the death of Alexander III, when the hearty Russian emperor was timidly succeeded by his mousy son, inarticulate and prone to outbursts of virtue.

This new Russian culture which emerged during the reign of Nicholas I was later named "the Silver age." Its formal beginning is frequently associated with the publication of Briusov's three anthologies entitled *The Russian Symbolists* in the years 1894 and 1895. Its conclusion is marked by the deaths of Blok and Gumeliev, and the subsequent exile of the age's greatest artistic representatives by the Bolsheviks, in 1922. The end of the Silver age was fixed in time by the appearance of Mikhail Gershenzon and Viacheslav Ivanov's *A Correspondence Between Two Corners* in 1921. Alexander Kushner even offered the exact date of the age's demise -- the day that Osip Mandelstam wrote his poem "A Concert at the Train Station," also in 1921. Such 'unscientific' declarations nevertheless serve to sharpen public perception of a given phenomenon.

In essence the Silver age was even shorter: limited to the first decade-and-a-half of the twentieth century. This opinion was professed by E. G. Etkind, for example, in his article "The Unity of the 'Silver Age.'" [1]

In order to localize these events historically, let us designate the twelve-year period that marked the collapse of the imperial house (between 1905 and 1917) as a gap between two historical epochs.

Socially and politically, this was a time when the Russian revolutionary movement, initiated during the second half of the nineteenth century by

such representative figures as N. G. Chernyshevsky, N. K. Mikhailovsky, G. V. Plekhanov, and others, was swiftly and decisively developed by their successors in the direction of revolutionary extremism which ultimately led to the nationwide turbulence of 1917. A part of the intelligentsia separated itself from this stormy tide and rose above it; these people were disenchanted with positivist ideas in general and their vulgar Russian interpretation in particular. This group of intellectuals was also evolving rapidly, but in the direction of various religious and metaphysical orientations. Three fundamental texts define the stages along this path: *The Problems of Idealism* (1902), *Landmarks* (1909, reprinted many times since), and *From the Depths* (1918--confiscated and suppressed by the Bolsheviks).

The authors represented in these anthologies -- P. V. Struve, N. A. Berdiaev, S. N. Bulgakov, S. N. Frank, A. S. Isgoiev, S. A. Askoldov, and others--became Russia's cultural elite; there was talk of a "Russian Renaissance" of the beginning of the twentieth century. The overall spiritual aspiration of this movement might best be expressed by the words with which Semion Frank concludes *Landmarks*: "We must move away from unproductive, anticultural *nihilistic moralism* toward a creative, culturally nourishing *religious humanism*." [2]

Yet even this variously educated and talented group did not express the full spectrum of the intelligentsia's highest yearnings; in part, it even opposed them, responding to any discussion of cultural or even social progress with barely concealed irritation. These neophytes not only preferred religious asceticism and the light of mystical *a priori* truths to the social life of the beginning of the century, but even set the two in direct opposition to one another.

While people of a more artistic bent appreciated their spiritual connection with this group of thinkers (particularly Nikolai Berdiaev), they nevertheless led more disorganized, bohemian lives. It comes as no surprise that some of them (Alexander Blok, Vsevolod Meierhold, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and pretty much all of the futurists) eventually allowed themselves to be seduced by the energy of the revolution. People of the Silver age had no definitive criteria besides a common rejection of positivist institutions.

Paradoxically, despite all of these bohemian trappings, the Silver age was the first to witness the professionalization of creative work. This was in part, at least, the result of the artists' utter lack of interest in anything

except creative pursuits.

Whatever spiritual crises people of the Silver age may have undergone, whatever moral dead ends they might have come to, they remained organically tied to the *Landmarks* circle rather than to Marxism. Whenever one speaks of symbolism, the first movement of the Silver age, characterized by the work of D. S. Merezhkovsky, Fiodor Sologub, Viacheslav Ivanov, Andrei Bely, or the aforementioned Blok, one cannot disengage it from the problematics bequeathed to the entire Silver age by Dostoyevky and Vladimir Soloviev, both of whom had resisted, in their time, the masses of "martyrs for a brighter tomorrow" who had fallen to the temptations of revolutionary ideology. The oppositional movements which arose outside of symbolism in the 1910s, such as acmeism (Nikolai Gumiliev, Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Sergei Gorodetsky, et al) and futurism (the Burliuk brothers, Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, and others), turned out to be links in a single chain reaction. In the end everything splintered into cubofuturists, egofuturists, various "poets' guilds," and then there were imagists and even nothing-ists. . . .

But let us not forget that behind all this motley diversity lay an initial meaning; an *a priori* unity could be glimpsed.

A similar evolution took place in the visual arts -- from the nineteenth century *Peredvizhniki* to the "Art World," which in turn splintered into the more local groups such as "The Jack of Diamonds," "The Blue Rose," and the "Donkey's Tail". . . . In the realm of music, the Silver age leaned heavily on the names of Alexander Skriabin and Igor Stravinsky. . . .

In terms of world history, the analogue to the Silver age is not, of course, the mythical "Golden" and "Silver" ages, but rather the "Silver Latin" period in Rome, the time of Tacitus, Seneca, and Martial.

This comparison, though not essential, is important in that all the artists of Russia's "Silver age" lived with a passion for distant associations, chose the category of "accordance" as its aesthetic measure, and was thoroughly enamored of quotations, since it sought the *a priori*, age-old truths.

Culture, if not stronger than politics, is at least more enduring, more encompassing. It is a precise measure with which to evaluate the potential of this or that social stratum or structure. And in this sense, the dawning of Nicholas II's reign reflected its cultural twilight. One of the Silver age poets describes the coronation ceremonies in 1895 thus: "Those days when brilliant style and empire were synonymous are gone, never to

return. The role of Lomonosov or Derzhavin is now being played by Viktor Krylov, a crafter of popular plays and rote, mediocre verse. Beneath these ancient arches we are now subjected to the watery lines of 'In Imitation of Koltsov'. . . ." [3] The assumption here is that depicting courtly life leaves no room for any discussion of the period's true cultural values.

