

BERNICE GLATZER ROSENTHAL

Nietzsche in Russia: The Case of Merezhkovsky

Behold the good and the just! Whom do they hate most? The man who breaks their tablets of values, the breaker, the lawbreaker; yet he is the creator.

Behold the believers of all faiths! Whom do they hate most? The man who breaks their tablets of values, the breaker, the lawbreaker; yet he is the creator.

Companions, the creator seeks, not corpses, not herd and believers. Fellow creators, the creator seeks—those who write new values on new tablets.

THUS SPAKE ZARATHUSTRA

Between 1898 and 1917 a massive surge of creative activity transformed the Russian cultural scene. Experimentation in all the arts was accompanied by a revival of interest in philosophy and religion. This is the era of Diaghilev and the Russian ballet, of the painters Chagall and Kandinsky, the composers Stravinsky and Scriabin, and scores of lesser-known artists and writers. Poetry, dormant since the 1840s, revived and flourished, and literature explored new themes and techniques. To Russians, it is their "silver age." Still comparatively unknown to the West, most "silver age" literature, poetry, and philosophy remains to be translated. Concentrating instead on politics and revolution, Western scholars have ignored the culture of the decade just before the Revolution. The few biographies of composers and painters focus on the individual artist and his work, but they tend to ignore the cultural matrix of which he was a part. They give the readers the impression that the cultural efflorescence of the era developed *ex nihilo*.¹ Conversely, Soviet scholars do

1. There is still no interpretive treatment of the period as a whole. For literary trends, D. S. Mirsky, *Contemporary Russian Literature, 1881–1925* (New York, 1926), is still the best treatment in English. See also Elizabeth Stenbock-Fermor, "Russian Literature from 1890–1917," in Erwin Oberländer, George Katkov, Nikolaus Poppe, and Georg von Rauch, eds., *Russia Enters the Twentieth Century, 1894–1917* (New York, 1971), and Martin Rice, "Valery Briusov and the Rise of Russian Symbolism" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt, 1971). For painting see Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment* (London, 1962); John Percival, *The World of Diaghilev* (New York, 1971); Stuart R. Grover, "The World of Art Movement in Russia," *Russian Review*, 32, no. 1 (January 1973): 28–42; and John E. Bowl, "Russian Symbolism and the 'Blue Rose' Movement," *Slavonic and East European Review*, 51, no. 123 (April 1973): 161–81. For music see Joan Peyser, *The New Music: The Sense Behind the Sound* (New York, 1971).

not treat the art seriously, because they consider it an example of “bourgeois decadence.”²

Thus the relation between the “silver age” and the change in the cultural climate which preceded it in the nineties remains to be explored. The art is part and parcel of a philosophical shift which began in the nineties. The “silver age” was a Russian version of the European-wide *fin de siècle*, part of a rejection of rationalism, positivism, materialism, and science which affected the entire continent. Across Europe, artists and intellectuals were groping for new values, new standards, and a new conception of man; their common concern transcended national differences and accounts for the rapidity with which works in one language were translated into others. By 1910, for example, all Nietzsche’s major works were available in Russian.

Searching for new ideals, certain Russian artists and thinkers adapted and interpreted Nietzsche and French symbolism to suit specific Russian conditions. The process began in the nineties with a small group of writers who opposed both materialism and traditional religion. Aiming to establish a new set of values based on art, creativity, and personal freedom, they affirmed life on earth and denounced all systems which repressed the individual. Exalting man’s creative imagination, they considered destruction of old orthodoxies necessary to release it. Theirs was a radicalism of the spirit; it chafed against any and all restrictions.

