

MESA

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NUMBER THREE

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CORRESPONDENCE
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CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN TWO CORNERS OF A ROOM

The following are six of twelve letters written in the summer of 1920 when the two friends Michael Gershenzon and Vyacheslav Ivanov shared a room in a recreation home "for workers in research and literature" in Moscow.

III

To Gershenzon

I am not a builder of philosophical systems, my dear Michael Ossipovich, but neither am I one of those affrighted souls who take anything that is put into words for a lie. For me "the forest of symbols" is an accustomed haunt, and symbolism in the word is no less clear to me than in the kiss of love. There is a verbal form to express inner experiences; they seek it and are homesick for it in its absence, for the full heart must overflow in speech. Human beings can offer one another no better gift than the convincingly luminous knowledge of their premonitions or beginnings (even if they are only that) of a higher, more spiritual consciousness. Still, one must guard against looking upon these communications, these confessions, as cogent, that is, against making them over to the intellect. Intellect is by nature coercive, but spirit blows where it listeth. Words must be of the spirit—symbols of the personality's inner experience, and truly children of freedom. As the poet's song moves rather than coerces, so they too must move the listeners' spirits, but not, like the demonstration of a theorem, subject them to specific convictions. Pride and lust for power are the faults of metaphysics, tragic faults, for once it had emerged from the womb of integral spiritual knowledge and left the paternal house of pristine religion it inevitably had to aspire to become learned and to long for the scepter of the great coercer—learning. And the mood that now governs and torments you so—the sharpened sense of the excessive weight of the cultural heritage that burdens us—results essentially from feeling culture not as a living treasury of gifts, but as a system of subtlest coercions. Small wonder: it was to precisely that—to become a compulsory system—that culture was aspiring. For me though, it is Eros' ladder and a hierarchy

of adorations. And around me are so many things and persons that fill me with awe—man and his tools, his great labors and his disparaged dignity, the mineral world even—that I find it sweet to sink into that sea (“naufragar m’è dolce in questo mare”)—to sink into God. For the things I worship are freely chosen, none are compulsory, all are freely accessible and all give happiness to my spirit. It is true that every reverence in turning into love lays bare with the sharp glance of love the inner tragedy and tragic fault of everything that separated itself from the sources of being and came to isolate itself in itself: beneath each rose of life the cross from which it flowered becomes discernible. But that is the longing for God—the desire of the moth-soul for death in the flame. Whoever does not know this inmost yearning is, in Goethe’s penetrating words, sick with another, desolate longing; even if he does not lay aside the mask of gaiety he is “a dismal guest upon the gloomy earth”. Our true freedom, our noblest joy and noblest suffering are always with us, and no culture can take them from us. The weakness of the flesh is more terrible, in that the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak; man is more defenseless against poverty and illness than against lifeless idols. He will not shake the hated yoke of a deadening heritage from his shoulders by forcibly getting rid of it, for it will grow upon him again of itself—as the hump is still inseparable from the camel even when it has thrown the burden from its back,—but the spirit is freed from this yoke only when it takes upon itself another, an “easy yoke” (Matt. XI, 30). With justice you say to man, enslaved by his own riches: “become”, but you seem to forget Goethe’s terms: “first die—die and become”. But death, that is, the rebirth of personality, is that very liberation it longs for. Wash yourself in spring water and—be consumed in flame. That is always possible, any morning of the spirit, which wakes up every day.

June 19, 1920

V. I.

IV.

To Ivanov

It was by accident that we began this correspondence from one corner of

the room to the other, yet it is beginning to absorb me. You remember you wrote me the first letter in my absence, and left it lying on my table when you went out; I answered it while you were not at home. Now I write in your presence, while, silently intent, you try to smooth out the rough folds, centuries old, of Dante's terza rimas so as, contemplating the model, to sculpt its likeness in Russian verse. I am writing because in that way the thought will be more completely expressed, more distinctly heard, like a sound in stillness. But after our meal each of us will lie down on his bed, you with a page of manuscript in your hand, I with a little leather-bound book, and you will read your translation of the "Purgatory" aloud to me—the fruit of your morning's work, while I shall compare and argue. And today again, as in the past, I shall drink in the full tones of your lines, but I shall also be seized again by the familiar oppressive feeling.