In these years of "the last reign" culture lost its interest in the institutions of power, and found itself free from having to cooperate with them. Its uncontrollable upward momentum was fraught with the degradation of official authority, which, before Nicholas II, had traditionally been fairly high in Russia.

Yet even aristocratic culture, which had established itself in the service of the Romanovs, was suffering a period of confusion at the end of the nineteenth-beginning of the twentieth centuries, whether it remained in dialogue with imperial figureheads or opposed them. All the talk of "twilight," "the end of time," and "decadence," had some real foundation.

In "The Philosophy of Inequality," Nikolai Berdiaev offers this analysis of the worldwide changes that had led to the emergence and survival of Silver age culture in Russia during the first two decades of the twentieth century: "The democratic revolution which has been taking place for some time throughout the world is not justified by the value or high quality of the culture that it brings to the world. Democratization degrades culture everywhere, in quality and in value." [4]

The Silver age was a response both to this democratic degradation and to emancipation in general. Born in the democratic spirit of the epoch, it could not help but to oppose the emasculated authoritarian regime and, more generally, the entire arrogant world of social inequality. Yet this opposition had a strange quality; it could not imagine victory, and felt a secret empathy with the old times which were passing into oblivion. It perceived the end of the imperial, Petersburg-centered period of Russian history as its own end, and thus built its own culture on a foundation of eschatological foreboding, the myth of finality, the symbolism of twilight. . . .

The old Russian aristocratic culture (aristocratic both in terms of class and in the sense that it belonged to the orbit of the highest, autonomous social structures--independent of the forces which might attract or repel them), the cultural period revolving around St. Petersburg was being replaced by a new, "common" (or "bourgeois" if you prefer) civilization that slipped away from vertical social structures and hierarchical values. It

had its advantages, if only in granting greater individual freedoms. (In light of this, the early death of Chekhov -- the first and immediately brilliant prophet of the principles of an artist's "private, individual existence," who dared to prefer "civilization" to "culture" -- is highly symbolic.)

However, democratization in Russia is inevitably accompanied by social cataclysms and general intellectual disorder.

Silver age culture, while acknowledging democratization as "immanent" (and making full use of it), immediately revolted "transcendentally" against this "new order." It began to perceive itself as a system of spiritual and artistic values even more esoteric than those of the recent past; theirs was an art which did not want to leave democracy but which nonetheless distanced itself within the circumference of its scattered light, from life in general, from the simplicity and warmth of organic human existence. Thus a new and torturous awareness of elitism permeated this attempt at cultural creation, which lacked the necessary cultural safeguard of hierarchy.

The process by which Silver age culture came into being is antimonic by nature: while fighting for its freedom and upholding civil liberties, this culture simultaneously fights for the right to be esoteric, and thereby for the chance to repress its profane surroundings. It acquires precisely this repressive (in the spiritual realm, of course), elitist quality. At the same time this culture's loftiness dictates an even greater necessity: the necessity of absolute opposition to the outside world as soon as that world becomes repressive itself -- that is, when the old hierarchical, autocratic social order is restored (in Russia, by the Bolshevik takeover).

Obviously, radical revolutionary social groups viewed the "end" as a "beginning," and no "cultural degradation" perturbed them; in fact, it came in handy. And these groups in themselves, no matter how many papers they wrote, whatever flurry of printed matter they may have produced at the beginning of this century, however many songs were sung, still had nothing whatsoever to do with the Silver age.

Those of the Silver age considered themselves the "last" people, while the revolutionaries were "other." It is crucial to capture the separate, solitary character of this culture's existence.

Let me repeat: though it was born of the worldwide process of democratization and acknowledged the natural necessity and inevitability

of this process, spiritually the Silver age culture rejected it.

“Despite the democratic and socialist strivings in politics,” wrote Fiodor Stepun, “culture continued in its intimate, aristocratic life. . . .” [5]

Above all, this culture is antinomic, not dialectic. Its most consistent antirevolutionary “landmark” direction was, at the same time (and this is now utterly ignored) in no way an intellectually and socially *antidemocratic* drive; it struggled against *radicalism*, against *revolution*. Democracy and revolution only rarely stipulate each other (or, otherwise put, the enfeebled development of democracy is frequently stipulated by a revolutionary situation).

Nor was the “landmark” movement an anti-intellectual development; its authors themselves spoke out with much fervor on this score: “As soon as the 'landmarkers' appeared . . . the Russian intelligentsia came alive,” V. V. Rozanov remarked. [6]

The *Landmarks* anthology speaks to the intelligentsia, cautioning it away from extremist ideology. This is its own sort of “guidebook,” with the sole designation and responsibility to bring the intelligentsia to a new consciousness, connecting knowledge with faith, theory with practice, “reality-as-truth” with “reality-as-justice.” This problem, unlikely to be resolved by the “landmark” participants themselves, was just as perplexing to the people of the Silver age.

How can all of this be unified, when that very same Berdiaev insisted upon the utter impossibility of any sort of conciliarism in “our bourgeois-democratic age,” which was most interested in the “equalizing process.” The philosopher’s following words are fully applicable to a description of the spiritual world of any of the Silver age artists:

“In this plebeian age, those of a creative and culturally refined nature find themselves more alone and unacknowledged than at any previous time. There has never been such a sharp contrast between the select minority and the majority, between the pinnacles of culture and its middle level. . . . In the past this contrast was diffused by culture’s more organic structure. But in a culture which has lost its 'organic' nature, retreated from its hierarchical structure, in a culture which is 'critically' constructed, the contrast becomes unbearably painful.” [7]

Let us also bring to bear a generalization which might help to clarify the “unifying principle” of the Silver age: “Culture is of noble origin. It takes

on the hierarchical character of the cult. Culture has a religious foundation. . . . Culture is symbolic by its very nature. This symbolism originates in the symbolics of the cult. In culture, spiritual life is expressed symbolically rather than realistically. All cultural achievement is by its very nature symbolic. It does not present the latest achievements of daily life, but only its symbolic markers." [8]

This is how Silver age culture perceived itself, reacting sharply to the diffusion of nineteenth-century culture's "grand style," in Russia as well as the world at large, which was brought about by the democratic privatization of reality.

