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M. O. Gershenzon and V. I. Ivanov

A CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN TWO CORNERS

(EDITORIAL NOTE.—*The following twelve letters, which form one of the most expressive and original works of post-revolutionary Russian literature, were written in the summer of 1920 when, after suffering terrible privations during the Civil War, the two convalescent authors shared a room in the Sanatorium for Scientific and Literary Workers near Moscow.*

Michael Osipovich Gershenzon (1869-1925), author of The Wisdom of Pushkin and several important historical and critical studies of the leaders of the Russian intelligentsia in the first half of the nineteenth century, was among those intellectuals who evaluated the Bolshevik Revolution not in terms of its stated theory and program but as an upheaval of incalculable and elemental power, liberating man from the excessive accumulation of cultural values and thus releasing him for a new start as "a naked man on the naked earth."

This standpoint, characterized by some Russian critics as a new kind of "Rousseauistic nihilism," is disputed in the "Correspondence" by Viacheslav Ivanovich Ivanov (1866—), who, after 1905, headed the Petersburg school of symbolist and metaphysical poetry. An outstanding scholar of classical literature and ancient history, he studied in his youth under Mommsen and wrote his dissertation on the tax-farming companies of ancient Rome. Deeply Westernized in his interests and outlook, he wrote brilliant literary essays, a study of the Dionysian cult, and a number of poetic works remarkable for their erudite content and hieratic majesty of diction and tone. The philosopher Leo Shestov named him "Viacheslav the Magnificent." Now eighty-three years of age, Ivanov, who has been converted to Catholicism, is living in Rome.

The theme of Western culture and its fate has seldom been

explored more keenly and provocatively than in this unique dialogue between two friendly antagonists. The dialogue takes on added significance from the conditions of extreme revolutionary change under which it is held. Both authors are in a sense defining their attitude toward the Russian Revolution as they debate the future of culture. However, the chief issue which they raise, that of primitivism versus tradition, is not at all peculiar to Russia, for it has become one of the central conflicts of Western civilization in our time.)

I.

To M. O. Gershenzon:

I know, my dear friend and neighbor, that you have come to doubt personal immortality and the existence of a personal God, and it hardly seems fitting for me to defend the rights of the human personality to metaphysical status and elevation. For in truth I feel in myself nothing that might lay claim to eternal life—nothing except that which, in any event, is not myself but only the general and universal part of myself which, like some luminous visitor, gives spiritual unity and meaning to my limited and inevitably temporary existence, with all the complexity of its capricious and contingent content. And yet it seems to me that it is not for nothing that this visitor has come and “created a dwelling in me.”

His purpose, I cannot help thinking, is to endow his host with an immortality incomprehensible to my reason. My personal being is immortal not because it exists, but because it has been called upon to awaken to existence. And like all awakenings, indeed, like my birth into this world—it seems an outright miracle. I see clearly that I cannot find in my manifest personality and its multiple expressions one single atom that approximates even to the most rudimentary notion of autonomous and true (i.e., eternal) being. I am a seed that has died in the earth; but “if the seed doth not die, how shall it come to life again?” God will resurrect me because he is with me. I know him in myself as a dark birth-giving womb, as that eternally higher source which brings forth the best and most sacred in me, as the living principle of being, more comprehensive than myself, and therefore containing, among my other energies and qualities, the quality

of personal consciousness proper to me. I was born of him and in me he dwells. And if he does not leave me, he will also create the forms of his continued dwelling in me, i.e., my person. God not only created me, but is continually creating and will create me. For he of course wishes that I should also create him in myself in the future, just as he has created me till now. There can be no descent of God without free acceptance of him: the two acts are in a sense equivalent, and that which receives becomes equal in dignity to that which gives. God cannot leave me if I do not leave him. Thus, the inner law of love engraved in us (for we can easily read it on the invisible tablet) proves to us how right was the psalmist of the Old Testament when he said to God: "Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption."—This is what I think to myself in my corner, my good neighbor. And what will your answer be from the other corner of the same square? What are you thinking?

V. I.

II.

To V. I. Ivanov:

No, V. I., I have not come to doubt personal immortality, and like you, I consider the individual to be the vessel of authentic reality. But it seems to me that about these things one should neither speak nor think. You and I, my dear friend, are at the opposite ends of the diagonal not only in this room but also in spirit. I do not like to raise my thoughts to the heights of metaphysics, although I delight in your effortless soaring in that sphere. These wide-ranging speculations invariably form into systems in accordance with the laws of logic—these empyrean structures to which so many in our circle devote themselves—and I confess that they seem to me futile and hopeless. More than that, all this abstraction, and not it alone, weighs upon me heavily: recently all the intellectual achievements of mankind, all the wealth of attainments, knowledge and values amassed and conquered through the centuries, have weighed upon me like an irksome burden, like an excessively heavy and confining spiritual garb.

Over a long period this feeling has troubled me at intervals; now, however, it has become constant. For me there is a prospect of

happiness in a Lethean bath that would erase the memory of all religious and philosophical systems; all scientific knowledge, arts, and poetry could be washed away from the soul without a trace; and then, to re-emerge on the shore, naked as the first man, naked, light and joyful, stretching freely and lifting to the sky my naked arms, recalling from the past only one thing—how burdensome and stifling were those clothes, how light and free one is without them. Why this feeling has taken root in me I do not know. Perhaps we could not feel the burden of the splendid vestments so long as they were whole and beautiful and comfortably fitted our bodies; but, in these last years, as they have become torn and hang down in rags, we long to throw them off altogether.

M. G.

III.

To M. O. Gershenzon:

I am not an architect of systems, my dear M.O., nor on the other hand am I one of those frightened creatures who think everything that is said is a lie. I am accustomed to wandering in the "forest of symbols," and the symbolism of the word is just as clear to me as that of the kiss of love. Inner experience has a verbal meaning, and seeks it, languishing without it, for it is from the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. People cannot give each other a better gift than that reassuring clairvoyance of their words even if they express only their forebodings or gropings for a higher, more spiritual awareness. One thing should be guarded against—giving these communications, these confessions a compulsive character, *i.e.*, making them into the property of reason. Reason is compulsive by nature; but the spirit breathes where it wills. Words must be spiritual—symbols of the individual's inner experience, and in truth, children of freedom. Just as the poet's song does not compel but moves, so words should move the minds of the listeners, and not subject them to convictions, as to a proven theorem.

Metaphysics has been afflicted with pride and lust for power, tragically afflicted for having separated itself from the womb of integral spiritual knowledge. Having left its paternal home of primitive religion, it inevitably strove to make itself over in the image of science and to thirst for the scepter of that greatest of all compulsive

forces. And the intellectual mood that at present so torments and obsesses you—your acute sense that the cultural heritage you bear is an enormous burden—derives essentially from experiencing culture not as a living treasury of gifts, but as a system of the subtlest compulsions. No wonder: for culture has actually attempted to become a system of compulsions. But for me it is the ladder of Eros and a hierarchy of devotions. And around me there are so many things and persons that inspire me with veneration, from man and his tools, and his great labor, and his insulted dignity, to the minerals, that I find it sweet to drown in this sea—*naufragar mi e dolce in questo mare*—in other words, to drown in God. For my veneration is free—none is obligatory, and each is open and accessible, and in each my mind rejoices. True, each veneration, as it passes into love, discovers with the keen eye of love an inner tragedy and a tragic guilt in everything that has severed itself from the sources of being and is isolated in itself: under each rose of life there appears the outline of the cross from which it flowered. But even this is the longing for God—the attraction of the moth-soul to the fiery death. He who does not know this fundamental attraction, he, in the true and profound words of Goethe, is sick with another longing, even though he may never remove his mask of gaiety—he is a “gloomy visitor on the dark earth.”

Our true freedom, our noblest happiness and noblest suffering are always with us, and no culture can take it away from us. Infirmary of the flesh is worse, for the spirit is valiant, while the flesh is weak; a man is more defenseless before want and disease than before dead idols. He cannot shake off the hateful yoke of deadening tradition if he seeks to abolish it by violence, because it will grow on him again of itself—just as the hump is inseparable from the camel even when he throws his load from his back—but the spirit liberates itself from this yoke only by taking on another “light yoke.” True, you say to man enslaved by his own riches: “Become” (*Werde*), but it seems that you are forgetting Goethe’s condition: “first die”—*stirb und werde*. But death, *i.e.*, the rebirth of the individual, is precisely his longed-for liberation. Bathe in the waters of a spring—and be consumed in flames. This is always possible—any morning, since the spirit awakens with every dawn.

V. I.

IV.

