

2012

Russian Literature in the Christian Context

Boris Paramonov

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/russian_culture



Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#), and the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Paramonov, B. (2012). Russian Literature in the Christian Context. In Dmitri N. Shalin, 1-29.

Available at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/russian_culture/20

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Article in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in Russian Culture by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.

Russian Literature in the Christian Context

Boris Paramonov

Preliminary Remarks

In examining Russia's cultural history one encounters an incontestable fact: the literary nature of its spirituality. At the same time, Russian literature is distinguished by its high caliber. If one examines Russia's cultural significance in the context of the Western world, or generally attempts to evaluate the nation's achievements on a Western European scale, one finds that Russian literature stands out with particular distinction. The West places Leo Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky on a par with Shakespeare, while Chekhov's plays enjoy a popularity comparable with the Bard's in the sheer number of theatrical performances, even in England, where Chekhov's Western renown initially blossomed. Even second-rate Russian writers, such as Maxim Gorky, are remembered and cherished in the West to this day; today's Russian would be surprised to learn that his play *The Summer People* -- a work utterly forgotten in Russia itself--was being staged on Broadway. This is not simply a matter of aesthetic admiration, of purely intellectual homage which Westerners pay to Russian literary culture; it is possible to observe Russian literature's direct, "real life" influence on certain Western phenomena, a sociological effect. The emergence of a Western intelligentsia in the specifically Russian sense of the word followed these same Russian models. Interestingly enough, the aforementioned play by Gorky concerns the intelligentsia and its much-vaunted complex of "guilt before the people"--a theme quite familiar in the West today. Of course, such an influence would be impossible without some spiritual ground shared by Russia and the West, most readily characterized by Christianity. Russian literature was a Christian phenomenon, and this mutually influential interplay between Christianity and Russian culture will form the basis of my discussion.

Before proceeding, however, I must make clear that I do not propose to explore Christianity as a Russian literary *theme* or the sundry variations on this theme throughout the course of Russian literature, although the history of Christian thematics is certainly rich, complex in its evolution, and quite significant. Yuri Lotman offers an example of such a study in his 1991 work, "Russian Literature After Peter the Great and the Christian Tradition." This outstanding scholar draws our attention to many fascinating thematic threads interwoven through the course of Russian

cultural history -- for instance, he examines Russia's conception of the writer, the poet as cultural hero, and finds it stemming directly from the religious tradition, tied to both oral and written culture and particularly to the calling of the Old Testament prophets. The original socialist propaganda disseminated in Russia was similarly imbued with religious fervor and imagery -- here the scholar points to the undeniable influence exerted by the St. Simon movement on early Russian socialists of Herzen's circle, who joined the French philosopher in his hope to establish socialism as the new religion, or more precisely, a new incarnation of socially-oriented Christianity. Lotman draws the following conclusion about this connection:

"As a result, we may note that cultural secularization has not penetrated to the deepest structural foundations of the national model, which were formed in previous centuries. A set of fundamental functions has been preserved, though the material bearers of these functions have changed."¹

Once again, all of this is certainly quite fascinating, but the subject of my discussion lies elsewhere. I am concerned not so much with the history and evolution of Christian cultural themes in Russia as with the history and significance of the Christian personality type in a cultural as well as political context: the Christian personality type as a structuring factor of Russia's place in the world, its "presence," as Heidegger's famous term *da sein* was recently translated into Russian. Russian cultural litero-centrism emerges as one of the essential elements of this structure.

Literature as a Form of (Christian) Escapism

A sort of organic link connects the Christian worldview with literary art. A Word-centered religion had to beget a Literature. It is no accident that philosophical observers, such as Spengler, liked to remark upon Russia's John-ian Christianity (later we will amend this observation somewhat). Christianity could not help but exert a cultural influence over Russians, as it had, in fact, always influenced everyone it came into contact with to some degree; yet due to many of its peculiarities, Christianity was not an altogether creative cultural force. One might say more -- that it exerted a negative influence on certain aspects of the cultural process, that it emerged as a peculiarly *nihilistic* force.

Having uttered this fateful word, one cannot help but hearken back to the thinker who turned this word into a memorable philosophy resonating throughout European culture -- Friedrich Nietzsche. This is what he wrote

in "The Antichrist":

In a manner of speaking, we might call Jesus a 'freethinker,' for he dismissed everything solid and secure as inconsequential... Life as a concept -- no, as experience -- is in constant conflict with all the words, formulas, laws, dogmas, and symbols of faith within Him. He speaks only of the deepest innermost workings of man -- these he calls 'life,' or truth, or light, while everything else -- all of reality, nature, even language itself -- has value for Him only as symbol, as likeness. . . . Having never even heard of culture, He does not have to struggle against it. He does not reject it -- one might say the same about government, about society and order, labor, war. . . . He had no reason to reject the 'world.' He did not even suspect the existence of such a church-begotten concept as 'the world.'²

Essentially, this list enumerates the fixed points of Russian cultural (that is, literary) consciousness and the key characteristics of Russia's spiritual worldview, which was formed under the direct influence of literature and which influenced writing, in turn. This is a metaphysical snapshot of that very Russian soul to which one might apply the ancient theologian's aphorism, with some modification: "The Russian soul is Christian by nature."

Throughout Russia's history, those aspects of social being, those dimensions of life listed by Nietzsche, had never been brought to the forefront or culturally sanctioned. Russian Christianity never sanctioned those conscious intentions which create a culture, objectified in cultural behavior and action. Russia was ruled if not by chaos, then by the mighty whims of government, which almost totally enslaved social life. Characteristically, this split and rupture found ideological sanction among Russian thinkers, who were the first to question the philosophical underpinnings of Russian history and Russia's cultural specificity in general. The notorious theory of "government and land" was developed in greatest detail by one of the so-called Slavophiles, Konstantin Aksakov. Briefly, Slavophilia is the doctrine of Russia's cultural specificity, introduced in the first half of the nineteenth century. The theory might be summarized by the following representative formula:

"The Government has the unlimited right of action and law, the Land has full rights to opinion and words . . . the external truth lies with the Government, the internal truth lies with the Land; the Czar holds total power, while the people retain full freedom of life and spirit; the Czar is

free to act and rule, while the people are free to speak their mind.”³

Most vividly, this brings to mind the evangelical words about rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar’s. Russia as “the Land,” that is the non-governmental body, or the soul, is relegated to a certain otherworldly, monastic type of existence, beyond earthly cares, save for those of basic survival. Essentially, the Slavophile “Land” bears a great resemblance to “Heaven.” The Russian people lead a holy life, and Russia is “holy” in its rural, popular aspect, not at all in terms of its government and social involvement. A real schism is proclaimed -- no longer a church schism, which took place in the seventeenth century, but a cultural schism splitting different ways of life. Yet this is a peaceful, harmonious schism, not so much a schism as a division of spheres of influence, a serene coexistence unburdened by government’s attempts to control the people’s inner life or by the people’s attempts to interfere in governmental cares and strife. Such a “pre-determined” harmony reigned in the time before Peter the Great, Slavophiles assert, until the great reformer disturbed it by trying to force Russia into the foreign patterns of Western European culture, which was by that time nearing the peak of its Enlightenment progression toward becoming a social, secularized culture.