The Silver age's internal battle between symbolism and the newer currents was essentially only a battle for new "symbolic markers." Theoretically, symbolism and acmeism and futurism all formed a new model for life-as-culture, captured in daily reality; all of them sensed "the ties of voluntary coordination" in all kinds of art and the ultimate "restoration of symbol as the embodiment of reality, and myth as the realized '*Fiat*'" — So be it! . . ." [9]

In practical terms, the Silver age was quite an esoteric production, pushing toward the destruction of symbol, the disembodiment of reality, and the apprehension of light ("*Fiat lux!*") in direct correlation with its descent into darkness.

All "foreign impulses and strivings" are dulled, in Alexander Blok's view, by "the sickness of that age which began with the *fin de siècle*." [10] That is, simply speaking, with the sense and acceptance of doom. The arrogant "So be it!" led not to the light, but to retribution: ". . . the world's whirlpool sucks almost all of man into its funnel; almost no trace remains of personality, which, if it survives at all, becomes unrecognizable, crippled, disfigured. What was once a man exists no longer; all that remains is limp and worthless flesh, a rotting little soul." [11]

Blok addresses these words to himself.

Such experiences are indeed unusual and even esoteric. Yet we have this esoteric nature to thank for the survival of Silver age culture up until our time; in our eyes, at the end of the century and of the millennium, the Silver age is a unified metaphysical whole, which has acquired all the qualities of that "grand style" (inspired by world culture and open to the problems of modernity) which it had longed for so fiercely in the past. Neither symbolism, nor acmeism, nor futurism, taken separately, could

make any claim of such scope.

This culture's religious-philosophical slogan was: "*a realibus ad realiora*" -- "from reality to the ultimate reality."

And no one came forward to admit that he had failed to find this "ultimate reality" in art. The existing revealed its finiteness without crossing over into existence.

Whoever answered the poet's question,
Who has captured that moment, when behind existence
Another existence is unexpectedly revealed?

in the affirmative risked finding himself not "on the other side of existence," but on the other side of sanity. Thus is it ingenuously described by the author of the above-quoted "Poem in the Nones." [12]

Valerii Briusov, who declared haughtily, "I do not see our reality!", nevertheless captured its essential content, a "standstill" in the motion of history, a pause which imagined Russian life during Nicholas's reign as its chosen contemporary. "There is no great, pan-national art for the modern man," asserted Viacheslav Ivanov in his 1904 article "Athena's Spear," "perhaps because modern man himself does not exist, as such; that is, as someone who has achieved a static type of existence. . . ." [13]

This break, the gap between epochs gave absolutely each and every person in Nicholas's empire a free, though somewhat ephemeral chance to "turn the course of history" into the desired channel. Of course, the thinking person was hardly up to such a grandiose undertaking; let alone the poets. . . .

Nothing around, nothing is quite "it." This very true apophatic argument, so valued in the Orthodox tradition as proof of God's existence (nothing which can be thought or perceived can give one an adequate understanding of him) simultaneously and analogously served as a proof of Russia's existence, which, as we know from Tiutchev, "the mind cannot grasp." For the Silver age artists, the disappearance of Russian reality from their field of vision was a sort of miraculous hint at its ideal existence, wherever it might be glimpsed--in the past or in the future.

Of course, these apophatic frames of mind were often fraught with the possibility of sliding down into the bosom of Russia's traditional nihilism, to which many Silver age artists succumbed, including the lyricists. Yet

Russian nihilism is practically the dark flip-side of Orthodox apophatism.

The apophatic spirit of the Silver age asserted the possibility of immeasurable freedom in the interpretation of everything existing on earth, yet at the same time did not deprive the artist of hope for the unspeakable grandeur of his unconscious impulses and intentions, hope for some link between the "transcendental" and the "immanent," despite the lack of a "logical bridge" between them (to use S. N. Bulgakov's expression).

Characteristically, Bulgakov published in a periodical, and then in a separate edition (1917) his book "A Light Not of Evening," right at the close of the Silver age; the book's main theme was "the divinity of Nothingness," that is, the "negative theology" of apophatism. Just as legitimate is the most famous philosophical treatise of the entire Silver age -- "The Pillar and the Profession of Truth" (1914) by Pavel Florenskii - which addresses at its core the problem of antinomy in the Christian faith as a whole.

The writers of the Silver age were the first to suspect that an epoch of accomplishments, rather than a "diamond-studded sky," would open up a chasm of unimaginable, petty vulgarity. "There will be such Philistinism. . . . The world has never yet seen such a thing. . . ." said Mandelstam. [14]

An arrogance with regard to the future is, perhaps, nobler than empty utopianism, yet they are alike at their core. Aside from eschatologism, the Silver age offered nothing sensible in response to progressivism. And this is quite understandable; those who promise the public a spot in heaven recall Nietzsche's "will to power" and proclaim "conciliarism" and "the construction of life" as a means to overcome the malaise of the *fin de siecle* and the furtive, "secret" fear of the end of time.

Essentially, this is a fear of the commonplace, in the face of a "civilization," as Blok would put it, which horribly degrades the meaning of individual-natural creativity. The people of the Silver age had no intention of seeking out the diamonds, say, in the petty-bourgeois ideal of personal and familial happiness. In this sense, the similarity between the disturbing insolence of the socialist scoundrels who glorified the communal sharing of women and the provocative practice of *menages a trois* among proponents of "collective beginnings" is not surprising. What might truly be surprising would be if some patron of the Petersburg artists' pubs such as the "Wandering Dog" or the "Actor's Rest" suddenly dared to quote Pushkin in saying "I'll sing along and live a merry life as a petty

merchant.”