To V. I. Ivanov:

Our correspondence from corner to corner, accidentally begun, is beginning to absorb me. You remember: in my absence you wrote your first letter to me and as you went out, left it on my table; and I answered it while you were out. Now I am writing in your presence, while you, in silent contemplation, are trying in your mind to smooth out the century-old and rigid wrinkles of Dante's tercets, in order to mold their likeness in Russian verse. I am writing because in this way my thoughts will be expressed more fully and heard more articulately, like a sound that breaks a long silence. And after dinner we shall lie each on his bed, you with a sheet of paper, and I with a little leather-bound book, and you will begin reading to me your translation of *Purgatory*, the fruit of a morning's labors, and I, comparing it with the original, will offer my criticisms. And once again, as on previous days, I shall drink my fill of the riches of your verse, again experiencing the familiar catch in my throat.

O my friend, swan of Apollo! Why was feeling so vital, why was thought so fresh and the word so full of substance then, in the fourteenth century, and why are our thoughts and feelings today so pale, and our speech as though laden with cobwebs? You spoke well about metaphysics as a system of hardly perceptible compulsions; but after all I am speaking of something else—of our culture as a whole and of the very subtle distillations with which it has suffused all the texture of existence; not of compulsions, but of temptations that have disintegrated, weakened, distorted our minds. And not even of this do I speak, not of the consequences and the harmfulness of culture, because the evaluation of usefulness and harm is the business of reason, and every argument that wields the sword will perish by the sword. Can we in this matter trust our intellect when we know with certainty that it has in itself grown out of culture and naturally worships it just as an untalented slave worships the master who has elevated him?

It is another judge, a judge who cannot be bribed, who has raised his voice in me. Whether I grew tired from bearing a burden beyond my strength, or whether the light of my original mind broke through the weight of learning and habit—in any event, it is from within that a simple feeling has risen and formed itself in me,

a feeling as imperious as the feeling of hunger or pain. I am not passing judgment on culture, I am only testifying: I feel stifled in it. Like Rousseau, I have a dim vision of a state of bliss—of full freedom and lightness of spirit, of a carefree paradise. I know too much, and the burden of what I know weighs upon me. This knowledge—it is not I who have acquired it through living experience; it is general and alien, inherited from forefathers and ancestors; it has penetrated into my mind by tempting me with demonstrability, and filled it. And because it is general, supraindividually demonstrated, its indisputability freezes my soul. Countless proven facts entangled me all around, like millions of unbreakable threads, all of them impersonal, all of them irrefutable, inescapable to the point of horror.

And of what use are they to me? An immense number of them I do not need at all. I do not need them in love and suffering, it is not thanks to them that I slowly grasp my destiny amidst fatal errors and unexpected achievements, and I certainly shall not recall them at the hour of death. But, like refuse, they litter my mind, they are there at every moment of my life, and stand like a dusty curtain between me and my joy, my pain, each of my thoughts. It is from this endless impersonal knowledge, from the countless memorized theories, truths, hypotheses, rules of logic, and moral laws, from all this load of amassed intellectual riches with which every one of us is laden, that the gnawing exhaustion comes. Recall just this—the theory of the thing in itself and the phenomenon. The great Kant discovered that we know nothing about the thing itself, and that all characteristics of it that we perceive are our representations. Schopenhauer consolidated this truth, having clearly demonstrated that we are completely enclosed in ourselves and have no means of crossing the boundaries of our consciousness or of making contact with the world. The thing in itself is unknowable; in perceiving the world we perceive only phenomena and the laws of our intellect; we only imagine or dream the outside world; it does not exist at all, and our perceiving apparatus is the only reality.

This discovery was logically irrefutable. The truth blazed forth like light in the night, and consciousness unquestioningly had to submit to it. The greatest revolution took place in men's minds: things, people, I myself as a creature, in brief, all reality, formerly so solid and so tangible, everything suddenly rose a foot in the air and

acquired the transparent quality of an apparition. There is nothing substantial; everything that seems to exist consists only of mirages created according to laws, with which our spirit, God knows for what purpose, peoples the void. For a hundred years this doctrine was dominant and deeply changed the consciousness of man. And now, it has come to its end; somehow, imperceptibly, it has lost its force, faded and given up the ghost; philosophers were emboldened to rise in defense of the ancient naive experience, the external world has again been restored to its undeniable reality, and of Kant's dazzling discovery only a modest residue has been salvaged—the truth that the formal categories of our cognition, the categories of time, space, and causality are not real but ideal, are characters not of the world but of consciousness, and are superimposed by the latter on experience, as a network of lines is superimposed on a map.

Now the mystification of one hundred years has passed—but what terrible traces it has left! The nightmare of unreality still envelops reason with the cobweb of insanity. Man returns to the sensation of real being like someone convalescing after a grave disease, with the morbid and disquieting feeling that everything he perceives may be a dream. Thus abstract reason in the laboratories of science produces knowledge and systems, infallible for it, but alien to the spirit, and when such a truth in the course of time—this is inevitable—cracks along its seams and collapses, we ask ourselves with anguish: Why did it for so many years swaddle men's minds and impede the freedom of their movement? Just as the objects sold in shops tempt us with their pleasant appearance and promise of comfort, so ideas and knowledge tempt us with an idle temptation, and our spirit became just as overloaded with them as our houses are with objects. Ideas and knowledge are fruitful for me if they are naturally born in me; but acquired from outside, of no natural need, they are like the collars, umbrellas, galoshes, and watches that the half-naked native in the African jungle barter from the European. And so I say: I am bored by the abundance of manufactured objects in my house, but the accumulated acquisitions of my spirit weigh upon me infinitely more. I would gladly give away all knowledge and all the thoughts I have acquired from books, for the joy of discovering for myself, personally, and from my own experience, a single piece of knowledge, fresh as a summer morning, primordial, simple.

I repeat, the crux of the matter is not the compulsiveness of which you write, but the temptation; and temptation is more compulsive than violence. Abstract reason, through the temptation of objective truth, imposes its discoveries on the individual. You say that after throwing off the burden, we shall inevitably begin to amass it over again. Thus, there is no difference of opinion—we cannot get rid of our reason and we cannot change its nature. But I know and believe in the possibility of another thrust of creativeness and another culture that will not congeal each cognition into a dogma, that will not dry every blessing into a mummy and every value into a fetish. After all, I am not alone—within these stone walls many are being suffocated. And you, a poet, would you have become accustomed to living here without protest if you did not possess the happy gift of soaring away by inspiration, at least occasionally and for a short while, beyond the walls, into a free expanse, into the realm of spirit? I follow your flights with envious eyes, yours and those of other contemporary poets: there is an expanse, and mankind has wings! But my eyes—or is it their fault?—see something else too: the wings have grown heavier, and the flight of Apollo's swans is not high. Indeed, how can the poet preserve the force and freshness of innate inspiration in our enlightened era? At the age of thirty he has read so many books, has so often discoursed on philosophical themes, and has become so saturated with the abstract intellectuality of his companions!

And here I will take occasion to answer your last appeal. That rebirth of the personality, its true liberation of which you speak in the end, the *Flammentod* of Goethe, is also an élan and a flight of spirit related to poetic aspiration, but incomparably bolder and more resolute. That is why such events are so rare in our days, incomparably rarer even than artistic works of genius. "The cultural heritage" presses upon individuality with a weight of sixty atmospheres—and its yoke, by virtue of its temptation, is indeed a light yoke; the majority do not feel it at all, and he who does feel it and rushes upward—let him try to break through that density! For all of it is not above his head, but in himself; he is plainly heavy in himself, and perhaps only the wings of genius can raise his spirit above his own heavy consciousness.

M. G.

V.

To M. O. Gershenzon:

My dear friend, we live in the same cultural milieu, we share one room where each of us has his corner, but there is only one wide window and one door. At the same time each of us also has his permanent quarters, which you, just like myself, would gladly exchange for another dwelling under a different sky. Life in the same milieu is not identical for all of its inhabitants and guests. A single element contains soluble substance and liquid oil; aquatic plants, corals, and pearls grow in it, fish move in it, and whales, and flying fish, dolphins, and amphibians, and hunters of pearls—divers. It seems to me—or, making reservations in my turn, it is the “fault of my eyes”—that you cannot conceive of living in a culture without essentially merging with it.

However, I think that consciousness can be entirely immanent to culture, and that it also can be only partly immanent to it, and partly transcendent—and incidentally this can be easily shown by a particularly important example relevant to our dialogue. A man who believes in God will not for anything in the world agree that his faith is part of culture; but a man shackled by culture will inevitably consider such belief a cultural phenomenon, however he may define its nature—as an inherited idea and a historically conditioned psychological reaction, or as metaphysics and poetry, or as a socio-morphological motive-force and moral value. He will see in this faith anything you want, but will invariably incorporate it into the sphere of cultural phenomena, which for him encompasses all the life of the spirit, never agreeing with the believer that his faith is something extraneous to culture, independent, simple and primordial, which *directly* links his individuality with the Absolute Being. For in the eyes of the believer his faith is by nature separate from culture, just as nature is, and love.