Switching from their party-line sociology (K. Aksakov) to an equally party-line cultural philosophy, Slavophiles put forth theoretical concepts meant to prove, or at least to proclaim, the fundamental distinction between Russian “learning” (that is, cultural genotype) and that of Western Europe, with the former touted as the loftiest cultural model, of course. Here I must refer to an essential Slavophile text written by Ivan Kireevsky, “On the Character of the European Enlightenment and its Relation to the Enlightenment of Russia” (1852). Kireevsky draws upon the conceptual framework established by the French historian Giseau, who delineated three elements in Europe’s spiritual-political foundation: (1) the legacy of classical antiquity; (2) Christianity; and (3) the beginning of forced conquest and colonization in the establishment of Europe’s political structures. Kireevsky, in turn, states that among all of these elements, Russia absorbed only one -- Christianity, which was unburdened both by the rationalistic tradition of ancient philosophies and the political passions of struggles for power. This circumstance, Kireevsky asserts, is not a drawback, but rather an advantage in terms of Russian-Christian cultural evolution, for it allows the possibility of building a higher (that is, purely Christian) type of culture compared with that of Europe. Let us examine a corresponding passage from Kireevsky:

“These three Western elements -- the Roman church, the learning of

ancient Rome, and a state system grown out of violent conquest -- were totally foreign to ancient Russia. Having penetrated into Russia, Christianity did not encounter the enormous obstacles that it faced in Rome, Greece, and European lands saturated with Roman erudition. The Slavic world did not obstruct Christianity's influence on the inner and social life of its people in the way that self-referential classical wisdom limited the West. . . . At the same time, fundamental principles of human rights and responsibilities, of man's personal, familial, and communal relationships, were not implemented by force through the decree of warring tribes and classes. . . . having never suffered conquest, the Russian people evolved independently. Enemies plaguing the land never meddled in its internal development. Tatars, Poles, Hungarians, Germans, and other scourges sent by Providence could only retard Russia's intellectual development, and indeed they did so, but they could not alter its inner, communal life."⁴

Russian culture was stalled in its self-contained beginnings by the interference of foreign cultural-political elements, most importantly by Peter's Westernization. This forced halt to Russia's organic development explains the country's present cultural lag behind the West: the alien culture did not fully take root, while the native one was retarded, inhibited by outside forces. Yet here the question arises, which no honest Slavophile can avoid: Why, in those early, original times, before the onslaught of "scourges," did Russia never give rise to any cultural models which could surpass those of its European contemporaries?

The Russian Idea as Artistic Model

Kireevsky does not duck away from this question, yet nor does he offer a convincing answer. In the same article, he writes:

Here one can do nothing but hypothesize. Personally, I believe that Russia's unique contribution to the world lay in the fullness and clarity of expression that Christian teaching found there, in the entire scope of the country's social and private life. This was the source of Russia's wisdom, but also the greatest source of danger to its development. The clarity of expression meshed so well with the spirit being expressed that it was easy to confuse their respective significance and revere the outward forms equally with their underlying meaning. . . . Already in the sixteenth century we see that reverence for formalities frequently supersedes reverence for the spirit . . . reverence for Russia's tradition imperceptibly became reverence more for its outward forms than for its animating spirit. Hence that slant in Russian learning . . . which caused various schisms

and eventually, due to its limited nature, caused a certain portion of thinking people to embrace the opposite extreme, striving toward alien forms and an alien spirit.⁵

Apparently, these words reflect a well-known historical situation in seventeenth-century Russia--the church schism, triggered by the patriarch Nikon's decision to bring Russian liturgy and ritual into accord with the Greek canon, which elicited rebellion among a great number of parishoners. This rebellion had far-reaching consequences, but we are not concerned with these at present. We must glean from Kireevsky's words the idea that Russian spiritual life in the bosom of the Orthodox church took on a sort of ritualized piety (or alternately, a "day-to-day evangelical zeal"), which undoubtedly slowed Russian spiritual development and in large part created that Russian personality type characterized by its tendency to adhere to stagnant dogma and mindlessly obey norms imposed from on high; this type is alive to this day, even now impeding Russia's Westernization in this modern, post-Communist stage of its history (this never hindered the proliferation of another, totally opposite archetype--the rebel-anarchist). This is all very significant, but once again does not tell the whole story. For our purposes, we must discern in Kireevsky's words implicit evidence of the contemplative-artistic tendencies in the Russian soul, which almost fully predetermined the character of Russian "learning."

Essentially, one can view Slavophilia itself as a sort of creative intuition about Russia, an aesthetic phenomenon in and of itself -- this is the artistic vision of Russia, or its myth, or, to use the classic term, its *idea*. The Slavophiles constructed their image of Russia through aesthetic contemplation. To do this, one first had to divert Russia from the flow of time, remove it to an archaic past or, more precisely, to an eternal present -- mythical time. This is why contemporary opponents called Slavophilia "retrospective utopianism" or "an anti-historical movement" (Chaadaev and the historian Soloviev, respectively). And, having glimpsed this aesthetic character of Slavophile thought, both in method and in subject matter, one is not surprised to learn that the best description of this thought may be found in Schopenhauer! In the third book of *The World as Will and Representation*, we find the following:

"But now, what kind of knowledge is it that considers what continues to exist outside and independently of all relations, but which alone is really essential to the world, the true content of its phenomena, that which is subject to no change, and is therefore known with equal truth for all time, in a word, the *Ideas* that are the immediate and adequate objectivity of the

thing-in-itself, of the will? It is *art*, the work of genius."⁶

And later:

(I)t is also that blessedness of will-less perception which spreads so wonderful a charm over the past and the distant, and by a self-deception presents them to us in so flattering a light. For by our conjuring up in our minds days long past spent in a distant place, it is only the objects recalled by our imagination, not the subject of will, that carried around its incurable sorrows with it just as much then as it does now.⁷

One needs not recall the details of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, with its fundamental definitions of will and perception, to see the applicability of his words to the Slavophiles and the image of Russia that they created. This product of artistic fantasy, which tears its object out of the flow of time and change in order to give it ideatic design, is sheer "perception," outside the realm of active, history-making "will." Thus one can construct, or reconstruct, or more precisely, stylize any cultural-historical reality. Scholars have already noted that the image of Russia formulated by Kireevsky or Aksakov recalls the image of medieval Europe created by German romantics such as Novalis.⁸ The methods of such creative stylization are secondary to the fact that, in Russia's case, we encounter this kind of work as the main, most valuable product of cultural activity in the national context. These literary fantasies, "literary dreams," as the critic Belinsky put it, are the most interesting product of Russian culture. Only one example corresponds with Slavophilia not only in method, but in content as well -- Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. This most famous of Russian novels is a Slavophile declaration in which "war" and "peace," Napoleon and Kutuzov, organic life and the inimical progress of world history play out the roles of Aksakov's "government" and "land," respectively. However, such thematic correspondence is rare -- more important is Slavophilia's crucial role in the evolution of Russian literature. It constitutes literature's methodology and, if you will, its genetic code.

Christian Kenosis and Orthodox Nihilism

The key element of this methodology lies in the Christian interpretation of Russian themes, which the Slavophiles expressed declaratively, openly, ideologically, and which became, in the greater context of Russian literature, a ubiquitous and inevitable subtext. Russian literature is a Christian literature even in its most openly atheistic examples. It was noted long ago that the Russian nihilists during the first "glasnost" and "perestroika"--the period of reform which took place in the 1860s -- with

all of their political radicalism, philosophical materialism, and religious atheism, essentially presented a modification of the Christian cultural-psychological type. Such was their most famous representative, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, who is best known in the West as the object of Nabokov's simultaneously heroic and satirical characterization in *The Gift*. This quasi-revolutionary's entire life is really the life of a Christian martyr.

Russian literature presents and sanctions the Christian worldview and ways of behavior as the only truly Russian narrative. Yet for all this, Christianity is understood, or rather, is instinctually presumed to be the same kind as Nietzsche described in his aforementioned work "The Antichrist." Generally, the Christian worldview and behavior among Russians may be distinguished by that very quality that Nietzsche called nihilism. And one ought to recall that even the term "nihilism" was born in Russia; Nietzsche derived it from the land of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, and his ruminations on these figures set the manifest tone for "The Antichrist."