All of these theoretical remarks are made despite that just position which states that any rational generalizations about the realm of art are slippery things indeed. In this case the fullness of knowledge can eat away at any conception. Specifically, in Silver age culture one might point out the deliberate bourgeois orientation of Vasilii Rozanov, the day-to-day commonness of Fiodor Sologub, Andrei Bely’s impulses in this direction. . .

And yet there is an “epochal style,” there is a “collective unconscious,” there is something which might be defined as “identity-less cultural paradigms.”

The Silver age is anomalous in terms of the commonplace perceptions of its time; that which might appear “decadent” or “immoral” from the outside was, for its representatives, a sign of Dionysian freedom. Here art tends to be viewed as a life “above morality,” as its own sort of confessional. The entire Silver age prides itself on “crossing the line.” Its participants represent the new religious-dissembling type of “man-as-artist.” Blok believed that such a type would appear only in the future. In truth, however, this was his way of verifying his hidden “I,” which fed not on the future but on the past, on Wagnerian illusions and Nietzschean suspicions. It was assumed that a non-humanist, non-social environment would create from its basic elements a “new breed” of people, people of culture rather than of civilization. Naturally, it would be raised by the “musical notes of our own cruel nature” (Blok). “It is not the man of aesthetics or politics, nor the humanitarian, but the man-as-*artist*; he and only he will be able to *live greedily and take action*. . . .” [15]

The “man-as-artist” is, most importantly, anti-humanist. He “sows the wind” and, consequently, “reaps the storm.”

All of these “elements” turned out to be distant not only from “civilization,” but from Christianity as well. Regarding the “most real,” that *a priori* truth of the Silver age, the “element” was nothing more than its pantheistic, if not pagan, equivalent.

Blok distanced himself from his “man-as-artist” and projected him into the future because he was all too well aware of his own mortality, of the fact that he was the “terminal branch” on the tree of his kind.

This was generally a crucial element of Silver age self-awareness;

everyone thought of himself as the "last poet." These people created and realized the romantic myth that they were the "last," "sunset" generation of Russia's passing culture. Precisely because it foresaw and witnessed the "end," this generation thirsted for all manners of "beginnings." Its "life-building" grew forth from eschatological experiences, and its culture was realized as a sort of "variation on the theme of the end." A similar "variation" resounded, according to Tynenov, in Blok's poem "The Twelve," which linked this entire culture.

This was indeed evidence of the end -- the end of what we now call the "Petersburg period of Russian history." To put it differently and more definitively, this was decadence.

In Gershenson and Ivanov's sketch "A Correspondence Between Two Corners," which ushered in the epoch, the latter asks and then answers: "What *isdécadence*? It is the keenest sense of organic connection with the monumental legacy of the high culture of the past, along with the painfully proud awareness that we are the last of its kind." [16]

According to N. N. Punin, Sergei Makovsky, the founder of the journal "Apollo," expressed such experiences even more affectedly: "We are the last ones; we are the creators of irony, yet we do so with deep love for ourselves and aristocratic dignity of spirit!" "Such opinions were commonplace in those times," Punin concludes. [17]

"I am the final representative, the last baby bird to take flight from the 'Nobles' Nest'," declared the philosopher Vladimir Ilyin. [18]

Everyone from the over-the-top Sergei Esenin to the half-insane Tikhon Churlin waded into this current: "I am the village's last poet. . . ." "I am the genius of the murdered generation/murdered, murdered. . . ." [19]

Those who were trapped, left behind locked doors in the "terrible world" of modern "civilization" were contemptible. The insolent declaration largely attributed to the futurists pulsed in everyone's blood. "We'll have a good laugh with the billy-goat" -- this was written not by the Burliuks, but by Briusov. Valmont's temerity was not nearly so expressive: he merely wanted to "revel in a gorgeous body" and only afterward to "tear off its clothes." Yet this is not bad. And then there is Akhmatova: "My husband whipped me with an embroidered belt, folded in two"--this was also a great novelty in Russian lyricism. Or Blok again, summing up the literary year of 1907 in terms of "a slap in the face of public taste": "We will raise the lyrical goblet and splash frothy and dangerous wine onto your bald

heads. Go ahead--try to dry yourselves off -- it won't help. . .” [20]

“We” are those who have been “dedicated” to the “poets’ courtyard.” Everyone knew one another personally here, and any internal opposition was not paraded about on the public stage. The observant Rozanov understood this right away: “The doors to the ‘Golden Fleece,’ that is, Blok and his friends, will hardly ever open . . . in fact, will probably never open. . . .” [21]

Once could compose an “alphabet” of the participants in the Silver age similar to the “alphabet” of the Decembrists. The list would not be too long.

This discovery was constantly impressed upon the people of the Silver age: after all the successes of “positivism,” “materialism,” and “realism” in the nineteenth century, the world remained as inscrutable as ever. All that was left to trust was the unconscious, for it cannot lie. Therefore, it cannot be considered evil. Which is, obviously, a mistake. Yet how can a man who insists on *a priori* truths, a man of faith, who believes that he was created in the image and likeness of God, admit that the “truth” might lead to a “lie”? And the Silver age surrendered to the unconscious Dionysian impulse to spite the “treacherous mind.”

Truly this was a “feast during the time of the plague,” if even the most straightforward and unselfish of poets exulted: “How to suppress your futile merriment/your blush, o drunken plague?” [22]

For the Silver age artists, the unconscious was a guide unrivaled in its intrepid reason. “When one is clearly aware of duality merging into one in human nature, and moral becomes phenomenal,” Andrei Bely concluded, perfectly logically. [23] Many people reached this very same conclusion. In fact, it was assumed that everyone did.