Oh my friend, swan of Apollo! Why was feeling so ardent, why was thought so fresh and the word so real in those days, in the fourteenth century, and why are our thoughts and feelings so pallid, our speech as if spun through with cobwebs? You were right to speak of metaphysics as a system of almost imperceptible coercions; but I am talking about something else—about the whole of our culture and about the subtlest exhalations with which it has permeated the entire fabric of our being—not about coercions, but about temptations that have disintegrated, weakened and disfigured our minds. And not even about that, not about the consequences and the evils of culture, for it is for reason to evaluate gains and losses, and every argument that lives by the sword dies by the sword. Have we any right to trust our reason in this matter, when we know for certain that it has itself been brought up by culture and naturally worships it, as the slave of low endowments worships the master who promoted him?

Another unbribeable judge raised his voice within me. Whether it was that I was tired of bearing the burden that went beyond my strength, or that my first-created spirit gleamed forth from the litter of learning and habit—no matter: a simple feeling came to consciousness and grew strong in me, a feeling as irrefutable as that of hunger or pain. I am not condemning culture, I simply bear witness: I am stifling in it. Like Rousseau

I dream of a blissful state of being quite free and unburdened in spirit, paradisiacally carefree. I know too much, and this load oppresses me. It was not I who acquired this knowledge by live experience; it is general, and alien to me; it stems from our remotest ancestors and from our predecessors. Tempting in its demonstrability it penetrated, it filled my intellect. And just because it is generally, supra-personally proved, its indisputability turns my soul to ice. The countless things we know, like millions of unbreakable threads, have wound themselves around me, every one of them impersonal, unchangeable, inescapable to the point of horror. And of what use are they to me? For most of them I have no need whatever. In love and sorrow I do not require them, it is not through them that in fateful errors and unexpected achievement I slowly comprehend what I was meant for, and in the hour of death I shall naturally not remember them. But like sweepings they choke my intellect, every minute of my life they are there, like a dusty curtain between me and my joy, my pain, every one of my thoughts. The debility that saps us—it is from this immeasurable impersonal knowledge, from the innumerable speculations, truths, hypotheses, rules of thought and moral laws that we retain in our memories, from this whole ballast of accumulated intellectual riches with which each of us is laden, that it comes. Just think of one thing: the theory of the thing-in-itself and of appearances. That great man Kant discovered that we know nothing of the thing itself, that all the characteristics of it that we perceive are our sense-images. Schopenhauer reinforced this truth when he gave obvious proof that we are completely enclosed within ourselves and have no means of going beyond the borders of our consciousness and coming in contact with the world. The thing-in-itself is unknowable; our cognition of the world is only the cognition of phenomena and laws of our minds; the outer world has its being only in our imagination or in dream; it does not exist at all; our apparatus of perception is the only reality. Logically there was no gainsaying this discovery. Like light in the dark of night the truth shone out, and consciousness had to submit to it without a word. An enormous change took place in people's minds: things, people, myself as an animate being, in short all reality, previously so solid and

tangible, all of it suddenly went as it were up in the air, a foot above the earth, and took on a spectral transparency. There is nothing real; all things that seem existent are mirages, built according to plan, with which our minds, God knows to what purpose, people empty space. For a hundred years this doctrine ruled and radically changed human consciousness. And now its end has come. Imperceptibly it has lost its force, has become dim and faded away. The philosophers had the courage to rise to the defence of our ancient naïve experience, its indubitable reality was once more restored to the outer world, and of the dazzling discovery only its modest rudiment remained: the truth, laid bare by Kant, that the formal categories of our knowledge, the categories of time, space, and causality, are not real, but ideal, belong essentially not to the world but to consciousness, and are imposed by the latter upon experience, like a network of lines on a map. The century-old illusion is over now, but what frightful traces it has left! A nightmare, this phantom irreality still casts cobwebs of madness over our reason. Man is returning to a sensation of the reality of existence like a convalescent after a grave illness, with the sickly and anxious feeling: is not all that presents itself to him a dream? So abstract reason in the laboratories of science works out facts and systems infallible for it but strange to the spirit, and when after a time truth—as is bound to happen—tears at the seams and falls off, we ask ourselves sadly: why did it swathe men's minds for so many years and hamper their freedom of movement? As the things on display in shops tempt us because they look pretty or comfortable, so ideas and learning are worthless temptations, and our minds are just as overloaded with them as our houses with objects. Ideas and knowledge are fruitful for me when they are born in me naturally, out of my personal experience, or when I have felt an irresistible need for them; but just to adopt them from outside without really needing them is like naked negroes in the wilds of Africa acquiring celluloid collars, umbrellas, rubbers and matches from Europeans by barter and wearing them. So now I say: the mass of manufactured articles in my house bores me, but the accumulated stuff that crams my mind oppresses me infinitely more. I would give all the facts and ideas I have found in books, with all those I have built on them