This is but one, typical if not yet exhaustive, example of such correspondence. Nietzsche asserts that the concepts of "heroism" and "genius" are completely foreign to the Christian mind and heart. Dmitri Merezhkovsky, writing about Russian literature as revolt against the West, aimed specifically at the great Westernizer, Peter, and his troubadour, Pushkin, offers the following summary:

"After Pushkin, all of Russian literature will be a democratic, Gallilean uprising against the giant who 'reared up Russia before the abyss.' All of the great Russian writers -- not only the obvious mystics, like Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, but even Turgenev and Goncharov -- are outwardly Westerners, but in truth enemies of culture. They beckon Russia away from its sole hero and enigmatic darling, Pushkin, the eternally lonesome giant stranded on a frozen chunk of Finnish granite -- they will beckon Russia back toward the maternal bosom of the land, warmed by the Russian sun, toward humility before God, toward the heartfelt simplicity of a ploughman, the cozy chambers of old-world gentry, to the wild cliffs above their own native Volga, the hush of 'gentry's nests,' to the Idiot's seraphic smile, to the blissful 'non-doing' of Yasnaia Poliana--and every single one of them, unwittingly perhaps, will take up this challenge of the humble to the mighty, that blasphemous cry of the indignant masses: 'Enough, you marvelous builder! Hold up!'"⁹

Here the word "non-doing" is quite significant, referring as it does not only to Tolstoy, but also to his inspiration, Schopenhauer, who admired Indian

philosophy and Buddhism and introduced them into European philosophical discourse and perception. Russians perceived Christianity in the Buddhist sense, as a philosophy and religion of non-doing. In this conception, Christianity fueled the Russian revolt against "heroic" culture, an active interference in world events, any sort of reshuffling or perfecting of circumstance. Literature became that form of cultural activity which -- while undoubtedly cultural -- could simultaneously provide a means of avoiding culture in the aforementioned sense of an active relation to being. Literature allowed for the possibility of maintaining an observant, reflective relation to the world, cultivating a sort of passive contemplation, avoiding worldly travails, which are always essentially cultural.

In this Russian sense, culture is seen as falsehood, an artificial superstructure over the elemental truth of being -- the "peasant," or Christian, way of life (in Russian the two words stem from the same root). In Christian theological terminology, this worldview, this very narrative is called "kenosis," or "descent": Christ's descent to earth as the incarnation of God, that is, God's decision to "lower" his ontological status to that of mankind, out of love. Russians follow this example not only in their literature, but elsewhere as well. In this sense Russian history may be seen as the imitation of Christ, *Imitatio Cristi*.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Russian poet and cultural philosopher Viacheslav Ivanov wrote:

The fundamental trait of our national character is the pathos of divestment, a thirst to strip away all raiment and rich attire, tear off all masks and decoration from the naked truth of things. Many of our virtues and strengths are tied to this trait, along with many of our weaknesses, evasions, threats, and failures. . . . The soul, instinctually hungering for the unconditional, instinctually ridding itself of the conditional, the artificial, is a noble savage, extravagantly wide and raging...eventually it devalues and debases the individual human face. . . . leading to all the suicidal urges of the intoxicated soul, to all manner of theoretical and practical nihilism. This love of the descent, evident in all of these images of 'casting-off' . . . this love, which lies in opposition to the tireless will to ascension . . . constitutes a distinguishing peculiarity of our national psychology.[10](#)

These words largely express the artistic theory and life of Leo Tolstoy, who said of Napoleon: "there is no greatness where there is no simplicity, goodness, and truth." But this formula is not so much profound as he is typical--a typical Russian, a kenotic Christian. Such construction of the

soul harbors danger as well--the potential for cultural pogrom, which in fact occurred in Russia when it stepped onto the Bolshevik path in 1917. 'Cultural Pogrom' means not only censorship, but also, for instance, economic ruin for the sake of the socialist experiment. Russian literature did not experience any significant decline during the Bolshevik years, and yielded several works of the highest caliber. Russia's anticultural nihilism did not so much threaten spiritual culture as it threatened material life, in the widest sense, everything from the economy to law and governmental organization, generally the *world* to which Nietzsche referred as something utterly foreign to the Christian psychological makeup.

At the peak of Russia's ruin, in January of 1918, Vasilii Rozanov wrote in a piece aptly titled "The Apocalypse of Our Time":

There is no doubt that the root of all that is happening now lies in the gaping holes left in Christianity's wake among all the European people, including Russians. Everything tumbles into this abyss: thrones, social classes, labor, wealth . . . all is lost, everyone and everything perish. All of it tumbles into the void of the soul, which has lost its ancient mainstay.[11](#)

This unexpected exchange between two minds belonging to totally different cultural orbits is remarkable; yet Nietzsche and Rozanov were united by a common theme -- Christianity's Russian implications (once again, "The Antichrist" reveals a careful reading of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky).

Christianity and Bolshevism

Thus, Christian "non-doing" can turn extremely active, but in a negative, destructive way. Such was Russian Bolshevism, which presents a modification of the Christian phenomenon (one must specify its particular *Russian* form here).

Nikolai Berdiaev termed this theme "apocalypse and nihilism." The corresponding discussion is presented in his book, *The Sources and Meaning of Russian Communism* (1937). For example:

Nihilism is a characteristically Russian phenomenon, unknown to Western Europe in this form. . . . Russian nihilism rejected God, spirit, soul, all manner of norms and higher values. Nonetheless, nihilism must be viewed as a religious phenomenon. It grew out of the spiritual soil of Orthodoxy, and it could only take root in a soul which was formed in the Orthodox tradition. This is Orthodox asceticism turned inside-out, asceticism without

grace. If one examines Russian nihilism deeply and honestly, one finds the Orthodox rejection of the world, a sense that the world is mired in evil, bearing witness to the sinful nature of all the wealth and luxuries of life, any creative excess in art and thought. . . .

Nihilism is the opposite of Russian apocalyptic thought. It rebels against the falsehoods of history, the lies of civilization; it demands the end of history and the beginning of a totally new, a-historical or super-historical life. Nihilism demands nakedness, a stripping away of all cultural trappings, annihilation of all historical traditions, emancipation of the natural man, who will be chained no longer. . . .

This deformed version of nihilism reflected yet another aspect of the Russian Orthodox religious type -- its indecision regarding the problem of culture. Ascetic Orthodoxy doubted culture's justification and tended to see sin in cultural endeavor. This could be seen in the struggles and uncertainties suffered by the great Russian writers with regard to their literary creation. Religious, moral, and social doubt in the justification of culture is a characteristically Russian motif.[12](#)

We might note that Berdiaev, when speaking of the religious roots of this Russian phenomenon -- nihilism -- never uses the term "Christian," but rather always says "Orthodox." Consequently, the Russian themes we discuss should be linked not with Christianity as such, but with its Russian historical modification, Russian Orthodoxy. This is both true and misleading. Russian Orthodoxy was Christianity "as such," since Christianity never encountered a hostile cultural context in Russia. Ivan Kireevsky discussed this in the aforementioned article: Russian Christianity existed in primordial purity, and the absence of two other Western European cultural progenitors--the legacy of classical antiquity and conquest of foreign lands -- were to Russia's advantage, served as a plus when all historical experience points to the opposite interpretation -- that the meaning of any absence is negative.