Philosophically, this morality could be understood as the “apotheosis of rootlessness,” as a triumph over both materialistic and idealistic monism. “Life and the world are too fragmented” (“*Zu fragmentarisch ist Welt und Leben*”), Lev Shestov states in an epigraph from Heine.

Poetically, this philosophy summarizing the experience of the Silver age would be expressed by Viacheslav Ivanov, already in exile:

A guest and a stranger everywhere
With the muse of the age but no native land

A citizen fluttering from one bird-feeder to another
Rootless, I am beyond the boundaries. [24]

Those Silver age authors whose dualism was founded in the experience of "fragmentation" and "the easy life" were no less dramatic than those who experienced it in their quiet studies as a legacy of sacred history or classical philosophy (the selfsame Shestov and Viacheslav Ivanov).

Among the symptoms of liberation, "spiritual simplicity" and the "rehabilitation of the flesh" were just as provocative as the seduced Viacheslav Ivanov's attempts to bring about "the Transfiguration of the world" by means of art from his lofty tower.

Everyone called for the "Transfiguration of the world"--the symbolists, the adamists, the futurists. . . . Some later admitted that the bloody historical metamorphoses that followed were a reflection of that "comprehensible essence" which they had expounded upon in speech after speech, lecture after lecture, while simultaneously debunking the contemptible "obviousness of outward experience."

One must acknowledge the concept of "correspondence" as a dominant strain in Silver age culture, for this age hoped to unify thoroughly the inner and outer realities, life and art. "Correspondence" was the perfect image of antinomy, imitating the link between essence and existence, between the "real" and the "most real." This is a dynamic symbol of the dualism that is rooted in culture, pointing up both the impossibility of ever overcoming it and all of the culture-building, productive strivings in that direction.

This system of "correspondences" was to have paved the road from secularized culture to a universal Christian realism. Theology provided the framework for attaining knowledge of God's existence through the ultimate absolute. This was, in fact, at the heart of the search for "correspondences." It was a grandiose attempt, but belated; art was turning away from Christian "realism" toward "nominalism." It parted ways with theology much as philosophy had parted ways with it. Viacheslav Ivanov's attempt to correct the situation from within, as well as the proliferation of religious thinkers in the "Landmarks" circle, "multiplied essences" more than works of art.

The artistic vision of the Silver age grasps and records the randomness and disorder of life, the accident of existence, the world's randomness. As in Okkam's time, faith found itself outside the boundaries of logical

speculation. The system of "correspondences" allows the absurd to be perceived as the imaginary.

The poet seeks a system of harmonic links among everything that exists. To put it more bluntly -- a system of links between the creative "I" and the great Nothing. Things which are incompatible in nature and reality are actually laced with threads of "correspondences." These must be identified and exposed in the act of creation. The wistful longing for "correspondences" was, essentially, an artistic variant of Russia's famous yen for all-encompassing "unity."

The Silver age artists felt this longing deeply, and expressed it in the following summation: *There are higher values in this world, but in itself the world is fragmented and unexamined.* Only one culture can truly be studied in depth. It is by itself a subject for study; we can only understand that which we create ourselves. The higher values, however, are not made by us. We seek their "correspondences" collectively. Yet we only find them alone.

Variouly modified, the intuition of "correspondences" defines the artistic practice of the symbolist Viacheslav Ivanov, the confessional tragedian Innokentii Annensky, the champion of "radiant clarity" Mikhail Kuzmin, the acmeist Nikolai Gumiliev, the futurist Velimir Khlebnikov, the mystical visionary Elena Guro, and Georgii Ivanov, the apologist for taste and moderation. In 1919 the poet Sergei Rafalovich wrote about Anna Akhmatova: "The mystery of eternal and prophetic correspondences has found itself a living, creative incarnation in Akhmatova's poetry." [25]

Of course, many poets were able use the "keyboard of mysterious *correspondences*" initially defined by Charles Baudelaire -- especially those who were partial to the European, and particularly German Romantic movement. In general the experience of similarity, the link between otherwise distant signs and feelings, could be considered the base of any poetic work. The term itself came to the Silver age through French mediation, while holding to the course of Platonic tradition in terms of content. "Correspondences" ("*Correspondances*") -- a key poem in Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* -- was translated into Russian repeatedly, perhaps most notably in 1912 by Konstantin Balmont.

Therefore let us continue the comparison between Akhmatova and Baudelaire, which was initially made by Sergei Rafalsky in his review of "The White Flock": "Baudelaire's sonnet about correspondences found its fullest and most perfect incarnation in her. And thus her poems never

subjugate one theme to another--description to lyric or lyric to description; the two are inseparable, borderless, and absolutely equal both in essence and in terms of the artistic expressiveness devoted to them." [26]

This interpretation of Akhmatova's poetry is quite noteworthy: it demonstrates once again the illusion of separating acmeism and symbolism. It is especially curious that among the symbolists, the most astute study of "correspondence" was being conducted by Viacheslav Ivanov, whom Akhmatova most decidedly disliked. For her part, Akhmatova acknowledged Baudelaire's undeniable influence on the master of acmeism himself, Gumiliev.

Of course, it is not merely a matter of sympathies and antipathies, of particular principles or a familiarity with Baudelaire; the final mystical choir sings of "correspondences" in *Faust*, and they are readily apparent in Goethe's paraphrase of Swedenborg at the beginning of the tragedy -- "the world of spirits is always close, and the door is unlocked." All of this is like a tuning fork held up to the poetic moods of the Silver age. In this case, the essential question is fascinating: What does a particular culture choose from among the world's experiences to identify as its *own*?

Silver age culture witnessed the emergence of various conceptions of "correspondence" as a specific and fundamental category in a way that no previous age, at least in terms of Russian art, ever had. Correspondence" was rooted in the actual experience of the world, not simply in poetics. That so many were bewitched by these "correspondences" underscores the wholeness of this culture and smooths over those differences among the symbolists, acmeists, and futurists which opposed one another in the literary (and often in the socio-political) realm.