thrown in, for the joy of gaining, all for myself, out of my innermost experience, one single original perfectly simple bit of knowledge, fresh as a summer morning.

I repeat: it's not a question of the coercion of which you write, but of temptation. Temptation is more coercive than force. Abstract reason uses the temptations of objective truth to impose its discoveries upon the personality. You say: after we have thrown off the load we shall inevitably begin to heap it up again and burden ourselves anew. This much is undeniable—we cannot rid ourselves of our reason and cannot change its nature. But I know and believe there are possibilities of some other creativeness, some other culture, which do not wall up every understanding in a dogma, do not make a mummy of every possession and a fetish of every value. For I am not alone—many are stifling in these stone walls—and you, as a poet, would you uncomplainingly settle down within them if you had not been granted the happy faculty of flying, thanks to inspiration, sometimes at least and for a short while, out beyond these walls into the freedom of space, into the sphere of the spirit? With envious gaze I follow your ascents and those of other contemporary poets: a space of freedom does exist, and humanity does have wings! But my eyes—or do they deceive me?—see something else as well: the wings have grown heavy, and the swans of Apollo do not ascend to great heights. And how could the poet preserve strength and freshness of native inspiration in these enlightened times? At thirty he has read so many books, argued so much about philosophic themes, and is so satiated with the abstract intellectuality of his circle!

And now, by the way, I shall answer your last appeal. That rebirth of personality, its true liberation, of which you speak at the end, Goethe's death in flame, is also an urge and ascent of the spirit, related to the poet's inspiration, but incomparably bolder and more decided. It is just for that reason that such events are so rare these days, rarer even than creations of genius in art. The "cultural heritage" weighs on personality with a pressure of sixty atmospheres and even more, and its yoke, because of temptation, is truly—an easy yoke; the majority does not even feel it; but whoever does feel it and strives toward heights—just let him try to break through

this heavy layer. For it is located not above his head, but within himself; the heaviness is simply his, and only the wings of genius can carry his spirit above his weighted consciousness.

M.G.

V

To Gershenzon

Dear, very dear friend, we inhabit *one* culture, just as we are living in *one* room, with a corner for each of us,—but with a wide window and a door. At the same time each of us has his permanent home, which you, like me, would gladly exchange for another, under another sky. Life in the same milieu is not the same for all its inhabitants and guests. In the selfsame element float a soluble material and fluid oil; waterplants grow, corals and pearls; fish move and whales, flying fish, dolphins, amphibia and seekers of pearls—deepsea divers. *My* eyes may deceive me (I too shall make that reservation), but you seem to me not to conceive living in a culture without an integral fusion with it. But I think consciousness might be entirely immanent in a culture, yet might be only partly immanent in it and partly on the contrary transcend it; and this can easily be shown by an example especially significant in the context of our conversation. The person who believes in God will not at any price be willing to consider his belief a part of culture; I too take that stand, convinced as I am that any great culture in history has sprung from a primordial religious fact. But one enslaved by culture will inevitably consider his belief a cultural phenomenon, no matter what more precise definition he gives of it: inherited notion and historically determined psychologizing, or metaphysics and poetry, or “socio-morphic” motive power (as Guyot called it) and ethical value. He will see anything and everything in this belief, but will unfliningly make it enter the circle of cultural phenomena that for him embraces the entire life of the mind, and will never grant the believer that his belief is something outside of culture, independent, simple and primary, something that sets his personality in *immediate* relation with absolute being. For belief is, for

the believer, by its very nature separate from culture, as nature and love are separate from it . . . Well?