Here I must underscore my fundamental thesis: Christianity cannot be the monopolizing, exclusive, monistic culturally creative factor. It acts exclusively and is, simply speaking, beneficial in any somewhat complementary situation. Thus, in conjunction with ancient classical culture it sparked a mighty impulse toward new, unprecedented cultural growth. But on bare -- "pure," "virginal" -- ground it cannot yield anything positive. Christianity cannot, or rather should not be a cultural totality. Yet this is the case in Russia. Taken out of any positive cultural context, Christianity can only form that worldview which Berdiaev termed

apocalyptic nihilism. On barren soil, Christianity inspires and religiously sanctions this bareness and emptiness, justifies "non-doing" as God's own work. In Christianity, culture is a stone rejected by the builders.

As has already been stated, however, one should not think that any sort of spontaneous activity is foreign to Christianity. It carries a powerful ethical impulse, a directive toward obligation which breeds all sorts of activity. Yet if Christianity considers the world itself to be unnecessary, mired in sin, then Christian energy, outside the cultural sphere which derails its lines of power, takes on the character of a negative impulse--that selfsame nihilism. Christianity is anarchical and antisocial; Jesus himself was an anarchist, a "hippie" spotted already by Nietzsche. Jesus' Christianity is not culture, not cultural potential, but anti-culture, counterculture. Of course, I'm speaking only of the Teacher here, not of the teaching and practice that grew up around and after him. The polar opposition of Christ and the Church is indisputable because the Church is, above all, a social practice, born in the context of cultural necessity, susceptible to cultural suggestion. More simply stated, the Church is necessarily conservative, while Christ is a total liberal, that is, an anarchist, a countercultural rebel. What the Christian church, in any of its denominations, has made of Christ is, of course, a cultural feat -- but it has little to do with Christ himself. The Church is Martha, not Mary. Western Christianity was hellenized in Catholicism and rationalized in Protestantism; in Russia, it created the Orthodox church as a harsh, repressive power. In this sense one might say that the Christian church is an oxymoron, that the church does not know Christ, and neither does culture.

All but one. The only truly Christian culture is Russian literary culture. Replacing action with observation and doing with words, this culture condemns itself if not to self-destruction, then to a perpetual state of unrealized and unrealizable hope, in a mood of social wistfulness, abstract -- that is, single-minded and ineffectual--idealism. Reality is replaced by a project of words. One such project in Russia was Communism. In this sense, Communism is totally literary. And it stands repeating that with all of its repressive censorship, Communism did not kill off Russian literature. One might say, in fact, that Communism assisted literature in self-consciously reflecting on the Communist project. The apex of this self-consciousness, "the moment of truth," was Andrei Platonov's novel *Chevengur* (1929), the ultimate creation of Russian literature, its *telos*. This book was the juncture, deciding whether Russian literature would descend into hell or arise into eternity. Eternity is, in fact, the Russian hell, in imitation of heaven revisited. *Chevengur* is a town which

witnesses the construction of the purest, most ultimate form of communism. And this communism turns out to be the end, the end of everything: history, labor, family, love, that free-fall into nothingness which Rozanov described in January of 1918. This is a monastery outside the surrounding social field, outside the world of peasants, ploughmen, and church tithes. Of course it cannot exist; it is doomed. But Chevengur's communists hurry to die in their eagerness to experience the bliss of the afterlife. No other literary text ever linked communism and Christianity so exactly and indelibly. The very "seamlessness" of this construction demonstrates the truth of the union, the congruence of the two beginnings, their essentially identical nature.

Platonov himself offers no Christian explications in this novel; Christianity is the subtext. However, there are many such correspondences in the body of Russian literature. The theme of Christianity as motivation for looming, imminent revolution has always been central to the Russian cultural discourse. One significant example is an episode in the so-called Russian religious-cultural renaissance at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Christian religious renaissance was aimed equally at the stagnant dogmas and servile practices of the Orthodox church and at the culturally desiccating worldview presented by the Russian atheist intelligentsia, which drained the soul in deserts of dogmatic materialism and trite positivism. Russia's liberation had to be religiously justified and sanctioned--this was perhaps the renaissance's most vital cultural message. Foreshadowing this mood, or, one might say, ideology, was a speech given by the most well-known Russian philosopher of the time, Vladimir Soloviev, entitled "On the Decline of the Medieval Worldview"; the philosopher stated that historical progress, so far as one could speak of it (and at the time one could, indeed), was moving in the direction of Christian values, but was being carried out by the godless rather than churchmen, revolutionaries rather than traditionalists. Hence came the idea most thoroughly developed from the turn of the century onward by Dmitri Merezhkovsky, about the unconscious, inarticulated Christian character of the Russian revolution, the entire anti-czarist Russian liberation movement. Merezhkovsky insisted that all Russian revolutionaries, even the most extreme terrorists among them, were unconscious Christians. The intelligentsia's duty was to bring Christian awareness to the revolutionary movement; then Russia would witness the coming of a new earth and a new heaven. The greatest poet of the early twentieth century, Alexander Blok, reflected Merezhkovsky's influence (and not only Merezhkovsky's; as previously stated, this was the air of the times) in his poem "The Twelve," which heralded the October Bolshevik revolution and depicted Jesus Christ leading a twelve-man unit of the Red

Guards (twelve also being the number of the apostles). The Red Guards were Bolshevik storm troopers, rather like the later Chinese Red Guards, and they were being lauded as the apostles of the new world. Blok wrote his poem in January of 1918, during the same days in which Rozanov wrote his text about the Christian void sucking Russia inside-out. These writings shared a plot, but differed in their conclusions; rather, not even so much in their conclusions as in the hopes nurtured by Blok. Yet only a year and a half later, in the summer of 1919, the poet wrote in his journal: "One cannot deny the Bolsheviks their uncanny ability to poison life and destroy individual people."¹³ This admission summed up the Russian illusion about Christian values being realized through revolution -- in fact, the Russian illusion about Christianity in general, for Blok's intuition served him well. Christ did indeed lead the Red Guard unit, led the "Red Guards' charge against capital," as Lenin later described the events of October, 1917.

St. John's Christianity or the Converted Criminal?

These words, first penned by Rozanov, paint a clearer picture of Russia's unique brand of Christianity, free from outside cultural influences. The key word here is "criminal." Russian Christianity did not so much follow the spirit of St. John, as Spengler wrote, as it followed the spirit of that common criminal who hung on the cross next to Jesus and who was assured entrance to the heavenly kingdom by the Son of God. The biblical parable might best be expressed by a Russian saying: Without sin there is no atonement, and without atonement there is no salvation. Russian Christianity is a provocative religion, a school of sin and repentance.

To clarify this admittedly paradoxical interpretation of Christianity, we must recall a phenomenon termed Christian Dionysianism. This is most easily understood through a fairly recent example -- the hippie movement -- or perhaps more concretely through Dennis Hopper's role in the film "Easy Rider." This film sharply illustrates the Christian subtext of the hippie movement, presenting Christians in their primal purity, one might say, in the form of drifters and publicans (though the latter play the role of drug-pushers in the film). Another example of Christian Dionysianism, sanctioned by Western cultural and historical precedent, was St. Francis of Assisi, a Christian saint, but also a wealthy youth who gave away his inheritance, squandered his father's estate.

One cannot fail to notice the grand gesture of renunciation in communism -- one might call it the Great Renunciation. Despite its penchant for violence, uncharacteristic of Christianity (at least in its earliest versions),

one cannot discredit a certain consciously demonic ideology in communism; it continues to pulse with the pathos of both ancient and contemporary prophets, such as Karl Marx. It is ecstatic, drunk with an ethical ideal, thirsting for immediate and all-encompassing goodness, a readiness to give out and share the inheritance. In a certain aspect this creates a mood of that very same Christian Dionysianism -- intoxication with goodwill, a relentless need for brotherhood. This is one of the key motives of Russian literature, which existed before and apart from communism, because it is a primal Christian, super-cultural and countercultural motive. Yet we hear this same note in communism, not only in its beginnings, but strangely enough, on its deathbed, as it exits the stage. It finds expression in the unforgettable events of Glasnost and Perestroika, when Gorbachev truly relinquished the estate, while Yeltsin concluded this rite by willingly, with no visible imperative, disbanding the Soviet Union, liquidating the internal Soviet empire with a stroke of his pen.