Authors such as Annensky, and the mature Georgii Ivanov after him, viewed the system of "correspondences" as a primarily antinomial phenomenon, delineated by opposites and contradictions; not merely in terms of "celestial" and "earthly," but in terms of recent experience, squandered and repulsively tangible. Annensky concludes that ". . .filth and debasement are but tortured longing/For a beauty shining out there, somewhere. . . ." [27]

"It is not beauty, but the tormenting awareness of the ideal" which lies at the base of Annensky's aesthetics. One can only discover beauty in the "beauty of loss."

The Silver age agrees with Pushkin in its firm belief that sensory perception is not necessarily the same as knowledge. So much the better for poetry, which would have no place in a world of unchanging conceptions. Yet only one level of sensory perception was also inadequate; the progenitors and creators of the Silver age were drawn by their cultural erudition toward the comprehension of "supra-sensory objects"--that is, "ideas" in the Platonic sense of the word.

We can only guess at "other worlds," and write poetry about them. As Blok justly remarks, "People wink at each other slyly in agreement that, of course, there must be a sharp delineation between this world and any 'other worlds'; our friendly forces battle for these 'alien,' as yet unexplored worlds." [28]

Obviously, these "unexplored worlds" cannot belong to any one man, and one cannot clown around, creating absolutely anything he wants. (Blok was quite familiar with the temptation to play the fool in such a way.)

Creation must originate in emptiness. As Zinaida Gippius liked to say, "The most important things are the ones that no one knows anything about." "And really, what can we understand, with our puny little heads?" asks a random pastor in one of Rozanov's works.

Ivanov's words exemplified the spirit of the age: "Peek out at modernity from between your fingers, and keep silent about the most important things." It is a reminiscence, if not a direct quote dating back to Vladimir Soloviev, one of the Silver age's most decisive authorities. Fiodor Stepun wrote of Ivanov, this "most melancholy" Russian philosopher, "He kept a cryptic silence about the most important thing for his entire life." [29]

Similarly, another well-known line of Ivanov's -- "I create useless masterpieces out of empty air" -- fondly paraphrases Lev Shestov in his essay about Chekhov, "Creation from Nothingness."

The presence of Russian nihilism in all of this cannot be denied. In this case it reflects a deep underlying sense of apophatism, for "nothingness" can also be the poet's creative source. Perhaps it is even the original source, without which poetry would be impossible. Regarding his views on poetic work, Georgii Ivanov wrote "I see the phrase itself arising from some original source. This is a rare quality, and of substantive importance to our brother." [30]

Georgii Chulkov's teachings about "mystical anarchism" critically

influenced this nihilism among the artists of the Silver age, according to one modern philosopher. [31]

And yet somehow it is not surprising that the "mystical anarchist" Georgii Chulkov eventually developed in the direction of the Orthodox faith, or that the despairing poet Georgii Ivanov later wrote of the "eternal light." The gap between Russian nihilism and Russian apophatism is narrow.

[32] To paraphrase Igor Smirnov's paraphrase of Dostoyevsky, Georgii Ivanov might be called "a nihilist in the loftiest sense of the word."

[33] There is no limit to negative judgments simply because there are no words which might adequately express intuitions about God.

In the meantime, let us continue to examine Blok: "The violet dusk dissipates, and the empty plain comes into view . . . a soul hollowed out by frivolity. An empty, distant plain, and above it -- the final warning -- a shooting star." [34]

Blok leaves his most important theme open-ended: "The reality which I have described is the only one that gives life meaning, meaning to the world and to art. Either those worlds exist, or they don't." [35]

"Either those worlds exist, or they don't" -- here we have the original apophatic-nihilist expression of the entire Russian Silver age.

Among representatives of Silver age culture, the intuitive knowledge of "transcendental goals" originates in their dramatic dissent from the premises of "immanent reason." The latter honors the epoch's "collective unconscious," while the former can never agree with the "world's gibberish," which will not be removed and neutralized by any kind of transformation. The creator's lot becomes self-immolation on the "unquenchable fire of unimaginable love" (Mayakovsky); yet not a day will pass that he does not laugh and admit that everything is but a "farce," and that "cranberry juice" flows through his veins instead of blood (Blok). Here it takes but a single step to pass from self-immolation to self-parody. Parody does, in fact, reflect self-immolation, the closed circle which has no exit from the outset.

There is a common tendency to choose Blok as the figurehead who generalizes the Silver age.

Anyone who is at all familiar with the artistic persona of the author of "St. Petersburg" knows that he is suffused with the impulse toward transcendentalism; for him life itself is, as he characterizes it in his poem

"The First Tryst," "the metaphysical link between transcendental premises." And yet Fiodor Stepun's words are undeniably true with regard to Andrei Bely and the other Silver age artists when he writes that "the absolutely *immanent* form and quality of his consciousness . . . is in sharp, hostile contrast to any sort of *transcendental* reality, in terms of its 'ultimate instability.'" [36]

Unravelling the various characteristics of our theme, Stepun makes several important observations: "If Bely truly embodies the self-reflexive 'I,' then... where is the inner pathos of his showy irrepressibility and touchy, bullying nature? In the long run, I think it is nothing but *Bely's battle with himself for himself*. Bely's foes are all the various voices and sub-voices, all the various threatening 'disruptions' and 'deviations' from his personal 'I,' which he unwittingly objectifies and which he deals with under the guise of his own, largely imaginary, enemies." [37]

The entire complicated historical evolution of the Silver age's many streams was fraught with battles against imaginary foes (which are psychologically far more dangerous than real ones). One example is the contention between acmeism and symbolism. Their strange literary war was an attempt to force each side to be understood, and in turn to approach the opponent. At the very least, this was a war among "the initiated," an enmity almost based upon love: "And in secret rapture I come face to face with--the enemy," proclaimed Konstantin Balmont, eternally indignant toward his literary comrades-in-arms. Also characteristic is his poetry in the same well-known book, *Let Us Be Like the Sun*, which begins with the words "Though it is only in my soul, I will kill him." Marina Tsvetaeva also comes to mind in this context with her widely read sketch "The Hero of Labor," which was dedicated to Valerii Briusov, with an epigraph from Balmont. Similarly, the "love/hate" relationship between Andrei Bely and Blok was all too familiar, even to their own contemporaries.