What follows from this?

It follows that upon our belief in the absolute, which is not culture, depends inner freedom—and this freedom is life itself—or our inner submission to culture, which has long since been essentially godless because it locked man up (as Kant definitively proved) in himself. Only by faith—*i.e.*, by the basic disavowal of the original sin of culture—can its “temptation,” of which you are so

vividly aware, be conquered. But the original sin will not be eradicated by the superficial destruction of its external signs and traces. To unlearn the art of writing and expel the Muses (to use Plato's words) would be only a palliative: once again characters will appear, and once again the scrolls will reproduce the same invariable tale of the rock-chained prisoners in Plato's cave.

Rousseau's dream originated in his unbelief. On the contrary, to live in God means essentially not to live entirely in the relativity of human culture, but with some part of one's being to grow away from it toward the outside, toward freedom. Life in God is really life, *i. e.*, motion: it is spiritual growth, the path to the mount and the heavenly ladder. One needs only set one's feet on the way to find the path—the rest will come of itself. Spontaneously, the surrounding objects will change their position, the voices will vanish, and new horizons will open up. The door to freedom is the same for all of us who live in common in the same enclosure, and this door is always open. If one goes, another will follow him. Perhaps all will set out, one after the other. Without faith in God man cannot regain his lost freshness of spirit. It is not enough to throw off worn out clothing, one must throw off the old Adam. Only the water of life rejuvenates. And the vision that appears before you of a revitalized community "without Muses and written characters," however fascinating, is a delusive dream and a sign of decadence as is all Rousseauism, if the human community that you exalt is not a community of prayer but a new sprout of the same corrupt stalk that we are ourselves.

If you answer that the very act of building a new culture, of tracing new signs on the *tabula rasa* of the human soul, will plunge mankind into a fresh tide of creativeness, a direct perception of the world, and a new youth, there is only one thing I can do—to shrug my shoulders and marvel at the deep optimism of your proposed answer, which springs from the failure, characteristic of Rousseau's age, to understand the fatal truth that the very sources of spiritual life have been poisoned, that the Orphic or Biblical assertion of "original sin" is, alas, not a lie. In this case, our conversation would be reminiscent of another, ancient conversation that Plato relates in *Timaeus*. The interlocutors are Solon and an Egyptian priest. "You are children, Hellenes, and there is no aged man among you," the second says to the first. It goes on to say that periodic floods and

fires devastated the face of the earth, but following these destructive convulsions of the earth the people in the lands settled by the Hellenes were reborn "without Muses and written characters" in order to begin again their transient upbuilding—while the sacred Nile was saving immobile Egypt, which preserved on her age-old tablets the ancient memory of the forefathers forgotten by the Hellenes, of the great and glorious race of men who had thrown off the yoke of the immemorial Atlantis.

My dear fellow-seeker! Like that Egyptian and his Greek disciple, and Plato himself, I piously light my incense on the altar of Memory, mother of the Muses, I celebrate her as the "bond of immortality, the crown of consciousness," and I am convinced that not a single upward step is possible on the ladder of spiritual ascent without a step downward toward the underground sources of the spirit—the higher the branches, the deeper the roots.

And if you answer that you have neither the right nor the intention to predetermine the future intellectual outlook of the people born of the new culture, that you are merely yielding, for yourself and your descendants, to your present need to go out from these stifling vaults into free space, without knowing or wishing to know what awaits you beyond the bars of the abandoned prison, you will thereby express both your fatalistic indifference to the cause of carving out the path of freedom and your ultimate despair in your own liberation. Let it not be so!

V. I.

VI.

To V. I. Ivanov:

Dearest neighbor and friend, in vain do you lure me by tender admonitions to leave my corner and move into yours. Your corner is also enclosed—there is no freedom in it. You say: Let the man of culture give himself to faith, he is already essentially free. I answer: burdened as he is with the cultural heritage, he is unable to soar to the absolute, and even if faith is inherent in him, this faith shares the lot of all his spiritual states—it is falsified by reflection, distorted and powerless. I repeat what I wrote you the last time: our consciousness cannot transcend culture, or only perhaps in rare, exceptional instances. See how our friend Shestov is struggling in the snare.

How often have we lovingly spoken of him! Has he not seen through the emptiness of speculation, the deadening dogmatism of ideas and systems? Does he not thirst for freedom? His yearning spirit is helplessly struggling to wrest itself free; now he strives to unravel the knots of dogmatic thinking that have fettered mankind, now he enthusiastically tells of the short-lived breakthroughs achieved by one or another, Nietzsche or Dostoevsky, Ibsen or Tolstoy, and about their lamentable return to the cage. With poison in one's blood, with exhaustion in one's bones, one cannot regain liberty. Faith, and love, and inspiration, everything that can liberate the spirit—everything in us is infected and sickly. Do you fondly imagine that on the soil piled with the blocks of century-old theories and systems, with the countless fragments of ancient, old, and new ideas, encumbered in disorder with the mausoleums of "spiritual values"—the indisputable values of faith, thought, art—that on such a soil there could grow mighty oaks and tender violets? Perhaps a withered and thorny shrub might grow on it, and the ivy of ruins.

But this is not what I wanted to speak about. You are right! I do not know at all and do not wish to know what man will encounter "beyond the bars of his abandoned prison," and I frankly confess my total indifference toward "the cause of carving out the path to freedom"; all this, my friend, is speculation, speculation once again. I am surfeited even with those theories that fill the air around me and my own reason. I am not interested in ratiocinations. I "simply," as you say, feel the urgent need of freedom for my spirit or consciousness, just as, probably, some Greek of the sixth century felt himself tormentingly fettered by the excessive plurality of the divinities of the Olympus, by their pretended qualities and claims, by the luxurious abundance of sanctified myths and religious rites—just as, perhaps, an Australian native suffocates in the stifling atmosphere of his confusing animism or totemism, lacking the inward strength to liberate himself from them. Beyond the bars of the prison this Greek perhaps dreamed of standing freely before one universal impersonal God whom his soul divined, and that Australian of the unconcern of the spirit not oppressed by fear, and of the free choice of a wife, unhampered by totemistic prohibitions. Neither one nor the other would have been able to voice his positive dream and hope.

He who wants to liberate himself sees only the barrier and pro-

claims only his negation; but he always struggles and negates "in the name" of something, a positive ideal has already matured in him, and it alone gives him the passion and strength to struggle. This ideal is indistinct and unexpressed: only such an ideal moves the will; a clearly realized and expressible ideal is not a system of barely alive, weakly motivating, distinct ideas—a product of disintegration. What do I want? I want freedom of consciousness and quest, I want the primordial freshness of spirit in order to go whither I please, along unbeaten paths, untrampled tracks, first because it would be pleasant, and second because—who knows?—on new paths we might find more. But no: chiefly because it is boring here, as in our sanatorium. I long for meadows and woods.

I not only want this—I firmly believe that it will be so; otherwise, whence comes this feeling in me? The genuineness and strength of my feeling are in my eyes a guarantee that it will be so. You know: from the reptiles came the birds; and my feeling is like the burning sensation and the itch on the shoulders of the amphibian when his wings began to sprout. The confused dream of that Greek and that Australian were divinations and heralds of the freedom that materialized centuries later. Perhaps after his original freedom man needed to go through a long period of discipline, dogma, and law, in order once again to come out into freedom as a changed being: this may be so. But woe to the generations to whose lot fell the intermediate stage—the way of culture. Culture is disintegrating from within—this we see clearly, and it hangs down in rags from the exhausted spirit. Whether liberation will come about in this form, or whether it will break out in a catastrophe, as it did twenty centuries ago, I do not know, and of course I myself shall not enter the promised land.

VII.

To M. O. Gershenzon:

"There is no motion, said the bearded sage. . . ." His interlocutor replied by giving him the symbolic advice to prove the justness of his opinion by experience—"and before his eyes began to walk." Needless to say, the first was not a cripple either; he, too, could move his legs, but did not attach any value to the motions of his body because of unbelief in his own experience. A large part of your objections I ascribe to autosuggestion—to the impact of a

preconceived idea of a speculative order; the other part, to your unquenched hunger for life. In your words there is so much despair, and between the lines, in the inner ring and rhythm of the words, as well as in your characteristic vitality, there is so much youthful vigor, so much longing to experience the still unexplored, to wander on trackless paths, to embrace living nature, so much longing for play and valor and the virgin gifts of the generous earth—*tant de désir, enfin, de faire un peu l'école buissonnière*—that it would seem, my dear Doctor Faustus reincarnate, still trailing some of your old anxiety, that Mephistopheles, looking at you, would not at once have to lose all hope for success if it occurred to him to discover the appropriate temptations with which to lure one wearied by the burden of his faculties out of his jealously defended “corner” into the open, into a broad and free life. Naturally, he would have to invent subtler tactics, and refrain from showing you an enchanting feminine image—it would be more effective, after another reminder that theory is gray while the golden tree of life is eternally green, to begin with little flowers in a pure glade and virgin groves of trees.