Perhaps the keenest appraisal of these events was made by an American Catholic historian of Hungarian origin named John Lukacs in his book entitled *The End of the Twentieth Century and the End of the Modern Age*; his view addresses the heart of the matter by taking into account the Christian overtones and context:

On the other hand, there is that strange and unexpected element in the Russian character: those conversions springing from a sense of guilt, a willingness to renounce one's possessions, to give things away. Such conversions were exaggerated and mystified by Dostoyevsky in his feverish, heavily panting prose; but they exist nonetheless. There is not much softness in the German character--except for a sentimentality that may be false and cloying in some instances but also genuinely good-hearted in others. Often there is an alteration of a hard, near-blind, barbaric cruelty with an unexpectedly charitable softness in the Russian character. The later is, alas, rare; but it occurs often within the same person.

There are evidences of this in Gorbachev -- and, before him, in Khrushchev. There is something very Russian -- stunning, unexpected, impractical -- in Khrushchev's decision in February 1956 to go before the entire Party Congress to detail Stalin's crimes. Impractical: because it shook the entire leadership, and led to the Eastern European risings a few months later. A few subtle statements or references to Stalin's extremes and errors would have done the job. Stunning: because the entire five-hour speech was something like a confession. The theme was Stalin, but

he was not the only one culpable. There was a touch of *mea culpa* in it on the part of this Ukrainian peasant whose entire career had been in the service of Stalin; and yet there was no sense of calculation in that belated denial of his former master. Thirty years later Gorbachev, who had risen as Andropov's man, close to the KGB: during the next six years he gave the empire away. He was not pressured to do that; it was not Ronald Reagan's technological bluster that forced his hand, and while the Soviet economy and material conditions of the peoples of the Soviet Union in 1985 were no better than before, they were not worse either. But Gorbachev was not only fully aware of, and deeply exercised by, the corruption of the Communist party. Beneath his more or less conscious dismantling of it was a sense of more than past mistakes; there was probably a Russian sense of guilt. Some sense of guilt may have been instrumental during the retreat of other great empires, but never in that way. Seldom -- perhaps never before in history--had anything like this occurred: the abandoning of almost all that had been won in a great war, of an entire sphere of interest, without external or internal threats, without a clear and present danger of material need. And it at least seems that the majority of the Russian people did not care much about giving up Eastern Europe, perhaps not even about letting many of the other 'republics' of the Soviet Union go. This, too, is something rare. I think that to attribute all of this to mere materialism or to indifferent stupidity would be wrong. Yes, those elements exist; but that indifference to imperial possessions, indeed to the traditional territorial extent of one's very state, may be a mark -- perhaps even one of the spiritual marks -- of a great people, after all.[14](#)

Russian literature resembled this last gesture of the communist leaders: useless and wonderful, as useless and wonderful as Christianity itself. Christianity never created a culture in Russia, but it did teach the Russian certain "gestures" and "ways." Among these gestures was Russian literature, which managed to make Dostoyevskian heroes even out of totalitarian warlords.

Whatever negative observations one might make about Christianity, as Nietzsche did in Germany or Rozanov in Russia, one cannot deny its one truly universally historic achievement. Christianity posits the idea of personal identity as a metaphysical value and furthermore, as the subject of inalienable civic and political rights, the bearer of freedom. One of Russia's beloved images of freedom is the bandit Stenka Razin, a sort of Robin Hood figure who remains in the collective national memory as a cherished hero. Stenka Razin and similar Russian heroes embody not so much freedom as "liberty" -- a crucial nuance in Russian psychology and

culture. The metaphysical sublimation of this type is the aforementioned criminal who hung on the cross next to Jesus. This is the history of Christianity in Russia (though not of the Orthodox church, of course).

Yet there was another, heterodox church in Russia--the church of Russian literature and its readers, who were as brilliant as the literature itself. The peculiarity of the Russian situation was that both types sometimes merged in a single individual -- the reader, as a man of letters, was the "criminal" -- a revolutionary, a nihilist, overthrower of tradition and propagator of robbery under the pseudonym of socialism. At the same time, the "criminal" displayed intellectual traits as a reader of learned books: such, for example, was Nestor Makhno, the eloquent anarchist partisan.

In today's Russia these types have been completely differentiated: the bandit has become a shining knight of primal wealth accumulation, akin to the American Robber Barons, and has lost all philanthropic resemblances to Robin Hood, while the intellectual reader not only was unable to tune into the process of Russia's so-called "Westernization," but seems to be losing interest in literature, which never did teach him how to live. If this disintegration of Russian life continues along these lines into the future, one will be able to speak of positive perspectives on Russia only with fingers crossed.

A Thematic Excursion into the History of Russian Literature

The preceding brief sketch, describing Russian literature in its structural moments as a cultural modification of Christianity (or more precisely, primal Christian consciousness) will be augmented by another brief sketch, or summation, of its narratives, protagonists, and themes. Even this deliberately synoptic listing will make plain the unity of this literature's cultural and religious arrangement throughout the long course of Russian history and despite all the recent catastrophic upheavals. At the same time, literature itself experienced many changes, evolved to become almost unrecognizable, if we agree to use the more general definition of the Russian written and oral tradition. Yet even the most significant mutations of Russian history -- Peter's reforms, the Bolshevik revolution -- failed to introduce anything fundamentally new into the thematics, attitude, and worldview of Russian literature. If even the latest Soviet leaders retain ancient Russo-Christian patterns in their responses to the world -- as was, for example, Gorbachev's political strategy of "relinquishing the estate" in a purely Christian manner -- then what can one say about such a relatively ideal construction as the Russian literary hero? Russian literature lives on in that same Platonic sphere,

engendering real-life models -- and these models are born the same, all variations on the same Russian Christian type.

It is customary to begin the history of Russian literary heroes with the princes Boris and Gleb--heroes of the early hagiographic period of Kievan literature. These real historical figures were young princes who were killed in a dynastic conflict by their brother Sviatopol the Damned. They are also the first saints canonized by the Russian Orthodox church. These heroes radiate a sacrificial quality, readiness to suffer, the ability to endure undeserved torments: genuine Christian traits, as they were imprinted and confirmed in the Orthodox consciousness and in the system of Christian values. The hagiography of Boris and Gleb reveals one detail especially precious to the modern researcher familiar with contemporary techniques of textual and situational analysis: one of the brothers had a homosexual lover, a certain "ugrin" (that is, Hungarian) named Georgi, and died together with him, in his embrace. A psychoanalytical approach to the narrative highlights this specifically Christian detail -- if we bear in mind the traditional view of Jesus as a virgin, as the archetype of androgyny, even. After Vasilii Rozanov's works (*The Metaphysics of Christianity* and *People of the Moonlight*) we cannot disregard this narrative. The hagiography of Boris and Gleb already reveals perhaps the defining characteristic of almost every subsequent Russian literary hero, and perhaps every heroic historical figure as well: a (Christian) resistance to the world as the only possible expression of a kind of passive heroism. This oxymoron presents itself in Russian narratives and in the nature of Russian people as the heroic sacrificial death, or a refusal to fight even at the price of death (to say nothing of unhappiness).