"Should the world plunge into darkness, or should I just not drink my tea?" Dostoyevsky's "Underground Man" wonders with neurasthenic, fiery inspiration. [38] The Silver age aestheticized, and ultimately sanctified this underground consciousness, telling it: "You exist."

Where am I? Where am I?
I cried out
To myself.
I am in the depths of all my mirrors.

Viacheslav Ivanov made this comment about these lines of his, taken from his 1904 book *Translucence*: "Science no longer knows what the self is in terms of a constant presence in the stream of consciousness." [39] He goes on to remark that, in general, man's outward activity is not necessarily a sign of man's existence. "Repugnance" at what had previously been called "real life" becomes metaphysically justifiable. Religious-artistic awakening comes at the price of "the churned-up field of individual consciousness."

Even the most tempestuous geniuses of the Silver age, such as Andrei Bely, caught up in wild, sweeping elements and cosmological ideas, had their moments of temptation: "Let us drink tea!" And nothing else. The more passionately this culture proclaimed "conciliarism" and "collective beginnings," the sweeter "monkish privacy" seemed, ultimately becoming "a correspondence between two corners."

This fateful dichotomy was based upon observations simultaneously keen and verging on the bombastic: "The polarity between living forces is resolved in liberating thunderstorms." [40]

Only opposing polarities could become "everyday questions," only irreconcilable extremities, antinomies, signified and expressed the heart of the matter, the essence of this Silver age culture which bore Dostoyevsky's legacy, recognizing in that "guide and spy" (according to Viacheslav Ivanov) "both our light and our underground cellar."

Even the aristocrat Nikolai Berdiaev makes his confession in *Self-Knowledge* in exactly the same terms as the underground outcast: "Essentially, I never loved this so-called 'life'; in my youth I loved it even less than I do now." [41]

Viacheslav Ivanov finds in Dostoyevsky's "creature's groans" an eternal reflection of the "New Testament incarnate": "Christ revealed the idea of not accepting the world in all the antinomial fullness of its deepest meaning. He commands us 'not to love the world, nor anything in it,' yet he himself loves the world concretely, the world which immediately surrounds and encloses one, with its lilies of the valley and birds in the sky, merriment and sweet fragrance, with people's beautiful faces, as much in the sunny revelation of a translucent moment as under the murky guise of sin and discord." [42]

Viacheslav Ivanov sums it up thus: "The pathos of not accepting the world is the Eros of the Impossible. It is the love of the impossible--the principle

behind all religious thirsting, all creative fantasy, every impulse and audacity which has heretofore been committed under the banner of 'Excelsior' ["onward, higher." A ballad by Longfellow] -- this is the pathos of the modern soul." [43]

Silver age culture needed Viacheslav the Magnificent to inspire thoughts in the imagination which would be quite blasphemous in everyday consciousness. For fundamentally, his ruminations come down to Nietzsche's daring proclamation of Christ as the "first nihilist."

Aphatic-nihilistic motives were apparent not only in the Silver age's theoretical constructs, but more importantly in its creative work, uncontrolled by reason, such as Georgii Ivanov's lyricism, his "light-bearing nihilism" (to use V. F. Markov's expression). Since they were not obedient churchgoers, these artists were quite prone to Orthodox mysticism.

This "pathos of not accepting the world" which leads the artist to lose familiarity with "real life," to ignore it, is simultaneously a token of the searingly harsh--and late--confessions to the momentary bliss of existence. This romantic, bitter experience heralds the passage from realistic settings in the artist's mind to a nominalistic creative practice.

Beauty, love, and goodness do not evidence the world's imminent salvation, but rather quite the opposite; they point up the inertia that threatens existence, bring to light every manner of ugliness and evil. The world's beauty lies not in stability, but rather in the ephemeral, the moment which slips away. "Here is the truth. The moment is eternity's brother... it contains the fluttering butterfly of the psyche." [44] The captured moment is ugly and deceptive. The more art is determined by the reality surrounding it, the duller it becomes. The interrelation between "poetry" and "life" bespeak the "impossibility of poetry." It is worthwhile only when nothing predetermines it:

And what is inspiration?
Just a sudden, slight
shining breath
of a heavenly breeze. [45]

The artists of the Silver age discussed nothing so much as the "unuttered" and "unspoken." All of their lyrical heroes had eyes which shined with "the impossible." "Flight," "*elan*" -- these coursed through everyone's blood:

Blok's, Mayakovsky's, Tsvetaeva's. . . .

Creative endeavor which reflects a "true-to-art" world foreign to the artist is, in Georgii Ivanov's words, "a ghost which has sipped blood." "Everything 'familiar' generally has little value," he wrote, recalling the motto of his older, revered namesake: "*a realibus ad realiora.*"

Yet in order to flourish on earth, one must produce something temporary—herein lies the drama. And the Silver age artist is captivated particularly by the ephemeral precariousness of his personal experience. His "singularity," so to speak. Contrary to theoretical postulates, the new modern art was governed by a quite medieval nominalistic principle: "Every individual thing is mediated by one's self, and nothing more" (Peter Aurelius). [46] Rather than "essences," it turned out that "single things" were necessary to contemporary art. According to Okkam the "general" can only be intuited. "Universalities" are but "intentions of the soul." Otherwise they would exist "not naturally, but only by convention." Thus they were in Viacheslav Ivanov's treatises. That is why they are so relevant to contemporary Communist utopian doctrines.