Well: on whether or not we believe in the absolute, which is not culture at all, depends our inner freedom—which, precisely, is life itself—or our inner enslavement by culture, which has long been intrinsically godless, for it has (as Kant once and for all proclaimed) confined man within himself. Only through belief—only, that is, by renouncing culture’s original sin, the innate will to affirm ourselves outside of God or directly in opposition to God—can the “temptation” you feel so keenly be overcome. But original sin is not to be rooted out by a superficial destruction of its outer traces and manifestations. To unlearn reading and writing and (to use Plato’s words) to banish the Muses would be merely a palliative; written characters would appear again, and the scrolls again reflect that same unalterable state of mind of the prisoners shackled to the rock in Plato’s cave. Rousseau’s dream sprang from unbelief. But to live in God means no longer to live entirely in human culture, which is relative, but with a part of one’s own being to grow out beyond it into freedom. Life in God is truly life, that is, motion: it is a spiritual growth, a ladder toward heaven, a mountain path. It is enough to set foot on the way, to find the path; the rest will come to us of itself. Of themselves the objects of our surroundings will shift, the voices move into the distance, new horizons open. The door to freedom is *one* for all who together inhabit the same prison; and it is always open. If one leaves, a second will follow. Perhaps all of them will wander out one after the other. Without belief in God humanity will not regain its lost freshness. It is useless to cast off the old clothes, one must slough off the old Adam. Only the living waters restore youth. And that renewed life of man of which you dream, “without Muses or written characters”, alluring as it may be, remains a Fata Morgana and a decadence, like every Rousseauism, if the human host you envision is not a community of prayer but consists of new offshoots of men just as blighted as we ourselves are.

If you were to answer that in any case the mere process of forming a new culture, of stamping new marks on the *tabula rasa* of the human soul would for long periods assure humanity a new morning of creativeness, a

direct perception of the world, and restored youth, all I could do would be to shrug my shoulders and marvel at the profound optimism of your reply, which results from the failure, peculiar to Rousseau's time, to understand the fateful truth that the very sources of the life of mind and spirit are poisoned, that the Orphic and Biblical affirmation of a first "Fall" alas is not a lie. In that case our conversation would remind me of another, an age-old dialogue that Plato reports in the "Timaeus". The speakers were Solon and an Egyptian priest. "You Greeks are children, and there's not an old man among you", said the priest. Periodic floods and fires desolated the face of the earth, but the peoples of the lands populated by the Greeks were reborn after these ruinous convulsions of the earth "without Muses or written characters", *ἄμουσοι καὶ ἀγράμματοι*, to begin their transitory building once more, while the sacred Nile saved unshaking Egypt, which on its eternal tables preserved the ancient memory, forgotten by the Greeks, of the fathers, of the great and glorious race of men who shook off the yoke of age-old Atlantis. My dear fellow-questioner! Like that Egyptian and his Greek disciple, and Plato himself, I light my incense upon the altar of memory, mother of the Muses, glorify her as "pledge of immortality, crown of consciousness", and am convinced that not a step on the stairs of spiritual ascent is possible without a step downward on the flights that lead to her subterranean treasures: the higher the branches rise upward the deeper go the roots.

But if you were to answer me that you do not take it upon yourself, and do not even feel entitled, to determine beforehand the content of man's future state of mind in a renewed culture; that you simply feel for yourself and coming generations the urgent need to step out from the stuffy vault into the open air, without knowing or caring to know what you and those who come after you will find beyond the walls of the deserted prison, then you would be showing your fatalistic indifference to the task of preparing the ways of freedom and your utter despair of your own liberation. May it not be so!