Naturally, too, the “open” would once again prove to be, at the end of a new series of adventures, a prison without exit. Perhaps the last of Faust’s temptations would prove to be the first of yours—the canals, and the new world, and the illusion of a free land for the liberated people. After all, there is no limit to the number of two-dimensional drawings and designs that can be traced on a horizontal surface. The essential thing is that it is horizontal. But I am no Mephistopheles, and that is why I do not want to lure you anywhere. The whole meaning of my discourses is the affirmation of a vertical line that can be traced from any point, from any “corner” lying on the surface of any culture at all, young or senile. But for me, culture itself, in its true meaning, is not at all a surface, nor a plain of ruins or a field strewn with bones. There is also something truly sacred in it: it is memory of not only the earthly and external face of the ancestors but also of the initiations that they attained. A living, eternal memory, which does not die in those who partake of these initiations! For these were given by the fathers for their most distant descendants, and not one iota of the once newly written characters, engraved on the tablets of the indivisible human spirit, will pass

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A CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN TWO CORNERS

(continued from p. 965)

away. In this sense, culture is not only monumental, but also initiatory in spirit. For memory, its supreme ruler, makes its true servants partake in the "initiations" of the forefathers, and renewing these in them, communicates to them the energy of new beginnings, new exploits. Memory is dynamic beginning; oblivion is weariness and cessation of motion, decline and return to a condition of relative inertia. Like Nietzsche, let us alertly observe ourselves to discover whether the poisons of decline, the infection of "decadence," are not in us too.

What is decadence? The feeling of subtlest organic union with the monumental tradition of a high culture accompanied with the arrogant and burdensome awareness that we are the last of the line. In other words, it is a benumbed memory, which has lost its power of initiative, no longer enabling us to partake in the initiations of the forefathers and no longer releasing impulses of essential initiative—it is the knowledge that prophecies are no more, as is indicated in the title that the decadent Plutarch gave to one of his works, namely, "On the Decline of Oracles." All that our poor friend Lev Shestov is doing is to write a long and complex treatise on the same subject. The spirit no longer speaks to decadent men with its former voice, only the soul of bygone epochs speaks to him; in his spiritual impoverishment he turns exclusively to the psyche, he becomes wholly a psychologist and sees everything in psychological terms. Will he understand Goethe's creed that "Truth has been acquired long ago and has united the high community of spiritual minds. Endeavor to learn it, this old truth"?

For the psychologist, it is only more psychology. At least he suspects everything spiritual and objective of being psychological and subjective. And I recall another saying of Goethe's —Faust's words about Wagner: "He digs in the earth seeking the golden fruit, and rejoices when he finds a dew worm." Is not this like our friend who longs for the water of life, and who carries out his psychological searches and discovers the futility of theories? He should be left to his demon: let the dead bury the dead. To believe him means to allow dry rot to enter into one's spirit. This of

course does not diminish our love for him, our tender pity for him and his work as a tragic and living gravedigger. We shall believe in the life of the spirit, in sainthood and initiations, in the invisible saints around us, in the countless united throng of wrestling souls, and we shall courageously walk farther, without looking about us or glancing backward, without measuring the way, without heeding to the voices of weariness and inertia that mutter about "poison in the blood," about "exhaustion in the bones."

One can be a gay wanderer on earth without leaving one's native town, and become poor in spirit without wholly forgetting all learning. We have long ago recognized that the understanding is a subordinate tool and servant of the will, useful to life like any of the body's lower organs; and the theories that saturate it, to use your words, can be given away to others as we give away useless books. But in the name of Goethe's "old truth" we shall deeply inhale the life-giving essence of these theories, these religions, their spirit and logos, their initiatory energy—and thus, carefree and curious, like strangers, we shall pass by the innumerable altars and idols of monumental culture, partly lying desolate, and partly restored and redecorated, stopping at will and sacrificing at the forgotten places wherever we discover unfading flowers invisible to others, flowers that have sprung up from an ancient grave.

V. I.

VIII.

To V. I. Ivanov:

You are a siren, my friend—your letter of yesterday is charming. It gave me the feeling that culture herself, personified, was cunningly tempting me with her riches and lovingly warning me against breaking with her. Yes, I cannot resist her voice—am I not her son? Not a prodigal son, as you think, but, what is even harder to endure, the son of a prodigal mother. Your diagnosis, my dear doctor, is decidedly incorrect; it is time that I should express myself more clearly. I do not want at all to turn mankind back to the philosophy and existence of the Fiji islanders, nor do I by any means want to unlearn writing and to expel the Muses; I dream not of little flowers in a clear glade. It seems to me that Rousseau too, who disturbed Europe with his dream, did not dream of a *tabula rasa*; this would have been a stupid, empty dream that could not have caught anyone's imagination.

This time you have formulated the basic issue of our dispute. Until now you have thought that, bored by the external achievement of culture, I was spitefully preparing to throw out the baby with the bath.

No, no! I speak all the time of temptations of the spirit, of poison in the blood, in life itself; I speak precisely of the most precious achievements brought about in the course of thousands of years of experience, of what you call the genuine initiations of the forefathers, of objective and indisputable truth—and I say that this very life source of spiritual existence is poisoned and no longer gives life to the soul but deadens it.

What is in question is precisely the dynamism of discovered truth, its power to bring forth initiations of the spirit. You write: "For memory, its supreme ruler, makes its servants partake in the initiations of the forefathers, and renewing these initiations in them, gives them the strength for new beginnings, new exploits." O if only this were so! But it was so once—and ceased to be. It came to pass that the revelations of truth bringing light to the ancestors have changed into mummies, into fetishes, and no longer plunge into the soul like a blissfully destructive charge but bury it under the granite blocks and rubble of disintegrated ideas. Objective truth both is and is not; it exists in reality only as a way, a direction, but not as a ready-made datum, that can and must be appropriated, following the words of Goethe, which you quote. If it were true that "truth has long ago been acquired," then of course life would not be worth living. In the initiations of the forefathers, not their content is precious, because the content of any truth discovered by man is relative, and to the same extent false and transient; what is precious is only their methodology, if this term is proper here. You should know better than anyone that every expression of the truth is symbolic—that it is only a sign, a sound that dispels inertia and moves us to turn our eyes in the direction whence it comes. Speaking of truth as a constant initiator, you depict human existence not as it is but precisely as I would like to see it. I say this: that the initiations of the forefathers have become petrified, have turned into despotic values which by tempting and intimidating us, reduce the individual spirit to a resigned and even voluntary submission to them, or, by enveloping the spirit in a fog, veil our sight. But I wrote about this once before:

Everyone knew that Napoleon was not born an Emperor. A simple woman seeing him from the crowd during some splendid parade, might have thought: 'now he is the Emperor who almost lost his personal name, he is the ruler of nations—yet in his swaddling clothes he was nothing to the world, only another child of his mother's.'—Similarly, when I stand in a museum before a famous painting, I think to myself the artist painted it for himself, and in the act of creation it was inseparable from him—he was in it and it in him; yet now it has been elevated to the world throne, as an objective value."

Everything that is objective is conceived in the individual and originally belongs only to him. Whatever value is in question, its biography comprises the same three phases that Napoleon went through: first, it is nothing for the world, then it is a warrior and leader on the battlefield, finally a ruler. And just like Napoleon in Ajaccio, a value is free and true only in childhood, when born unknown it plays, grows, and suffers in freedom, without attracting anyone's covetous glances. "Hamlet" flowered only once in the complete fulness of its truth—within Shakespeare, and the Sistine Madonna with Raphaël. Then the world draws these flowering values into its everyday battles. In the world no one needs their fulness. The world has felt in the value the original force with which its creator endowed it, and wants to exploit this force for its own needs; its relation to the value is dictated by greed, and greed is always specific. Therefore, the value always becomes differentiated when it is in general use, it disintegrates into particular forces, special meanings which do not contain its fulness and therefore, its essence.

Just as men need an oak not in its natural state, but sawed up in parts, so they cherish a value only in the fragmentation of its essence, as a multiple utility. Finally this utility becomes a generally accepted value, and the value receives the royal crown. The crowned value is cold and cruel, and in the course of years it completely petrifies, turns into a fetish. Its features no longer show even a trace of that free and open energy which its face once breathed. It has served so many passions, high and low! One wanted a bucket, another a rainfall, and it satisfied everyone, confirming each in his false, subjective truth. Now it autocratically dictates its laws to the world, heedless of individual prayers. What was alive and individual, immersed in, and fed on, one man's blood, now becomes an idol, which demands that living people, similar to what it itself was when it came into the world, be sacrificed to it. Napoleon as emperor and a painting enthroned in a museum are equally despotic.