Let us examine the best-known pre-Peter I literary hero (and writer), the archpriest Avvakum, author of his own hagiography, widely considered the literary master of the period before Peter's reforms. Avvakum actively participated in the church schism of the mid-seventeenth century, defending the "old piety," opposing the church reforms of Patriarch Nikon, and supporting czar Alexei Mikhailovich, father of the future emperor, Peter the Great. Avvakum's life truly was heroic, marked by tremendous activity in the pursuit of certain church and political goals. Among Western figures he most resembles Savonarola, whose death at the stake he also shared. Yet, at the same time, reading his hagiography one cannot help but remark upon another Western European resemblance -- this is a Russian Jean-Jacques Rousseau! The key to their similarity is masochism. This has already been noted in scholarly literature; the American Slavic scholar and psychoanalyst Daniel Rancour-Laferrriere remarks upon Avvakum's masochism as an archetypal Russian trait in his book, *The*

Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering (1995).¹⁵ Avvakum served as a lightning rod, drawing in all of the century's storms. The most superficial familiarity with contemporary psychology makes plain the indubitably masochistic, provocative aspects of this behavior. One is left with the impression that Avvakum has no desire to win his battle -- his only desire is to suffer some.

Masochistic traits appear in the archetypal Russian character three centuries after Avvakum in one of Ivan Bunin's tales. Here we find a lowly variation on Avvakum's character in the form of Shasha, a peasant's son who provokes people to beat him--first his father, the rich, loutish Roman, then the soldier who is married to Shasha's mistress. The tale is characteristically titled "I Keep Silent," in a grotesque expression of Russia's oft-praised sacrificial meekness.

On the village's big open market day, Shasha regularly calls the soldier out to fight, with the aim of being beaten:

Amid the din and clamor, the mad clanging of the whirling carousel and the ecstatic, sham-sympathetic *oohs* and *aahs* of the parting crowd, the soldier stuns and bloodies Shasha with his first punch. Shasha . . . immediately hits the dirt as if dead, falls to be pounded by steel-heeled boots in his chest, his rumped head, his nose, his eyes, already dimmed like a slaughtered sheep's. Meanwhile, the people gape in wonder: what an odd, crazy person! He knew all along how this would turn out! Why did he put himself up to it? And in truth -- why? Why does he go on so insistently, day after day, emptying out his ruined house, striving to erase the last signs of what Roman's wild genius had created, and endlessly craving insult, shame, and beatings?¹⁶

Of course, Bunin's Shasha is a grotesque degradation of the Christian archetype which was presented so miraculously and expressively by the larger-than-life figure of Avvakum, yet Shasha retains the structural and formative qualities of this type, the most important of these being the need to suffer as a way to attain Christian salvation.

However, the main reservoir of compelling Christian character types lies in the classical Russian literature of the nineteenth century, among those protagonists who earned the epithet "extraneous people." Their main trait presents itself as an inability to act in the most elementary, everyday situation: in sexual competition, not only against a rival for a woman's love, but competition with the woman herself. Specifically, this narrative unfolds so that the literary protagonist turns out to be weaker than his

beloved; thus, he willingly relinquishes her to another. The plot has many variations in Russian literature.

For many years, if not centuries, the “extraneous people’s” behavior was explained away as the result of governmental oppression and societal repression in Russia, which would not allow its positive characters to blossom. In a psychoanalytic light such behavior takes on a completely different character. Yet there are other interpretations of this literary phenomenon besides the psychoanalytic one, which focus beyond its social dimensions. The most clever of these belongs to the literary formalist Victor Shklovsky, who has, in fact, commented extensively on the irrelevance of psychoanalysis to literature:

I will write about ‘scouts’, for no one has written of them yet and their feelings might be hurt. When mating horses (which isn’t the most refined activity, but without it there would be no horses), often the mare experiences a defensive reflex, becoming nervous and refusing to mate. She may even kick the stallion.

Now, a factory horse is not meant for romantic intrigues; his path must be strewn with roses, and only exhaustion puts a damper on his ardor. Thus, a half-grown stallion is selected to approach the mare; his soul is much more delicate. They flirt with one another, but as soon as they begin to reach an understanding (in a manner of speaking), the poor young stallion is dragged off by the neck and the real producer is brought back on the scene.

The first stallion is called the scout. The scout’s task is a hard one, and they say some end up mad or suicidal. . . .

The Russian intelligentsia has played the historical role of the scout.

Yet even before, Russian literature was devoted to describing the trials and tribulations of these scouts. Writers described in great detail how their heroes failed to get what they strove for... Alas, even Leo Tolstoy’s characters in *The Cossacks*, *War and Peace*, and *Anna Karenina*, even these most beloved characters are scouts.[17](#)

This theme may be illustrated beginning with the very first Russian classicist--Pushkin. His *Evgenii Onegin* presents the first significant, truly seminal model of the Russian literary plot: the woman emerges as man’s superior, defeating him in a sort of moral contest by showing a willingness and ability to love, while the male hero handles the situation inadequately.

Essentially, Evgenii Onegin is the first "scout"; this protagonist rejects the woman who has fallen in love with him, only to realize that he loved her after all once she is married to another. In psychoanalysis, this sort of situation is termed "Kandavel's motif."

To confirm this thesis, one has but to list the famous Russian novels of the nineteenth century, naming the characters who make up the couples and triangles of the aforementioned plot. This pattern applies to almost all of Russia's nineteenth-century classic literature. A few examples: Rudin, Natalia, and Luzhin (Turgenev's "Rudin"), Oblomov, Olga, and Stoltz (Goncharov's "Oblomov"), Raisky, Vera, and Volokhov ("The Cliff," also by Goncharov), Prince Andrei, Natasha, and Anatole Kuragin (later Pierre Bezukhov) in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. In this sense, the most expressive male character in Russian literature is Prince Myshkin in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, a deliberately Christlike figure, incapable of love by definition ("love" implying a certain elementary level of activity).

To examine this plot as masochism in the narrow psychoanalytical sense, as does D. Rancour-Laferriere, means to simplify its cultural -- or anti-cultural, or a-cultural -- meaning. This meaning is elucidated only if we consistently bear in mind the Christian roots and correlations of the given psychological situation. The cultural and social explication lies in non-doing, the refusal to participate actively in existence, not only on its societal surface but also in its ontological depths. "Do not love the world nor that which is in it" might be the most appropriate Christian formula to describe this relation to the world.

It is difficult to recall any example of a positive, active protagonist in Russian classical literature. If we begin once more with Pushkin, the only character who readily comes to mind is Pugachev in *The Captain's Daughter*, who, while certainly active and perhaps even positive (at any rate, not without a certain roughish charm), could certainly never be called cultured. Lermontov's Pechorin is active -- and even enjoys considerable success with the ladies--yet this is the pointless activity of a Byronic hero, who experiments with people and circumstances. Pechorin is extraneous among the extraneous people (and if we follow the psychoanalytical train of thought, we cannot help but notice both in the character and in Lermontov himself distinctly homosexual traits, particularly in their contempt for women). Curiously, perhaps the only active hero in Russian literature is not Russian at all, but German; this is Stoltz, whom Olga chooses over the "scout" Oblomov. Far more frequently, however, such active foreigners appear ridiculous; thus we have Hugo Pectoralis, the hero of Leskov's "Mighty Wave," who decides to

best the Russians at their favorite sport -- overeating at the Easter meal -
- and dies after choking on a pancake. A similar plot appears in one of Chekhov's early humorous tales, in which a foreigner marvels in terror, watching Russians partake of this same activity; this tale is called "The Foolish Frenchman." Yet the most foolish Frenchman in all of Russian literature turns out to be Napoleon in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*; the author satirically mocks and morally condemns the French emperor's confidence in his own, human ability to influence events and make history. Kutuzov defeats him specifically by "non-doing," by obedient faith in the mysterious flow of events which does not answer to man's will.