Though “art for art’s sake” was the aesthetes’ battle cry, they hoped to substitute art for populism as the “religion” of the intelligentsia—to make creativity the focal point of the artist’s life and work. Populism, dominant since the sixties, bade the artist devote himself to “the people,” to press for an agrarian socialism based on the peasant *mir*. The populists believed that once revolution toppled the autocracy, once enlightenment replaced religion, justice and social harmony would prevail. Despite their militant atheism, the populist agitators were akin to an order of monks and nuns. Risking their lives, denying themselves any comfort or pleasure (many were from the privileged classes), they voluntarily accepted a spartan and ascetic life style. Rigidly utilitarian, they denounced art and thought which did not directly serve their goals. Until well into the nineties they controlled the media of publication and enforced their own conception of art. Self-expression and beauty were not among their values, and they consigned work which lacked

2. See, for example, V. E. and D. Maksimov, *Iz proshlogo russkoi zhurnalistiki* (Leningrad, 1930); V. Asmus, ed., “Filosofia i estetika russkogo simvolizma,” in *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, vol. 27–28 (Moscow, 1937), pp. 1–53; N. A. Trifonov, ed., *Russkaia literatura XX veka: Dorevoliutsionnyi period* (Moscow, 1962), p. 4; *Istoriia russkoi literatury*, vol. 10 (Moscow, 1954), pp. 607, 774; *Istoriia russkoi literatury v trekh tomakh*, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1968), pp. 12, 731. Recently there have been signs of a sympathetic re-evaluation of the “Mir iskusstva” group and pleas for tolerance of different artistic schools. See, for example, A. Gusarova, *Mir iskusstva* (Leningrad, 1972), and D. Sarab’ianov, *Russkaia zhivopis’ kontsa 1900-kh–nachala 1910-kh godov* (Moscow, 1971).

political or social content to oblivion. Only a few giants, such as Dostoevsky, successfully defied them. In addition to this unofficial censorship, the writer had to contend with the official censorship of tsar and Orthodox Church.

But populism was losing its credibility. Groping toward new ideals, the intelligentsia was ceasing to be a monolithic force. Three decades of agitation had not made the peasant into a revolutionary. The assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 had boomeranged; instead of sparking revolt, it stimulated repression. Within a few years the populist leaders were either in jail or in exile, their journals closed.³ A malaise prevailed among the intelligentsia, and a particularly cheerless and arid form of positivism dominated the universities. Following Schopenhauer, some disillusioned populists sought to lose themselves in art and nature, to withdraw from "the world." Tolstoy was admired, but few artists could accept his rejection of art.

Those who loved art tended to be attracted to symbolism. Symbolism originated in France. In Russia it became more than a technique; it constituted an entire *Weltanschauung* which opposed intuition, imagination, subjectivity, and mysticism to positivism, populism, science, and reason. Determinedly apolitical artists spoke of "higher truths." Art became their path to the "world-soul"; self-expression, including sensuality, was their means to greater creativity, and creativity itself became their source of values.

Russian symbolism derived from many sources—Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Tjutchev, Vladimir Soloviev (the first two French, the latter two Russian).⁴ But Nietzsche was most important. His philosophy gave Russian symbolism its fighting edge; it enabled his admirers to fuse a medley of attitudes into a militant creed. Accepting his credo of self-affirmation, Russians were able to silence the remnants of populism in their consciences and to forget "the people." Unappreciated writers could identify with the lonely Zarathustra; they could condemn those who ignored them as "the herd." Nietzsche became their personal philosopher, and they tried to live by his teachings. Andrei Bely, for example, recalled that at the turn of the century Zarathustra was his manual.⁵

Symbolists were particularly aware of the problems and potentialities inherent in city life. While they condemned industrial civilization as repressive, as turning men into machines, they were also cognizant of the personal freedom made possible by urban anonymity. Though they considered rationalism a threat to the spirit, they realized it also broke down traditional restraints.

3. *Otechestvennye zapiski* was closed in 1884. Although the writers eventually found positions on other journals, the nerve center of Russian radicalism was dead.

4. See Georgette Donchin, *The Influence of French Symbolism on Russian Poetry* (The Hague, 1958), A. V. Flekser, *Bor'ba za idealizm* (St. Petersburg, 1900), and Simon Frank, ed., *A Solov'ev Anthology*, trans. N. Duddington (New York, 1950).

5. Andrei Bely, *Na rubezhe dvukh stoletii* (Moscow, 1931), p. 469.

They were acutely sensitive to the problems of modern man, especially the problem of freedom, and promethean individualism was their response to forces transforming their world.