June 30

V. I.

VII

To Gershenzon

“ ‘There is no motion’, said the bearded sage” . . . The man to whom he spoke advised him, symbolically, to test the opinion he had expressed, by his own experiment—“and without a word started walking up and down before him.” Of course the sage was not lame either; he too could put one foot before the other, but found the motions of the body proved little because he distrusted his own experience. The major part of your objections I attribute to auto-suggestion, to the impact of a preconceived idea of a speculative order; the remainder to your unquenched hunger for life. In your words there is so much despair, and between the lines, in the inner tonus and rhythm of the words as well as in the liveliness of action so characteristic of you, so much youthful vigor, such a thirst to test the untested, to wander along untrodden paths, to cling confidently to living nature, such longing for play, adventure, and the untouched gifts of the generous earth, *tant de désir, enfin, de faire un peu l’école buissonnière*, that—or so it seems, dear Doctor Faustus (in a new incarnation in which, though, your old companion, fretful Care, has not quite abandoned you)—Mephistopheles on seeing you would not have to give up hope of success should he take it into his head to find the right temptations for you so as to lure one wearied by the burden of the four disciplines out of his jealously guarded “corner” into boundless freedom, into the wide ways of life. It goes without saying that he would have to invent subtler tactics and certainly not call up the seductive image of a woman in a magic distance; it would be more to the purpose to remind you once more that theories are gray, and life’s golden tree forever green, and to start with the little flowers on the pure meadows and with the virginal glades. It goes without saying, too, that at the end of a new series of adventures the boundless freedom would again prove to be a hopeless prison. Perhaps the last of Faust’s temptations would have to be the first for you: the canals, the New World and the illusion of a free earth for a freed people. Many drawings and designs can be laid out on a horizontal plane. The important thing is, that it is

horizontal. But as I am not Mephistopheles I shall not invite or entice you anywhere. The whole point of all I am saying to you is the contention that from a given point, a given "corner", on the surface of any culture (whether young or weak with age) a vertical line may be drawn. But culture itself, in its true sense, is for me not a plane at all, neither a level covered with ruins nor a field strewn with bones. There is in it something truly sacred too: culture is the memory not only of the earthly and outward countenance of the fathers, but, also, of the initiations they attained. A living and eternal memory, which in those who partake of these initiations does not die out. For these were given by the fathers for their remotest descendants, and not one jot of the once-new characters inscribed on the tables of the human spirit—which is *one*—will fade. In this sense culture is not only monumental but also initiatory in the spirit. For memory, its supreme sovereign, lets her true servants participate in the "initiations" of the fathers; renewing these in them she passes on to them the strength for new beginnings, new departures. Memory is a dynamic principle; forgetting is weariness and interruption of movement, decline and return to a state of relative inertia. Let us, like Nietzsche, keep careful watch as to whether we do not carry the poisons of disintegration, the infection of "decadence" in ourselves.

What is "decadence"? A feeling of subtlest organic connection with the monumental tradition of a high culture that is past, and at the same time the proud and oppressive consciousness that we are the last of its line. In other words: a memory that has died out, has lost its initiatory character and no longer lets us participate in the initiations of the fathers or gives us any impulses to true initiative; the knowledge that prophecy has become silent (in fact the decadent Plutarch entitled one of his works "On the Cessation of Oracles"). All the work of our poor mutual friend Leo Shestov constitutes one long complicated treatise on this theme. Spirit no longer speaks to the decadent through its former messengers, what speaks to him is only the spirit of times; spiritual impoverishment turns him exclusively to the psyche, he becomes altogether a psychologist, a psychologizer. Will he ever understand Goethe's creed: "Truth was discovered long ago, || A noble bond of spirit knit. || The ancient truth, take hold of it!" For the psycholo-

gist it is merely ancient psychology. At any rate he suspects whatever is spiritual and objective of being psychological and subjective. And again I remember Goethe's words—Faust's words to Wagner: "with greedy hands for treasure grubs and finding worms feels pleasure". Isn't that like our friend who thirsts for living water making his psychological investigations and uncovering the vanity of speculations? One must leave him to his daemon; let the dead bury the dead. To give him credence is to give the maggot entry into one's own spirit. Yet we love him no less, and feel no less close and tender toward him and his work, the work of a tragic long-lived gravedigger. We will believe in the life of the spirit, in sacredness and in initiations, in the invisible saints all about us, in all the souls that fight, one countless host, and we will go on, gaily, without glancing aside or looking back, not measuring the length of the road or listening to the voices of the spirits of weariness and laziness that speak of "infection in our blood" and "exhaustion in our bones". One can be a happy wanderer on earth without leaving one's native city and can become poor in spirit without altogether forgetting erudition itself. We have long since given intelligence recognition as a subordinate tool and as a servant of the will; it serves life's purpose, like any of the lower organs of the body; according to you we may entrust the speculations that saturate it to others, just as we give away useless books, when we do not let them lie peacefully on the shelves at home. But the life-giving sap of these speculations, these religions, their spirit and logos, their consecratory energy, of these we will breathe deeply, in the name of Goethe's "ancient truth"; and so, carefree and eager to learn, we shall like foreigners pass by the innumerable altars and idols of a monumental culture, some of them lying desolate, some renewed and newly decked, and shall, as we please, stop and offer sacrifices at the forgotten places, if we glimpse unfading flowers there, invisible to men, springing from the ancient tombs.