In addition to fetish values, concrete and tangible, there are vampire values, the so-called abstract values, something like legal persons in the realm of values. They are fleshless and invisible; they are formed by means of abstraction from concrete values, because the law of cohesion operates in the spiritual as well as in the physical world, where the vapors from the earthly reservoirs gather into clouds. By way of abstraction from many Hamlets and Sistine Madonnas there arose a general value—Art; and in the same manner all the rest of them were born—Property and Morality, the State, the Nation, the Church, Religion, Culture, and many, many others—all of them from the emanations of the best blood of the most ardent human hearts. And each of them

has its cult, its priests and its faithful. The priests speak with conviction to the masses about the "interests" and "needs" of the worshipped value and demand sacrifices for the sake of its prosperity. The State thirsts for power, the Nation for unity, Industry for development, and so on; thus, although phantoms themselves, they actually rule the world, and the more abstract a value, the more voracious and ruthless it is. Perhaps we can speak of the last war as only an unprecedented hecatomb, which a few conceptualized values, having concluded an alliance among themselves, demanded of Europe through the intermediary of their priests.

Yet in each abstract value, however its insatiable belly may have swelled, there gleams a spark of the divinity which can arouse our emotions. In it each individual unconsciously venerates the sanctity of some ineradicable aspiration that he has in common with all men; and it is only through this living feeling that the value is strong. Whether I eat to gratify my hunger, or whether I cover my nakedness, or pray to God—my business is only mine, it is so simple and personal. And now my personality is given social status, is elevated into impersonality, and from there still higher, into the empyrean of the superpersonal principles, and lo and behold, the single feeling finds itself included in a most complex hierarchically centralized order; the simple prayer has been lost in the boundless gigantic structure of Theology, Religion, the Church. What was a need of my heart, has been declared my sacred duty, has been taken from my hands as something beloved, and placed above me, as an anointed sovereign.

The poor heart, like a mother, loves its offspring even in the tyrant, but she also weeps obeying his impersonal will. And there comes a moment when love conquers submissiveness: the mother overthrows the tyrant in order once again to embrace him as a son. That is how Luther with his ardent heart destroyed the cult, the theology, the papal Church, in order to liberate simple personal faith from a complicated system. Likewise the French Revolution dispelled the mysticism of the throne and placed the individual man in a more direct and intimate relation to authority. And now a new rebellion is shaking the earth—this is the truth of labor and possession striving to free itself from age-old complications, from the monstrous fetters of social and abstract ideas.

Mankind still has a long way to go. Lutheran Christianity, the Republic, and Socialism have done only half the task; we still have to create conditions under which individuality can once again become completely individual, as it was born. However, the past has not been in vain. Man will return to his origin transformed, because his sub-

jectivity, having become a universal and objective value, for long years flowered in its eternal truth there, on the heights. What is taking place is phylogeny in reverse, so to speak: having reached its peak, the movement is now retracing its steps, following the same way as the one it ascended, stage after stage. That is why each revolution is a rebirth of the old: the monarchy is supplanted by a common council—parliament; parliamentarianism will yield its place to a still earlier form—federation, and so it will go on until we reach the original point of departure. But the old forms are now animated by a new spirit. The community in ascent was poor, chaotic, and closed; in descent it is harmoniously organized and infused with a general meaning. As for the starting point to which everything must return, it is individuality. Individuality will contain in itself all the acquired fulness. Centuries will pass, and faith once again will be simple and personal, labor will be joyous individual creation, and property will be intimate communion with the object; but faith, and labor, and property will be immutable and sacred within the individual, and outside they will be immeasurably enriched, like a tree grown from a seed. I repeat, the task now is to make it possible for individuality once again to become truly individual, and yet be experienced as universal; that man, like Mary, should recognize in each of his manifestations both his child and God.

However, values are not yet everything; against values one can fight. But how can one fight against those poisons of culture, which have entered into our blood and infected the very sources of spiritual life? There are nets of theories, made of steel, woven by centuries of experience; they captivate the reason imperceptibly and surely; there are the well-trodden paths of consciousness where laziness insinuates itself; there is the routine of thinking and the routine of conscience, there is the routine of perception, there are the stereotypes of feeling and the countless clichés of speech. They lie in wait for spiritual seeds at the very moment of conception, envelop them at once and, as though in amorous embrace, lure them on to well-beaten tracks. Finally, there are the countless results of knowledge, terrible in their multiplicity and inexorableness; they inundate the mind, establishing themselves within it as objective truth without waiting till hunger summons those among them which are really needed; and the spirit, crushed by their weight, withers in its overcrowded quarters, powerless either to appropriate them in an authentic manner or to expel them. Consequently, I speak not of freedom from theory, but of freedom of theory, or more accurately, of freedom, directness, and freshness of contemplation—so that the wisdom of the fathers should not intimidate the faint-hearted, that it should not encour-

age inertia and dim the horizons, that a new sensibility and new thought should come into being, a sensibility and thought that will not immediately petrify in each of their achievements but will remain forever plastic, freely moving in infinity. Then there will appear those gay wanderers, men poor in spirit, carefree and curious, about whom you speak; at present they do not exist or merely seem to exist; at present no one passes, like a stranger, *by* the altars and idols, but you too, my friend, without knowing it, sacrifice on many altars and unconsciously worship idols, for the poison, I say, is in our blood. And I do not want to rivet mankind to the horizontal plane—it is you who write: “Let us advance, without looking around and without measuring the way.” What I say is: individuality on this plane is the vertical line along which a new culture must rise.

M. G.

IX.

To M. O. Gershenzon:

The dialogue between us is becoming difficult; it has turned into an argument, which incidentally should not have happened. By nature, my dear friend, you are a monologist. You cannot be lured onto the paths of dialectic; for you, logic is not a law. You are not interested in your self-contradictions, a list of which I could present to you as others present bills, if my taste did not advise me to refrain from this type of attack on the inward, *psychic* sense of your confessions. Still, after all, we agreed that truth must not become compulsive. What then is left to me? To sing and play on my reed pipe? “We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced, we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented”—thus the children of the parable in the Gospels call unto their fellows, but we consider that we are no longer children. “Well sung,” you will say with a kind smile to the singer, and continue past him on your way. “Happy journey to the promised land”—one feels like calling after you, for you yourself mention it; and it is the promised land, of course, that you rave about—its grapes and fig trees (“they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree,” as is said in the Bible), its abundant pastures and cool springs, but where it is and how it is exactly—perhaps it lies beyond this phenomenal world—you do not seem to want to know: all that you desire is to reach it (for one must absolutely reach it, that is why it is the “promised” land) or at least behold it from Mount Nebo, for the “triple image of perfection” shines in it. And you will not exchange your nomadic restlessness and your burning thirst for cool water—the ancient thirst born of forty years of

wandering in the wilderness—for the flesh pots of Egypt, and her temples, pyramids, and mummies, and for all the Egyptian wisdom and initiations. Like Moses, you have tasted of this wisdom, of these initiations, and yet you would forget everything; you hate Egypt—you have come to feel aversion for the mummified “culture” with its wisdom that does not quench *your* thirst.

What a difference between you and Nietzsche, whose burden, which is as alien to you as is all Egypt, you were consistent in not attempting to lift on your shoulders, which even without it are excessively loaded by the burden of spiritual values and monuments. Wherefore would you undertake hand in hand with him the dangerous pilgrimage into the cavern of the Sphinx, whose singing riddle (“who and what are you, stranger?”—Oedipus answered: “a man . . .”) strikes up a special, different melody for each one who presents himself. Of course, Nietzsche’s problem is your problem: culture and individuality, value, decline and health, especially health. And hardly any initiation of individuality in our present cultural milieu can take place without the “initiate’s” (as the theosophists say) meeting him as “the guardian of the threshold.”

Nietzsche said: “Man is something that must be ‘transcended’”—and thereby once more testified that the road of the liberation of the individual is a road to the heights and depths, a movement along a vertical line. Again an obelisk, again a pyramid! “Possible, quite possible!”—you hurriedly dismiss the question, for your loins are girded; and your ardent eyes measure the horizons of the wilderness—“first of all, I must get out of here, out of Egypt.”