Further inspection of this motif in Russian literature yields an incredible result -- it becomes all the more evident during the Soviet period, when it would seem that Russian life had changed radically at its very core and had specifically undertaken stern measures to root out all ties with its religious, Christian past.

Soviet literature began with a paradox -- Alexander Blok's poem "The Twelve," in which Christ steps forward as the leader of the Bolshevik Red Guards. The number twelve represented the new apostles in the new Bolshevik church. In his notes about the poem, Blok himself wrote that the Red Guard was a poor rural church adrift on the coarse ocean of Russian life. The poem pivots around the killing of the prostitute Katya, who symbolizes Russia. Christ's presence seems to sanction this ritual murder. That a woman is killed draws a crucial thematic line linking Blok's mysterious poem with the fundamental narrative of Russian literature.

The Bolsheviks welcomed Blok, for they found the support of one of the pillars of pre-revolutionary Russia's cultural elite both useful and flattering. However, they hurried to distance themselves from the poem's Christ figure, pronouncing this motif "mysticism." And in truth, both on the surface and in a practical sense, the aims of Bolshevism seemed to have little in common with the Russian cultural tradition as it was formed under Orthodox Christianity. Bolshevism entailed forced activism, a reorganized megalomania, a Promethean plan to reshape the world, which was by no means limited to social problems. It is a sort of cosmic utopia, like any truly revolutionary movement, as the Russian philosopher S. L. Frank noted in his remarkable work "The Heresy of Utopianism":

The last true source of utopian thought is a brand new—compared with the entire sphere of Old and New Testament conceptions--religious idea (the only possible analogue might be found in second-century gnosticism). This is the idea that all the world's evil and human suffering are

determined... by the faulty structure of the world itself. This brings up another thought: that human will, which is governed by the drive toward absolute truth, can fundamentally restructure the world, creating a new, meaningful, and righteous world in place of the old, successful, iniquitous one. Utopianism is...the rebellion of man's moral will against the world's creator and against the world itself as his creation. The ancient gnostics taught that the world was created by an evil god and that the God of love and righteousness, revealed in Christ, is an entirely different god from the world's creator... Utopianism often admits openly its wish for cosmic transfiguration, as, for example, in Fourier's utopian fantasies or in Marx's famous formula about the 'leap from the kingdom of necessity into the kingdom of freedom,' which indicates the perception of imminent socialism precisely as an entirely new eon of universal being. In some foggy way utopianism cherishes the faith that transfiguring the social structure must somehow insure genuine salvation, that is, an end to man's tragic subordination to the blind forces of nature and the coming of a new, unclouded and blissful existence. [18](#)

The Christ portrayed in "The Twelve" is a gnostic Christ, bringing destruction to an unjust world embodied by a woman -- Katya. Contemporary cultural critic Alexander Etkind traces the further development of this theme in Blok's work, concluding that castration is a necessary condition for the cosmic transfiguration of being. Blok's Russian genius revealed Bolshevism's secret as a Russian spiritual intention that was exclusively shaped by Christianity. The Bolsheviks' decades-long struggle to eradicate the very essence of Russian being might and should be interpreted as the result of this fundamental spiritual arrangement.

I refer, of course, to the mysticism of Russian literary and historical themes, not to their (Soviet) empiricism. The empiricism seemed new, yet beneath the surface of almost every Soviet literary framework one could trace this same narrative. A few examples:

During the Soviet period, Russian literature began to assimilate themes and forms which had not been endemic to Russian classicism or to Russian literature generally. A certain secularity overtook Russian literature, partially in response to a common perception of the communist revolution as a radical attempt to Westernize Russian life. In this sense, the most interesting phenomenon might be seen as the emergence in the early 1920s of the literary group "Serapion's Brothers," whose most famous member was Mikhail Zoschenko. The group's manifesto, written by Lev Lunets, was unambiguously titled "Westward!" This manifesto proclaimed that the critical drawback to all previous Russian literature rested in its

lack of plot, of that engaging action so characteristic of Western literature. This implicitly disavowed the introspective and overanalytical Russian literary hero, who had been, as previously discussed, a variation on the Christian consciousness.

Like all independent literary groups in the post-revolutionary Soviet Union, "Serapion's Brothers" did not last long and exerted no lasting influence on Russian literature. The very idea of a disengaged, aesthetically autonomous literature would not take root in Russian soil, even among the literary avant-garde. One might consider, for example, the literary group LEF, led by the famous poet Mayakovsky. Here the Bolshevik motif of Promethean activism resounded mightily. LEF proclaimed the end of art as a purely aesthetic activity and the transition to "life-building." Art's task was to shape a new, communist way of life. Applied art was touted as the acme of creativity -- for instance, the construction of economical fold-out furniture in response to the Soviet housing crisis.¹⁹ Yet at the same time, this fascination with applied art did not lie at the heart of LEF's creative ideology. The secret goal was cosmic utopianism, the total transfiguration of being. This became most evident in Mayakovsky's own, immensely creative work. The first edition of his poem "About This" included photomontages by A. Rodchenko, which were quite well-known in the West. The poem dealt with conquering love as earthly slavery, dreams of a new immortality, the thirst for physical resurrection. Here we find, transformed, motifs endemic to the most truly Christian worldview, but presented in a new, activist voice, as a sort of "pro-active apocalypse" (as N. Berdiaev remarked of Nikolai Fiodorov's philosophy, which greatly influenced Mayakovsky). Significantly, overcoming the trappings of physical love as a form of cosmic, ontological survival echoes Christianity (if one ignores Plato, of course). The communist arose as a transformed, militant monk of the European middle ages, as opposed to the pensive, prayerful hermits of Orthodoxy; this was, essentially, the extent of the "radical change" and progress wrought by the Bolshevik revolution. I would hazard to say that this revolution took place within that same -- Christian -- discourse.

Of course, I refer to the inner, truly unconscious implication of the revolution's narratives. On the ideological surface, official doctrine did not and could not sustain such narratives. After all of the peripatetics of the shaky 1920s, official ideology proclaimed "socialist realism" as the only valid method for Soviet art. Art had to reflect life in its revolutionary progression, from a communist perspective. This doctrine emerged thanks in part to Maxim Gorky, who was an interesting figure in himself. Having achieved worldwide renown even before the revolution, Maxim Gorky

(1868-1936) always nurtured socialist sympathies and political affiliations with the Bolsheviks. Prior to the revolution, he became active in a group called the "God-builders," whom American scholar Robert Williams considers the real, or "other" Bolsheviks.²⁰ They parted ways ideologically with Lenin on nothing less than interpretation of Marxist theory, correctly emphasizing its activist character while Lenin, at least before the revolution, saw Marxism through the traditional lens of harsh determinism, "economic materialism." Among the God-builders, however, Marxism acquired a meaning beyond scientific theory explaining the laws of social evolution and became its own sort of religion, which allowed for global understanding and revealed the secrets of life. Marxism made possible the incarnation of the theogonic process: God becomes the people (the God-builders' demotheism), that is, a social collective whose labor completely transfigures life itself. In other words, Marxism created a myth which inspired great masses of people to direct social action. Maxim Gorky wanted to see this myth realized in the process of socialist construction in the Soviet Union, and fixed his vision on the theory of "socialist realism." In this view, both the subject and the object of art became reality itself, transformed through labor into the image of actual perfection. Socialist construction became a sort of theurgy.