July 4

V. I.

XI

To Gershenzon

Haven't we compromised ourselves enough, dear friend? Each in his own way: I by mysticism, you by anarchic utopias and cultural nihilism; for as such they would be judged and condemned by the "solid majority" (a little phrase of Ibsen's) of present-day mass-meetings and gatherings. Ought not each of us retire to his corner, lie down, and keep silent? "How can a heart express itself? || How can another understand you? || Understand what you live by? || Thought become word must lie." I don't like to misuse this melancholy confession of Tyutshev's; I should like to believe that what is expressed in it is not eternal truth but the fundamental lie of our disjointed and distracted times, that are incapable of producing a communion of consciousness, times that are bringing on almost the last consequences of the ancient sin of "individuation", through which all of man's life, throughout history, and all of culture, has been poisoned. Every day and every hour, perpetually creating cults great and small, we try to overcome this mortal principle: every cult is communion, so long as it is alive, even when it unites only two or three adherents; communion flames up for a moment, only to die down again; hydra-headed culture, torn by inner discord, cannot turn into a harmonious cult. But still the thirst for unity must not tempt us into giving in and compromising, that is, into establishing—from without—an apparent, imaginary bond where the very roots of consciousness and, as it were, the blood-vessels of spiritual beings have not formed a network. In the deepest depths beyond where we can go we are all *one* system of the universal circulation of blood that nourishes the one heart of all mankind. But we must not anticipate a sense that is given us only as a distant dim presentiment, and must not substitute invented simulacra for sacred hidden reality. We two have no common cult. It seems to you that forgetting liberates and vivifies, but that cultural memory enslaves and kills; I maintain that memory liberates and forgetting enslaves and kills. I speak of the way upward, but you tell me that the wings of spirit are weighted and have forgotten how to fly. "Let us go away", you urge, but I answer, "There is no way out: change of position on the same plane will

alter nothing in the nature of the plane or in the nature of the moving body.” . . . Once I wrote:

“To you beauty allotted
The trees of your forefathers
And the narrowness of churchyards;
To us—the limitless space of nomads.
Daily treachery,
Each day a new encampment . . .”

And immediately the truthful Muse forced the poet, the rebel against the tradition of culture, to add:

“Wandering deception
Of a prison without exit.”

Oh, for the sake of cult one must abandon the familiar places and the trees of the forefathers:

“Brothers, let us flee into the darkness of the sacred groves . . .
For the children of the Gods the staff of exile is light,
The blossoming thyrsus of a new love . . .”

Wide is the flower-filled earth, and how many bright meadows upon it

“Await the pressure of our lips
And of our feet acquainted with the dithyramb . . .”

So it *will* be, dear friend, although the signs of a change are not yet visible. Culture will change into a cult of God and of the Earth. But that will be a miracle of Memory—the primordial memory of mankind. Inwardly culture is not homogeneous, as eternity is not *one*, as the composition of human personality is multiple.

“In the deep sea move seas, some toward dawn, the others toward dusk;
Up above, the waves move toward midday, deeper, toward midnight;
In the dark whirlpool are many streams, each flowing otherly,
And in the purple ocean rivers flow under the water.”

So in culture too there is a hidden current that draws us toward the origins of life. An era will come of great, joyful, all-comprehending return. Then cool springs will well up between the ancient paving-stones and

sprays of roses grow from the gray tombs. To live this day the sooner, one must go farther and ever farther, and not look back; retreat would only delay the closing of the ring of eternity.