The symbolists, who were especially well-versed in philosophy, may insist that a thing's essence is objectively meaningful, that ideas have prototypes or signify the ultimate degree of perfection, before which any individual thing is inferior. But the spiritual arbitrariness, willfulness, and Nietzschean impulse characteristic of any decadent movement compelled Silver age artists precisely toward inferiority, to a confession reflected in the "crystal of the lower realities," as Viacheslav Ivanov gracefully put it. This position was seen as "unspoken," "inexpressible," "undeclared," precisely because it lacked a truly "realistic" inner structure.

Everything the eye beholds is "temporary"; our very world is thus. "Eternity" can only be discussed in the language of "correspondences."

The rejection of the world is a rather ordinary postulate for Russian and various other romantics. But among the Silver age artists this rejection of reality often reflected a sort of scorn, a negligent attitude toward it. This rejection was touted metaphysically more than socially, and generally fell to the artists instead of being worked out consciously.

If in 1892 the poet declared his "magnificent contempt for cowards and slaves," [47] all of them rather distinct, then Anna Akhmatova removes all civic measure from this sentiment and translates it into an existential plan. In a poem dedicated to the memory of Mikhail Bulgakov, she

marvels that her contemporary “. . .carried the magnificent contempt/through to the very end.” The object of this “magnificent contempt” remains unnamed not only because of the threat of censure, but because to name him would belittle the entire experience.

The Silver age’s muse viewed the egotism of its underground precursor condescendingly: it was high time for *that* world to collapse. That momentary light deserves no attention; there are other worlds--the worlds of the stars. And there is also “the abyss.” “We came to love leaning over the abyss and losing ourselves,” Viacheslav Ivanov testified. [48]

And Blok lamented, “I’ve stopped being a man of the abyss and am rapidly becoming a scribbler.” [49] Yet he had not wandered too far from the abyss. “The galloping steed flies breathlessly over the bottomless chasm into eternity,” he rejoiced, recalling the commandments:

All, all that threatens destruction
holds for the mortal heart
an inexplicable delight --
A token, perhaps, of immortality! [50]

Yes, this is the “Feast During the Plague.” And the “plague” here is nothing less than the entire surrounding world. The revelry at this feast is desperate, under cover of night. Life is no longer even a “ball,” but “the continuation of the ball.”

In the new poetic age, Pushkin’s golden words took on an imperceptible moonlit reflection, dusted with Silver. This begs the question, however: By the dark of night, might this “Silver” have turned to “gray”?

Russia’s “damned poet” is also, and even more essentially, a “damning poet,” who rejects the world in its entirety rather than this or that specific social order. He deals not with history, but with eternity. And he lives not by the dull light of day, but by luxurious nocturnal starlight.

Blok’s destructive “thrill of revolt” flowed with such lyrical force that it washed away the very thought of death, however clearly it might be delineated on the horizon:

There are times, there are days, when
A snowy wind roars through your heart
And neither a tender voice

nor a peaceful hour of work will save you. . . [51]

And is it really necessary to be saved at all, if life is already prolonged in verse, if love conquers death, if at the end of suffering there is joy and in general, the poets of the new Renaissance are out there vociferously and "by the grace of God" (as Andrei Bely modestly put it) chopping the daubed ("budetliane"?? what is that?) from their pedestals?

Indeed, nothing could save them: not Blok's undeniably brilliant insights and impulses, not the secret hope imbedded in them for the birth of a new culture, free of the old "civilization"'s fetters, nor faith in the all-conquering spirit of the people and Orthodox unity.

And in fact, how could one be saved, if man's guilt had been made an instrument of acquiring truth? Not humility, but this sense of guilt was viewed by Silver age artists as "filthier than vainglory." "Filthier" because it became sublimated in art, dragged itself up on the scaffolding, spilled out onto the pages of luxurious editions (it also reproduced well on wallpaper, putting the whole world at fault). This precisely recalls Dostoyevsky's antihero, who mused that on paper "you will judge yourself more harshly, become wordier." [52]

That phrase, "become wordier," contains the essential truth of the modernist aesthetic. This is that very "universality" which exists only on the verbal level -- the crucial stumbling block for dedicated "realists."

Language did become wordier; it took an entire century to sort out. . . .

The Silver age artists immanently became refined sinners, but nevertheless in a transcendental way -- with the redemptive promise. At these heights they expiated the sins of Russian culture.

"Just as something broke loose in us, so did it break loose in Russia," Blok insisted in his lecture "On the State of Contemporary Russian Symbolism." [53]

Civilization broke loose in Russia. As one of the first to grow weary of it, Blok hoped that the elements might carry him to other, free worlds, worlds where man is not bound by the eternal "All of this has happened, everything has been done before. . . ." For a romantic artist, to possess something is already to be satiated with it. And even more terribly, any sort of knowledge. . . .

For the artist, the profane, demonic temptation of possession is that, once satiated, he is liberated and free.

From satiation with art to freedom. This lot was drawn by many besides Blok.

"This is the thesis," he repeated endlessly to Viacheslav Ivanov. "You are free in this magical world, full of correspondences. Create whatever you want, for this world belongs to you." [54]

Alas, this profane "world" decidedly did not belong to the men and women of the Silver age. Is this not why they so fervently encroached upon the ideal world?

This is the question posed by the Silver age: Does culture save man, or does it damn him? That is, can life be positively transformed on the foundations of culture? Symbolism and futurism saw "life-building" as their goal while acmeism excluded it from its program, yet all three currents are inspired by these problematics and see them as initial points of departure.

In the Silver age, "life-building" and its rejection turned into "life-collapsing." From the twentieth century perspective this "negative perception" became the dominant existential experience of the artist. It turned out to be universal, directly linked to the conditions of personality's existence in the modern world.

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