Social-realist methodology exerted the least influence over the artistic practice of Gorky himself, who was and remained a naturalist writer of the old school. However, it did not positively influence any other Soviet writer either, and in fact, could not do so. The theory was stillborn, for one cannot force any sort of theory or method on art. Yet social realism provides interesting evidence of the activist tendencies in Russian consciousness which cropped up in Bolshevik discourse. It is even more interesting to track these tendencies' downfall.

To make a long story short, one need recall only one name -- Andrei Platonov (1899-1951). This was a colossal figure, an undisputed Russian genius on a par with Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, the writer who reaffirmed Russian literature's worldwide renown. Yet in the given context, his evolution is quite telling.

The ideology, or rather the worldview of gnostic utopianism deeply permeated the young Platonov's work in the form of Fiodorov-Tsiolkovsy's cosmic fantasies. The main theme of Platonov's writing in the early 1920s, when he was still writing poems and articles for a newspaper called *The Voronezh Commune*, was a profound hatred for the existing world and a call to its total destruction. These exhortations were technocratically motivated as a project to re-engineer existence completely. Platonov

consciously quit the literary field and trained as an engineer -- specifically as an electrician and specialist in land improvement -- but on the job he encountered the impoverished reality of Russian life and realized that the matter at hand was not space missions to distant galaxies but digging ditches and rehydrating the soil in that same Voronezh county. Victor Shklovsky once encountered him on the job, and sketched a portrait of the young Platonov -- not the writer, but the agricultural engineer -- in his book *The Third Factory*. Platonov returned to literature a different man -- his theme of bold intergalactic adventures took on an unexpected, partially satirical twist (particularly in his projections to Russia's past, to the era of Peter the Great, so similar to Bolshevik times, in "The Floodgates of Epiphany"), yet his rejection of the world and what was in it remained. Platonov became an extremely kenotic figure, one wants to say -- a Russian Christ. His prose evangelizes Russian apocalyptic nihilism. Platonov depicted faithful communists in the familiar guise of wandering pilgrims seeking the Invisible City, which is revealed to be communism. Most often, the Invisible City turns out deadly. Platonov's protagonists seek death as a pledge of immortality (this theme also resonates in Pushkin's work), as a path to a new heaven and a new earth. Death as a way of life-- here is Platonov's theme. His heroes thirst to "live a little in death." Yet Platonov himself remains immortal in Russia, his work presenting communism as the Russian apocalypse in the brilliant novels *Chevangur* and *Kotlovan*.

Platonov conceived communism as a Christian phenomenon in the kenotic sense, as a rejection of all hustle and activity, total humility, the ultimate cultural nihilism. He simultaneously separated communism from forced activism and reinstated its basic rejection of the world. The circle of Russian culture and Russian literature closed in on itself; communism coincided in its secret sources with the purely Christian, culturally uncomplicated formation of the Russian Orthodox soul. This junction fulfilled the Christian cultural theme in Russia. Beyond this theme one finds only empiricism, which, for all its curiosity, has no specifically Russian essence. Russian literature past, present, and future which falls outside the bounds of Christian inspiration and negation was, is, and will always be as "international" as, say, technical craftsmanship. It involves integration and convergence, rather than any particular singularity. It is, in short, "not Russian."

Of course, Russian literature did and continues to harbor artists who struggled to stay out of this apocalyptic-nihilist ring, who broke free from it, or who simply never noticed it to begin with. Russian literature had its "Westerners." Even Pushkin might be counted among them; despite his

intimate penetration of specifically Russian themes, he remained “not Russian” (in the aforementioned sense) as a spiritual type--the type of an enlightened, open-minded European. Dmitri Merezhkovsky did not challenge Pushkin’s “Russianness” in vain when he energetically insisted that all Russian literature that followed Pushkin was an uninterrupted revolt against its forefather and first genius. Turgenev retains a similar superficially cultural image, despite his thorough development of the Russian-Christian “scout” prototype, the passive protagonist (Turgenev’s only revolutionary character was a Bulgarian in the novel *The Day Before*). Chekhov could also be described as European, in a more fascinating, democratically inclusive sense. One might also include here a whole series of 1920s poets -- Viazemsky, Baratynsky, Annensky. There is even a modern poet in Soviet and post-Soviet literature, Alexander Kushner, of whom a critic wrote: “What a rare case -- poetic inspiration at a temperature of 36.6 (Celsius).”²¹ The Western, un- (or anti-, or super-) Christian type of Russian writer, despite his indisputable accomplishments, remains marginal to Russian literature itself-- he cannot stand out as a genius against its background.

Vasilii Rozanov once wrote that a Russian Westerner, as opposed to a Slavophile, would brilliantly edit, produce, annotate, and culturally contextualize *War and Peace* -- but he could never write it. Russian literature’s fate -- the fate of all Russian culture, if you will -- lies among these doomed geniuses in an environment lacking any true cultural middle ground. Culture as the “middle kingdom” is, once again, not Russian.

Bertoldt Brecht’s famous words, “Pity the country that lacks heroes,” may well be applied to a country which engenders only geniuses.

References

This paper was translated from Russian by Masha Barabtarov.

¹ Lotman, Y. M., *Izbrannye Statii v Trekh Tomakh*, Vol. 3 (Tallinn: Alexandria, 1993), p. 129

² Nietzsche, Friedrich, “The Antichrist.” I could not secure an English edition — the only copy disappeared from the New York Public Library. There was an 18-volume *Collected Works*, but the card catalogue did not indicate which volume contained the essay in question, and I did not have the strength to examine all eighteen volumes.

³ Aksakov, K. S., *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*, Vol. 1 (Moscow:

Universitetskaia Tipografia, 1889), pp. 283-84.

[4](#) Kireevsky, I. V., *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Tipografia Imperatorskogo Moskovskogo Universiteta), pp. 184-85.

[5](#) Ibid., pp. 219-20.

[6](#) Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World As Will and Representation*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), pp. 184, 186.

[7](#) Ibid., pp. 198-99.

[8](#) Stepun, F., "Nemetskii Romantizm i Filosofia Istorii Slavianofilov," in *Grani* No. 42, p. 186.

[9](#) Merezhkovsky, D. S., *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*, Vol. 13, (St. Petersburg: M. O. Wolf, 1912), pp. 345-46.

[10](#) Ivanov, Viacheslav, *Po Zvezdam: Statii i Aforizmy*, (St. Petersburg: Ory, 1909), pp. 327-329.

[11](#) Rozanov, V. V., *Izbrannoe*, (Munich: A. Neimanis, 1970), p. 444.

[12](#) Berdiaev, Nikolai, *Istoki i Smysl Russkogo Kommunizma*, (Paris: YMCA Press, 1955), pp. 37-38, 39.

[13](#) Blok, Alexander, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Vol. 7 (Moscow-Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1963), p. 365.

[14](#) Lukacs, John, *The End of the Twentieth Century and the End of the Modern Age*, (New York: Ticknor Fields, 1993), pp. 77-78.

[15](#) Rancour-Laferriere, Daniel, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 23-25.

[16](#) Bunin, I. A., *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Vol. 4, (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1966), p. 229.

[17](#) Shklovsky, Victor, *Gamburgskii Schet*, (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel, 1990), p. 186.

[18](#) Frank, S. L., "Eres Utopizma" in *Po Tu Storonu Pravogo I*

Levogo, (Paris: YMCA Press), pp. 98-99, 102-103.

[19](#) See Matich, Olga, "Sueta Vokrug Krovati: Utopicheskaia Organizatsia Byta I Russkii Avangard" in *Literaturnoe Obozrenie* No. 11 (1991), pp. 80-84.

[20](#) See Williams, Robert C., *The Other Bolsheviks: Lenin and his Critics, 1904-1914*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

[21](#) Epstein, Mikhail, "Russkaia Literatura na Rasputie" in *Zvezda* No. 2 (1999), p. 158.