But we Russians have always been, most of us, fugitives. Something impels us to flee, to flee without a backward glance. I have an insuperable distaste for solving a problem, whatever it may be, through flight. A while ago I said that the cultural "Egypt", as well as Nietzsche's desire, was alien to you. For almost all our intelligentsia (in so far as we use the term in its true, strictly socio-historic sense) Egypt is alien and culture a slavery in Egypt. But naturally you are flesh of the flesh and bone of the bone of our intelligentsia, however much you revolt against them. I myself am hardly that; rather, I am in part a son of the Russian soil, but one who was driven from it, and in part a foreigner, one of the disciples of Sais, where tribe and family are forgotten. "To become primitive" —that is the magic phrase for our intellectuals, and that thirst shows how they have been torn away from their roots. They think "to become primitive" means to feel one's roots, to sink roots into the earth. That is how it was with Leo Tolstoy, who must naturally attract you. Dostoevsky, who naturally repels you, was of a different sort. He wanted no "return to the primitive"; but what he wrote about the garden as the panacea of communal life, and about the education of children in the great garden of the future and about the "factory in the garden", is no dream, but an intellectually sound and historically true program for social action. Return to the primitive is betrayal, forgetting, flight, weary cowardly reaction. The thought of a return to the simple in cultural life is just as untenable as in mathematics, which knows only "simplification". The latter is reduction of multiple complexity as a unit to a more perfect form of simplicity. Simplicity, as supreme and crowning attainment, is the overcoming of incompleteness by ultimate completion, of imperfection by perfection. The way to simplicity, so much desired and so lovable, leads through complexity. We reach it not by leaving a given environment or country, but by an ascent. In every place—I repeat and bear witness to it again—there is Bethel and Jacob's ladder, at the center of any horizon. That is the path of true, cre-

ative, productive freedom; but freedom stolen by forgetting is empty. Those unmindful of kinship are fugitive slaves or freedmen, but not free-born. Culture is cult of ancestors and of course—even now it is dimly aware of it—resurrecting of fathers. Man's path is to become ever more distinctly aware of himself as a "God forgotten, and by himself forgot". It comes hard to him to remember his birthright, forgotten even by the primitive. The philosophy of culture of my Prometheus is *my* philosophy:

"They will produce trafficking, the arts, warring, counting,
Mastering, and then slaving,—to forget
In the noise of days, in cares, in sensuality
And in dreams, the will of Existence, so immediate
And so whole. But the savage will wander
Discontented in the wilderness . . ."

The savage, or he who under the spell of forgetting has become like a savage, has "returned to the primitive", is not happy in his empty freedom; he is discontented and downcast.

But there is only *one* way not to be "a gloomy guest upon the darkened earth"—and that is spiritual death in flame. I have spoken.

July 15

V. I.

XII

To Ivanov

You are angry: a bad sign. Annoyed at my deafness to your pleas you class me with the "back-to-naturers", who "are unmindful of kinship", the cowardly deserters and so on, and even call me names like "intellectual" (while you, old fox that you are, give yourself fancy titles—son of the Russian soil, and on top of that, disciple of Sais!). What irritates you most is that I keep obstinately repeating my "Sic volo" and refuse to argue. But it isn't so: I've been arguing all along, as hard as you have. You claim two things, for instance, in your letter; first that in its further development culture itself will lead to the sources of life; we've only to keep going steadily on,—at the end of the road, so you say, the light we yearn for will

shine out, “cool springs will well up between the ancient paving-stones and sprays of roses grow from the gray tombs”, that is, culture, having fallen into evil ways, will by pursuing them end up at its original chastity. My answer to that is: I don’t believe it, nor do I see any reason to think so; only a miracle can turn a Magdalen into a saint. *One* way you conceive of is: culture proceeding by spontaneous evolution. But this prophecy doesn’t fit so well with your *other* theory that every human being should surmount culture by dying, in spirit, in the flame. One or the other: if the very development of culture is to lead us unswervingly toward God, then I as a single individual need not worry; I can quietly go on with yesterday’s work: lecture on the economic development of England in the Middle Ages, build a railroad from Tashkent to the Crimea, construct long-range artillery and perfect the technique of poison gases; I am even duty-bound to do so, so that culture may proceed rapidly forward on the beaten track—so the dream of its perfection may be realised the sooner. In that case personality’s death in flame is not only unnecessary but harmful, because by the very fact of being consumed and resurrected the personality leaves the sphere of cultural work. Let me remind you of your own lines:

“He who has known the nostalgia in the things of earth
Has known the beauty of the things of earth . . .”

And then:

“He who has known the beauty of the things of earth
Has known the dream of the Hyperborean:
Blissful he cherishes
Silence and plenitude in his heart
And calls to the azure and emptiness of space.”