Dmitrii Sergeevich Merezhkovsky (1865–1941) was one of the chief proselytizers of Nietzscheanism in Russia.⁶ In his lectures, poems, novels, and critical essays he related Nietzsche's ideas to the cultural problems of Russia and brought Nietzsche to the popular consciousness. Highlighting the existential questions that populism, positivism, and Orthodoxy had failed to solve, his works disseminated a conviction that a radical new faith was needed. A cultural impresario, Merezhkovsky introduced Russians to French symbolism and, almost singlehandedly at first, fostered an appreciation of beauty and culture for their own sake. Even those hostile to him testify to his influence in shaping the culture of the "silver age."⁷

This essay will trace Merezhkovsky's Nietzscheanism from its muted beginnings in the early nineties, through its peak in mid-decade, to its transmutation in an apocalyptic form of Christianity by 1900. Merezhkovsky's personal need for an all-encompassing faith was the determining factor in his own intellectual development. But because of the cultural crisis of the time, his development was recapitulated, in modified form, by many others.⁸

Torn between independence and need for love, between intellect and emotion, Merezhkovsky was a deeply unhappy and lonely man. Although he was convinced that faith would integrate all conflicts in a greater whole, his

6. This is not to imply that Merezhkovsky was the only proselytizer of Nietzscheanism. Charles Birlé, cultural attaché to the French Embassy, introduced Benois to Nietzsche, and the Moscow journal *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii* discussed Nietzsche all through the nineties. See George Kline, "Nietzschean Marxism in Russia," *Boston College Studies in Philosophy*, 2 (1968): 166–83, esp. p. 168, for a description of the introduction of Nietzsche into Russia. See also his "Changing Attitudes Toward the Individual," in C. E. Black, ed., *The Transformation of Russian Society* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 606–25, and chapter 4, "The God-Builders: Gorky and Lunacharsky," in George L. Kline, ed., *Religious and Anti-Religious Thought in Russia* (Chicago, 1969), pp. 103–26. See esp. pp. 62–63 and 106–9 for Kline's argument that "for Nietzsche, no individual has intrinsic value; individuals have instrumental value only as creators and 'transvaluators' of values, whose creativity serves future history" (p. 62). This aspect of Nietzsche, perceived by the Nietzschean Marxists, is only part of Nietzsche's complex philosophy. To Merezhkovsky and his group Nietzsche was perceived as a philosopher of asocial individualism. Furthermore, the "God-Builders" were a product of a later period.

7. See, for example, Nicholas Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, trans. K. Lampert (New York, 1951), pp. 148–49. Berdyaev credits Merezhkovsky with introducing a whole world of unknown or forgotten values into Russian culture.

8. Valerii Briusov considered the first edition of Merezhkovsky's collected works (1911) "unique in their own way as a manuscript of the search of the contemporary soul, as a diary of all that was experienced by the most sensitive part of our society for the past quarter century." See his *Dalekie i blizkie* (Moscow, 1912), p. 63.

questing intellect barred actual belief. Finding existence a burden, he sought some reason to go on living. But pleasure eluded him, and devoting his life to "the people" as the populists advocated was not the answer either. "And I want to, but cannot love the people," he admitted.⁹ Fear of death ruled out suicide; more important, it made the question of what happens after death the most significant question of all. Secular philosophies could not answer it. Merezhkovsky was isolated from both "the people" and his fellow intellectuals; neither Russian Orthodoxy, which proscribed the intellect as a form of vanity, nor secular materialism, which overlooked the spiritual and emotional dimensions of man, could satisfy what Merezhkovsky called a "thirst for faith."¹⁰

Merezhkovsky's discovery of art, beauty, and culture completed his estrangement from the belief systems of his time. Positivism was indifferent to art and hostile to imagination; through science and reason the problems of life would be solved. Populism and Orthodoxy required the artist to bend his vision to serve a higher goal. Furthermore, they demanded a degree of self-effacement which the egoistic Merezhkovsky could not accept. The faith he sought would provide happiness on earth, guarantee personal immortality, and still withstand a rational critique. Stressing "personality," a concept that includes heart and soul, as well as mind and body, Merezhkovsky belonged neither to the traditional right, which condemned the body, nor to the revolutionary left, which ignored the soul.