If you had been at any time and even if only in part a Nietzschean, you would have felt that in man, culture’s beast of burden, who exhibits the shape of a camel (the simile is Nietzsche’s, the pathos is yours) lion’s claws cut through; you would have perceived how there awakens in him the elemental desert-like hunger of the predatory animal, which compels him to tear into pieces something alive, something heretofore feared, and to taste of its blood. This living and blood-filled “something” is called in the abstract language of the New Egypt, in its priestly books, “values”: for they are wondrously vital and alive, since, as you have said, mankind has saturated them with its living blood, and breathed its fiery soul into them, although they sit motionless, on their thrones, as “graven images, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” But Nietzsche is not only a wrecker, a blood-drinker, and a psychopage: he is a legislator. Even before becoming the “Youth” that, according to his forecast, the lion must turn into, he breaks the

tablets of the old values in order to trace new characters on new tablets, *unque leonis*. He wants to give a new testament to the same old Egypt—to “transvaluate” the same heathen family inheritance. He joins the community of the great carvers of the ideal; the iconoclast, the image breaker becomes an image painter. But what is this to you—you thirst for cool water, not for hot blood; for you are only a wanderer in the desert not at all a beast of prey; and in Egypt itself you are not at all a wrecker, but perhaps only—faced by the inquisitional tribunal of the priests—a sower of suspicion, doubt, disintegration; and it is not to your liking to legislate, and in point of fact there is nothing to be transvaluated, for your own valuations would essentially, in their very core, perhaps coincide with the recognized values; but for some reason you must begin with a supposed dethronement and dramatic abrogation of the latter.

Perhaps it seems to you that if values are to be revived they must first be killed—that they are not immortal gods if they do not withstand the ordeal of death. I think that you are motivated by a deep and secret impulse, diametrically opposed to those impulses which throughout the past centuries determined all the creation of idols in the world that the Scriptures call the heathen world. The genius of paganism projected its noblest part into a transcendental image or an invisible but transcendental idea—a suprasensual image—and objectified its highest part into a symbol, a likeness, an icon, a graven image; and even “on the shoals of history,” as you like to say, in the century of Kant and the definitive enclosure and immuring of the spirit by reflection into the solitary well of individual personality, it strove to save “the idea” as “the regulative idea” in man’s rational consciousness. You, without realizing it, are a typical representative of another, equally ancient and always iconoclastic impulse, to absorb the idea in the twilight of the unconscious. You do not need the “regulative idea”—whether transcendent or immanent, it is always an idea;—in itself it oppresses you despotically; what you need is a regulative instinct. You know and want God not in the visible sky nor in man’s invisible skies, but in the fiery soul of the living creature, in the breath of its life, in the pulsation of its veins.

I repeat, a hoary old time, no less ancient than the hieroglyphs of Egypt, is with you in this thought. I recall my verses about primitive man who did not fear death as we fear it:

*Ancient man, thou art mightier than we—
Because before inexorable fate
Thou didst not lower thy youthful eyes.*

Did he believe in the immortality of the soul? If he did, this faith was to him neither a comfort nor a hope; on the contrary, it must have enveloped him in the deepest gloom.

*But while within him stark despair crushed
His mind, and the darkness of the Hospitable Temple
Filled his dream with fright—
In his sinews ripened energy like the sun
And as it fed his arteries with joyous life,
"I am immortal" sang his very blood.*

This is genuine belief in immortality, is it not? From all your premises it follows that the first perfect and true ideal is the instinct with its immanent theology (for it is in accord with nature). That is why you have no wish to make use of "the freedom of speculation" that he nevertheless demanded—and, faithful to yourself, you begin our present correspondence with the declaration that "about things such as God and immortality, one must neither speak nor think."

Excuse this typological exploration of your psychic and intellectual structure. *Amico licet*. But can one answer differently to him who declining the devices of persuasion (except one, and perhaps, the strongest—the beauty of words) proclaims *hoc volo*—such is my will, such is my thirst; and *ut sentio sitioque, ita sapio*. We must still investigate the sources of the will and the nature of the thirst. But such an examination would be insufficient, if we failed to locate the investigated will as an essential phenomenon, connected with the general change that we are experiencing.

What then is taking place in our day? Is it the abrogation of cultural values in general? Or their disintegration, which bears witness to their complete or partial paralysis? Or, finally, the transvaluation of the former values? However that may be, the values of yesterday are deeply shaken, and you are virtually one of those who rejoice in the earthquake, for according to you, if the old Egypt is not destroyed, the image of perfection that once illumined the cradle of each of its creations will remain buried forever in the inner vaults, under the wind-swept blocks of the pyramids. However, it seems that history is not being made under your banner, but stubbornly insists upon remaining history, a new page in the annals of cultured Egypt.

We shall not consider the accidental, unpredictable, irrational element in the course of events; let us cast a glance at the state of men's minds. The anarchistic tendencies are not the prevalent ones: they seem essentially to be correlate and shadow of the bourgeois order. The so-called conscious proletariat stands entirely on the ground of cul-

tural continuity. The fight is waged not for the abrogation of the values of the cultural past, but for something that looms before men's minds as a supreme task—the revitalization in it of everything that has an objective and timeless significance—and for their transvaluation in the nearest future. The lion who has come out of the depths and leapt upon the accepted values has not arisen from the camel, and he is not only a beast of prey, but as Nietzsche also conceived of him, he is the lion-man, to whom “nothing human is alien.” And now, in accordance with the prototype given by Nietzsche, he is breaking the old tablets of the Law and trying to scratch new laws on new tablets, *unq̄ue leonis*.

I think that in doing this he will uselessly spoil a considerable number of marble slabs and eternal bronze; but I also think that some unique and deep trace of the lion's claws will never be erased from the monuments of our ancient Egypt. Moreover, what is in question is not the content of the new “twelve tablets,” but the method of dealing with values. The method of the revolution which has driven you and me, physically weary and exhausted, into a communal sanatorium where we talk about health, is predominantly a historical and social, and even a political method, and not a utopian and anarchistic, that is, an individual one, a method of those who remain and are settled, not of those who run away and are nomadic—in so far, I will add, as we do not at present touch upon the questions of spiritual ascent, of growth along the vertical line, where all rights and duties are taken over by the principle of individuality, the unique and irreplaceable human individual.

However, now we have again come close to its sacred circle. I maintain that individuality—the spirit that animates it—contains both Mount Nebo and the Promised Land itself. You oppose individuality and value, comparing Napoleon's mother who nursed him, with the same mother estranged and observing a son who, from the throne of deadening glory, now appears to her as a magnificent and cold sarcophagus of past life, past love. My friend, the deepest aspiration of the human will was well expressed by the Pharaohs who considered it their main task to erect a tomb worthy of themselves. Everything that is living desires not only self-preservation, but also self-revelation, knowing in its inmost being that the latter is self-exhaustion, self-destruction, death—and perhaps eternal memory. The wish to leave some trace after one has passed, to turn life into a monument of value, to disappear and to be preserved in the living cult of the principle that animates us—this is the source of the age-old human “aretaism,” as the Hellenes, the Dorians, called their categorical imperative of active valor. The ini-

tiation of mankind into the higher mysteries revealed to it still another divine and human face of the same aspiration for death in the name of life: truth, love, beauty, strive to be eucharistic: "eat my flesh and drink my blood; for my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed." Not Bonaparte's mother before her son's throne, but Mary before the Cross is the symbol of the heart before the great truth of the universal value. The value must be crucified, and put into the coffin, and have a stone rolled over it, and be sealed with seals: the heart will see it resurrected on the third day.

But here unexpectedly your voice joins mine, and both of us, in love and common hope, together prophesy not with my, but with your words about this, that the longing of the heart and the will of the mind will be fulfilled, "that the individual should once again become truly individual and yet be experienced as universal, that man, like Mary, should recognize in each of his manifestations both his child and God."

V. I.

X.

To V. I. Ivanov:

I find the spectacle amusing: you treat me as a doctor treats a patient; my illness distresses you as a friend, scares you as a member of society, and even irritates you. From the beginning your diagnosis has been wrong, and you are surprised at the ineffectiveness of your remedies. You try to conjure away my feeling by arguments based on history and reason, and blame my stubbornness for your failure. It would be just as effective for a father to warn his son that the girl he loves will not bring him happiness; just as effective to assure a thirsty man that he should not drink water, that it would be better for him to suffer, because his thirst is illusory and will soon pass. And I do not at all refuse to discuss your numerous arguments, and oppose at least one argument that methodologically encompasses them all. Heraclitus said: "It is difficult to fight against the heart; for each of its desires must be bought at the price of a soul"; following his example I say: historical reason, in its judgments about culture, is naturally disposed to glorify it. If you think it necessary to analyze the nature of my thirst, I am no less entitled to define the cause of your satiety.

And now I come to your remarks on Nietzsche. Once again you are mistaken, my good doctor. I read little of Nietzsche—he was not to my taste; and now I realize that my "pathos," as you call it, is not identical with but contrary to his pathos. He, being ill himself, found it possible to formulate a prognosis of the illness of culture, and on

the basis of this prognosis, to legislate to the future. The man of culture is supposed to beget a lion, and the lion later to beget a child—"Become lions as soon as possible, be daring, tear others to pieces." But it seems that after the terrible war of 1914-1918 it is difficult to speak of the birth of lions. This war showed that in the civilized, educated man of our time there was maturing a predatory and bloodthirsty beast—true, but this beast is not a lion at all, and that is why I have very little hope that he will ever beget a child. No, it does not behoove us to write laws for the future. It will be enough if we succeed in realizing that we are sick and need a cure; this is the beginning of a possible recovery. And Nietzsche is strong only in his cries of pain.