That’s true: “he calls to the azure and emptiness of space”. He will immediately stop giving courses and will certainly not give one single lecture in the learned society to which he belonged, he will not so much as put in an appearance there. I am not even mentioning that “spiritual death in flame” is just as great a rarity as the Magdalen turning saint. I, not taking part in argument? Here you see me, in the midst of disputing and arguing.

But these lines of yours are very much after my heart. It would seem that you too once felt my longing and my thirst, but that you later quieted down and soothed your longing with sophistries about an eventual transfiguration of culture and a moment-to-moment possibility of personal salvation through death in flame. In the way that you now piously accept the whole of history I have, it is true, no belief in common with you. Or yes; there is something we have in common; our friendship over so many years proves it. I live strangely, a two-fold life. I grew up sharing in European culture, I absorbed its spirit and not only became quite at home in it, but have a genuine love for much of it: I love its cleanliness and comfort, I love science, art, and poetry, I love Pushkin. I move in the circle of culture as one of the family; I have lively conversations with friends and acquaintances on cultural themes, and really take an interest in these themes and the methods of treating them. In this I am at one with you; we have a common worship of common service in the marketplace of culture, common habits and a common language. That is my daytime life. But in the depths of my consciousness I live differently. From there for many years now has come the insistent and unceasing ring of a secret voice: No, no, that isn't it. Some deeper will in me turns sadly away from culture, from all that is done and said around us. To it all of that is boring and unnecessary, like a battle of phantoms that chase each other in empty space; it knows a different world, surmises a different life, that do not yet exist on earth, but that will and must come into being, because only in them will real reality come true, and I am aware of this voice as the voice of my true self. I live like a foreigner who has come to be at home in a foreign land; I am loved by its people and I love them myself, work eagerly for their welfare, feel their pain and take pleasure in their pleasure; but I know that I am a foreigner and secretly I mourn for the fields of my homeland, for the different springtime there, for the scent of its flowers and the speech of its women. Where is my homeland? I shall not see it and shall die on foreign soil. There are moments when I long for it so passionately! At those times I have no use for railways or for international politics; dissension between systems and my friends' contro-

versies over the transcendence or immanence of God seem to me to be empty—to be empty and to get into one's eyes, like dust eddying in the streets. But with emotion, like the stranger in a foreign place when the color of the sunset or the scent of the flowers there bring his homeland back to him, I feel, even here, the beauty and the coolness of the promised world. I feel them in the fields and in the woods, in the song of the birds and in the farmer walking behind his plough, in the eyes of children and sometimes in their words, in the divinely kind smile, in the caress that one human being gives another, in honest and incorruptible simplicity, in certain fiery sayings and unlooked-for lines that cut through darkness like a lightning-flash, and in much, much else—especially in suffering. All those things will be there, all of them are flowers of my homeland, that are being smothered here by a rank, coarse, scentless vegetation.

You, my dear friend, are in your native land; your heart is here, where your house, your sky is,—on this earth. Your spirit is not split, and this wholeness of yours enchants me, for it itself, whatever its origin, is also a flower of that land, of our common future home. And therefore I think that in the house of our Father *one* mansion is prepared for both of us, even though here on earth each of us sits stubbornly in his corner, quarreling over culture.

July 19

M. G.

Translated by Eleanor Wolff

NOTES

Vyacheslav Ivanov, see Note in *Mesa 2*. — Michael Ossipovich Gershenzon (1869—1925) was an eminent critic and historian.—The verse on p. 13 is quoted from Pushkin, the one on p. 19 line 5 from Soloviev.

St.-J. Perse's great poem *Vents*, published by Gallimard, Paris, early in 1947, may as yet not be known in this country. We print the beginning of the second part.

We wish to call the attention of our readers to Erich Kahler's book *Man the Measure* (Pantheon, New York, 1943), and to Katherine Garrison Chapin's essay *The Quality of Poetry*, in her book of verse *Plain-chant for America* (Harper, Boston, 1942).

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We should like to point out the following corrections to be made in *Mesa 2*.

P. 7 (*San Juan de la Cruz*) line 12 from bottom: aun

p. 13 line 3: llamada

line 13: ni quiere

line 14: dato con una

p. 25 (*Von einer Dichtung*) line 2: das—nicht

line 2: sondern jenseits

p. 44 (*Notes*) line 7: Vyacheslav

line 9: (1932)

Mesa 1, p. 21: The title of Guillén's sonnet should read *Cierro los ojos*.