It seems to me that throughout your reasonings there sounds one basic note: filial respect for history. You are averse to condemning it; you reverently accept everything it has created, and you are horrified by my bold rebellion against it. But in one of your preceding letters you spoke with conviction about man's original sin, referring evidently to the sin of schism and of disintegration into closed, self-asserting individualities. Consequently, you admit that man's will is to a certain extent free to determine his existence in one way or another. Then why are you offended by my assertion that contemporary culture is the result of an error, that modern man has followed a false path and wandered into a jungle from which he cannot find his way out. To be sure, history has been rational throughout, that is, everything that took place can be explained; but an explanation is not an evaluation. The deer developed antlers by virtue of an inherent law, as a means of self-defense and intimidation of his enemies; but in some species of deer the antlers reached such a size that they impeded the animal in his flight through the woods, and the species died out.

Is not the situation of culture the same? Are not our "values" something like these antlers—at first the result of individual adaptation, then the general possession of the race, and finally a burden and impediment that has grown enormously, and become tormenting, even fatal for the individual?

Yes, you are right: Your logic is not law for me. The truth of history is not consecrated at any point; it is a truth in process of creation, tested and verified by each separate individual. My own individuality, having tested it by its feeling, says to it: you are a lie, I cannot worship you. I say to Perun: * you are a wooden idol, not God; I feel God

* An idol of pre-Christian Russia—Trans.

as invisible and omnipresent; but you are trying to assure me that this statue is a symbol of my deity, and that once I have fully grasped its significance, it will entirely replace God for me. And although you reveal its symbolic nature to me in a very interesting, very profound way—I am ready to listen to you endlessly, I am almost convinced by you—its appearance is so terrifying and so repulsive to my feeling that I cannot control myself. I remember all the sacrifices that we offered to it, I think of the heavy, bloody sacrifices I will have to offer to it from day to day according to the instructions of its priests. No, no! This is not God! *My God*, the invisible one, makes no demands, nor does he frighten or crucify. He is my life, my movement, freedom, my genuine will. That is what I meant when I told you that my thirst turns away from the warm and spicy drinks of contemporary philosophy, art, and poetry, that only cold spring water can quench it. And in our existence there is no longer any water of life; all the springs have been enclosed in reservoirs, their water captured into mile-long pipes, then filtered and sterilized; finally this half-dead liquid is subject to city processing; we drink either boiled water, or complicated beverages of all sorts of tastes, colors, and odors. In the midst of these luxurious containers of thick and warm philosophy, of hot and aromatic poetry, one can die of thirst without finding a swallow of cool water.

Forgive me this protracted metaphor: it is so hot these days, and nowhere can I find refreshment; I drink and drink warm boiled water, I have drunk all the water in our decanter, and still I have not quenched my thirst. That, no doubt, is why I have been writing about thirst. I recall how on just such a hot day, many years ago, I drank spring water from a pitcher at a shady spot in a woods near Kuntsev. The air was cool, and it was delightful to drink the pure spring water. Even if by the will of fate, by the order of culture, I am living in the city, resting in a sanatorium, in a stuffy room with a window giving on a wall, drinking repulsive overboiled water, and chasing swarms of flies, can I help recalling that there are woods and cool places, can I help longing for them? And there is something else, and not the least important:

*If only our hard fate would spare
The children, and not recur!*

The logic of abstract thought does not affect my feeling; but the logic of history, which superstitiously bows before history, is just as incapable of conquering it. You marshal against me not only the inherent rationality of the past, but also its continuation—the events of the present day—as the ultimate and decisive argument. You summon

me to open my eyes to the revolution now in progress; its slogan is not the abrogation of the values of past culture; on the contrary, it wants to make them the possession of all; it is not a rebellion against culture, but a struggle for culture, and "the proletariat stands entirely on the ground of cultural continuity." True, but what of it? What we see now is the proletariat taking the accumulated values out of the hands of the few into its own hands. But we do not know at all what it sees in these values, nor for what purpose it is seizing them. Perhaps it sees in them only the instrument of its age-old enslavement, and it needs not to own them, but only to wrest them from the hands of the exploiters? Or perhaps, after many years of enlightenment as a result of public education, the proletariat has come to believe in the claims of culture and imagines that it can enrich itself with cultural values; but who can tell? It may happen that when it takes these values in its hands, the proletariat will realize that, apart from chains and rubbish, there is nothing in them, and irked and disappointed, will throw them overboard and begin to create new, different values. Or perhaps it will trustfully lift them onto its shoulders and carry them on further, faithfully assuming the burden of "the cultural heritage." But in using the old values it will unconsciously suffuse them with a new spirit, and within a relatively short time, their molecular structure will be so renewed that they will be unrecognizable.

It is possible (and this is what I actually think) that at present, in struggling for possession of the values of culture, it is being misled; it thinks it needs them as such, while in actual fact it needs them only as a means for new achievements. Such is the unusual self-deception of our will. Man creates the airplane, thinking only of its technical usefulness—I will fly quickly or send Stock Exchange news from New York to Chicago; and he does not know that his spirit has moved him to build wings not at all for the sake of his earthly goals, but on the contrary, to enable him to wrest himself free from the earth and to soar above it; that secretly the hope and faith concerning possible ascent to other worlds have already matured in him, and that the airplane is only the weak beginning of the fulfilment of this dream that has already taken roots and confidence in him—some day I will fly for ever and vanish into the ether without leaving a trace!

Thus in ancient times man flashed out the first spark from a flint, having realized that darkness is not inevitable and that he had the power to conquer it, while today by merely pressing a button we change night into day. The conscious design does not reveal the genuine goal; the spirit conceives goals in itself and communicates to consciousness

only the direction of the first step, then the second step, and so on. Only the spirit knows the direction of the path as a whole; hence consciousness feels deceived after each step. Wundt named this phenomenon the heterogeneity of goals: the goal set by consciousness on the road of realization is displaced or supplanted by another, completely alien to the first; and so link after link; the intended short straight line turns out to be curved—this is the spirit that imperceptibly and irresistibly bends the walker's steps toward its own dream, unknown to reason. What we see now in the Revolution does not tell anything about the long-range calculation and design with which the spirit called it into being.

M. G.

XI.

To M. O. Gershenzon:

My dear friend, have we not sufficiently compromised ourselves, each in his own way—I by my mysticism, and you by your anarchistic utopianism and cultural nihilism, as the two attitudes would be defined and condemned by the “compact majority” (the term is Ibsen's) of contemporary meetings and assemblies? Should we not each go to our corner and stay quiet on our beds? “How can your heart express itself? How can another understand you? Will he grasp what makes you live? Each uttered thought is but a lie.” I do not like to abuse this sad confession of Tiutchev's*[†]; I like to think that it voices not an eternal truth but the basic lie of our dismembered and disintegrated cultural epoch, which is powerless to give birth to a consciousness, an epoch that realizes the next to the last consequences of the age-old sin of “individuation,” which has poisoned the whole historical life of mankind, all culture.

We strive to overcome this fatal principle every day and every hour by the uninterrupted creative process carried on in little and big cults—every cult is catholic while it is alive, even if it attracts only three or two devotees—and catholicity flashes up for a moment and dies out again, and the multi-headed hydra of culture torn by inner dissonance cannot change into a harmonious cult. Nevertheless, the thirst for unity must not tempt us to yield and compromise, i.e., to establish an external and sham bond where the very roots of consciousness and, so to speak, the arteries of our spiritual beings have not become woven into one net. In the depth of depths, which is unattainable to us, all of us

* The quotation is from *Silentium* by F. I. Tiutchev (1803-1873), one of the major Russian poets of the nineteenth century.—Trans.

make up a universal system of blood circulation that feeds the single heart of mankind. But we must not steal a march on sensibility, which is given us only as a distant and obscure foreboding, and substitute fictitious likeness for the hidden sacred reality. You and I have not a common cult. It seems to you that oblivion liberates and gives life, and that cultural memory enslaves and deadens; I maintain that it is memory that liberates, and that it is oblivion that enslaves and deadens. I speak of the road upward, and you tell me that the wings of the spirit are overlaid and have forgotten how to fly. "Let us go away," you say, and I answer: "There is no place to go; displacement of a body on a plane does not change the nature of the plane nor of the moving body." Once I wrote:

*To you, the ancestral trees
And cemeteries overcrowded;
To us, free nomadic space—
This was the judgment of Beauty.*

*Betrayal every day
A new camp every day*

But at this point the truthful Muse compelled the poet, in rebellion against cultural tradition, to add:

*The wanderer's illusion
Of hopeless captivity.*

O for the sake of the cult one ought to leave the settled places and the trees of the ancestors:

*Brothers, let us leave for the dusk of sacred groves . . .
The staff of exile is light to the children of gods,
The flowering staff of new love.*

Broad is the flower-bearing earth and there are many clear glades.

*They await our lingering lips
The dithyrambic unison of our feet*

This *will* be some day, my dear friend, although as yet there are no signs of such a transformation. Culture will be transformed into a cult of God and Earth. But this will be a miracle of Memory—mankind's primal memory. Intrinsically culture is not uniform, just as eternity is not single, just as the composition of human individuality is multiform.

*Seas are moving within the deep sea, some to dawns,
and some to sunsets;
Above, the waves aspire to noon; below to midnight;
Many currents stream in many channels in the dark deep
And subterranean rivers roll in the purple ocean.*

In culture, too, there is a hidden movement that carries us toward the primal sources of life. There will be an epoch of great, joyous, and all-attaining return. Then cool springs will break forth from between the old slabs, and rose bushes will bud from the gray tombs. But to hasten that day, we must go farther and farther, and not turn backward: a retreat would only show up the closing of the ring of eternity.

However, the majority of us Russians have always been run-aways. We itch to run, to run without looking back. I am absolutely averse to solving any difficulty by running away. I said before that the cultural "Egypt" was alien to you, like Nietzsche's *élan vital*. Almost to all our intelligentsia, taken in the exact and circumscribed meaning of a socio-historical category, Egypt is alien, and culture is slavery. And you, of course, are flesh of the flesh and bone of the bone of our intelligentsia, however much you may rebel against it. I myself am hardly so; rather I am half a son of the Russian land, but exiled from it, and half a stranger, one of the disciples of Saïs, where race and tribe are forgotten. *Oprostitsia*, to become simple, that is the magic word for our intelligentsia; in this longing is expressed all its uprootedness. It imagines that "to become simple" means to touch bottom, to strike roots in the earth. Such was Leo Tolstoy, who should logically attract you. Of a different stripe was Dostoevsky, who logically repels you. He did not want to "become simple"; yet what he wrote about gardens as the panacea of communal living, and about the education of children in the great garden of the future, and about the factory itself in the garden, is a program of social action spiritually right and historically correct, not a dream.

To become simple is treason, oblivion, flight, a cowardly and tired reaction. The idea of becoming simple is just as untenable in cultural life as in mathematics, which admits only "simplification." The latter is the reduction of a multiple complexity into a more perfect form of simplicity. Simplicity in the sense of a supreme crowning achievement is the overcoming of incompleteness by definitive completion, of imperfection by perfection. The way to this yearned for and lovable simplicity leads through complexity. It is conquered not by flight from a given milieu or country, but by ascent. At every place, I repeat and testify again—Bethel and Jacob's ladder—at every center of any horizon. This is the way of genuine and creatively active freedom; but empty is the freedom stolen through oblivion. And those who remember not their kin are runaway slaves or freemen, not freeborn. Culture is the cult of ancestors, and of course—this is obscurely realized even today—the resurrection of the fathers. The way of mankind is an increasingly sharper

self-awareness of man as "a forgotten and self-forgotten god." It is difficult to remind him of his being first-born; this is already forgotten by the savage. The philosophy of culture in the mouth of my Prometheus, is *my* philosophy:

. . . *To trade,
to practice art, wage war, and calculate,
to rule, to be a slave—so that
in the noise of days, in care, in lust,
in dreams one should forget the freedom
direct and whole of being. And the savage
will wander in the wilderness, sunk in gloom. . . .*

The savage or he who became like the savage, having become "simple" under the spell of oblivion, does not enjoy his empty freedom; he is gloomy and downcast.

And in order not to be "a downcast guest on dark earth" there is only one way—fiery death in the spirit. *Dixi*.

V. I.

XII.

To V. I. Ivanov:

You are angry: this is a bad sign. Irritated by my deafness you place me in the ranks of the "self-simplifiers" who do "not recall their kin" and you even abuse me as a member of the "intelligentsia" (while, shrewd as you are, you flatter yourself—a son of the Russian land, and in addition a disciple from Saïs!). What angers you most of all is that I stubbornly assert my *Sic volo*, and refuse to argue. But this is not true: I argue with you all the time. For instance, in your last letter you maintain two things: first, that culture itself in its further development will lead us to the primal sources of life; all that is needed is zealously to march forward—at the end of the road, you say, the desired light will shine forth, "cold springs will break forth from between the old slabs, and rose bushes will bud from the gray tombs," i.e., culture, which is at present worthless will in its ultimate dissolution re-acquire its pristine virginity.

To this I answer: I don't believe it, and I see no reason for thinking so; only a miracle transforms a sinner into Saint Mary Magdalene. Such is, you think, the one way—the spontaneous evolution of culture. But this forecast of yours is in contradiction with your second thesis—that every man should overcome culture by fiery death in the spirit. For either one of the two: if culture in its own development leads us un-deviatingly to God—I, an individual, need not bother; I can calmly con-

tinue my business of yesterday, lecture on the economic development of England in the Middle Ages, build a railroad from Tashkent to the Crimea, perfect the long-range gun and the technique of poison-gas production; I am even obliged to do it so that culture may advance along its prescribed road—so as to hasten its longed-for completion. In this case, the fiery death of individuality is not only useless, it is directly harmful, because an individuality consumed in flames and resurrected, by this very token leaves the ranks of cultural workers. I will remind you of your own verses:

*He who has known the anguish of earth's phenomena,
Knows their beauty,*

*He who has known the beauty of phenomena
Knows the dream of the Hyperborean:*

Voluptuously nursing

Peace and fulness in his heart

He calls for the endless blue and emptiness.

Now this is true: "he calls for the endless blue and emptiness." He will cease lecturing at once, and surely will never submit even a single report to the scientific society of which he was a member and, moreover, never again visit it. Let alone the fact that "fiery death in the spirit" is just as rare as the transformation of sinners into saints. How can you say that I don't argue? You see, I am arguing and disputing.

But I like these verses of yours. Apparently you, too, once knew my anguish and thirst, and then you quieted down, and talked your anguish away with sophisms about the ultimate transfiguration of culture and the ever-present possibility of personal salvation through the fiery death. As you are now piously accepting all history, we indeed have no common cult. Or, rather, there is something in common, as is proven by our very friendship that has lasted so many years. I live in a strange way, a double life. In contact with European culture since my childhood, I have deeply imbibed its spirit and have not only become wholly familiar with it, but also sincerely love a great deal in it—I love its cleanliness and comfort, I love science, the arts, poetry, Pushkin. I am at home in the cultural family, I speak eagerly with friends and acquaintances on cultural themes, and I am genuinely interested in these themes and the methods of developing them. Here I am with you: we have a common cult of serving in the cultural market place, we have common habits and a common language. Such is my daytime life. But in the depth of my consciousness I live differently. For many years a secret voice has been insistently and uninterruptedly speaking to me: this is not it, not it!

Another will in me turns always, with anguish, from culture, from everything that is being done and said around me. It finds all this boring and useless, like a struggle of phantoms rushing about in the void; it knows another world, foresees another life, such as are not yet on the earth, but that will be and cannot help being, because only in them will genuine reality be embodied; and I recognize this voice as the voice of my genuine self. I live like a foreigner who has become assimilated to a country not his own; I am liked by the natives and I like them in turn, I eagerly labor for their welfare, I suffer their sufferings and rejoice in their joys, but I know that I am a foreigner, and in secret I regret the fields of my homeland, its different seasons, the odor of its flowers and the speech of its women.

Where is my homeland? I shall not see it, I shall die in a foreign land. And sometimes I so passionately long for it! Then I do not need railroads and international politics; the disputes concerning philosophical systems and the quarrels among my friends about the transcendent and immanent God seem empty to me, empty and impeding my view, like dust raised on a road. But just as this stranger in a foreign land sometimes recognizes, with emotion, his homeland in the odor of a flower or the hue of a sunset, so I even here feel the beauty and freshness of the promised world. I feel it in the fields and in the woods, in the song of the birds and in the peasant following his plow, in the eyes of children and sometimes in their words, in the divinely kind smiles of women, in the sympathy of man for man, in sincere and unvenal simplicity, in an occasional word that glows or an unexpected line of poetry which pierces the darkness like a flash of lightning, and in many, many other things—especially in suffering. All these will be there too, all these are the flowers of homeland, crushed here by a dank, coarse and insipid vegetation.

You, my friend, are in your native land; your heart is where your house is, your sky is above this earth. Your spirit is not split, and this integrity fascinates me because, whatever its origin, it, too, is a flower of that land, our common land of the future. And that is why I think that in the house of our Father one dwelling is prepared for you and me, although here, on earth, we sit stubbornly each in our own corner, arguing about culture.

M. G.

(Translated from the Russian by Norbert Guterman)