During the eighties Merezhkovsky and his friend Minsky (N. Vilenkin) began to study "problems of individualism." A mutual interest in individualism brought Merezhkovsky and his future wife, Zinaida Hippus, together in 1888. He was twenty-four at the time. While a student at St. Petersburg University, he had become familiar with Herbert Spencer's philosophy. Rejecting Spencer's economic individualism, Merezhkovsky also demanded to know the individual's place in the cosmic scheme. At the same time, accepting Schopenhauer's conviction that the ego is the source of suffering, he tried, unsuccessfully, to deaden his own sense of self.

Though the exact date of Merezhkovsky's first reading of Nietzsche is not known, by 1890 Nietzschean themes are evident in his works. His drama *Sylvio* deals with a would-be superman, a bored Renaissance prince whose only goal is to fly like an eagle (one of Zarathustra's two animals) and whose greatest joy is battle.¹¹ But Merezhkovsky rejected Nietzsche. The unhappy

9. Dmitrii S. Merezhkovsky, "I khochu no ne v silakh liubit' ia liudei," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 24 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1914), 22:11 (hereafter *PSS*).

10. See D. S. Merezhkovsky, "Groza proshla," *Trud*, 1893, no. 17, pp. 107-45. The theme of this play is an unhappy marriage caused by the partner's lack of religious faith.

11. D. S. Merezhkovsky, "Sil'vio," *Severnyi vestnik*, 1890, no. 2, pp. 69-90; no. 3, pp. 63-81; no. 4, pp. 45-58; no. 5, pp. 57-75.

prince is saved by a humble Christian woman who teaches him to love “the people.” Merezhkovsky had not yet made a break with populism. His first impression was that Nietzscheanism was a crass and bloodthirsty creed unsuited to sensitive souls. Shortly before, Merezhkovsky had rejected the idea of art as religion. Using the French novelist Gustave Flaubert as an example, Merezhkovsky argued that conscious craftsmanship and minute examination of one’s own emotions destroy both spontaneity and love, thereby negating the possibility of happiness itself.¹²

In 1891, however, Merezhkovsky changed his views; he accepted Nietzsche’s emphasis on art, beauty, and sensual pleasure. A trip to Greece and Rome was the catalyst. There Merezhkovsky found a form of art which combined feeling and intellect and celebrated life itself. He specifically stated that the Parthenon of Athens was a revelation, beauty incarnate, the ideal become real. Its effect on him was overwhelming. Nero’s Colosseum, he said, is only “the dead greatness of overthrown power. Here [in the Parthenon] is living eternal beauty. Only here, for the first time in life, I understood the meaning of *beauty*. I had never before thought of it, never desired it. I did not weep, I was not glad, I was content. . . . It seemed that this moment was eternal and will be eternal.”¹³ For the very first time Merezhkovsky had achieved a sense of inner peace. So completely was the Parthenon in harmony with its natural setting that it appeared to have risen from the soil in accord with divine laws. But the fact that it was created by men testified to human powers and demonstrated what it is possible for bold men to achieve. The nude goddesses, he said, were “naked beauty itself,” flesh become spirit. The body was no longer an object of shame.

Greece became Merezhkovsky’s symbol of harmony. Through beauty, Greek culture fused heart and mind, body and soul, religion and life, into an integrated whole. Aesthetic creativity appeared in a new light. Beauty became more than just an intellectual exercise, a means to withdraw from the real world; it was the way to make life meaningful, to give man the courage to go on living. The influence of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* is obvious; Nietzsche had stated that “existence can be justified only in aesthetic terms.”¹⁴ Through art, man can face the horrors of existence, “without turning to stone.”

Rethinking the issues, Merezhkovsky accepted Nietzsche’s glorification of the pagan virtues and seconded his call for a new way of life based on art. In “Acropolis,”¹⁵ a critical essay written in 1891, he called for a “new

12. “Flobert,” *Vechnye sputniki*, in *PSS*, 17:190–94.

13. “Akropol’,” *Vechnye sputniki*, in *PSS*, 17:14.

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York, 1956), p. 9.

15. “Akropol’,” *Vechnye sputniki*, *PSS*, 17:18.

Parthenon," to be created by "Godlike men on earth." Liberated from the slave morality, he implied in a poem of the same period, men will account to no one but themselves; they will live "only for happiness . . . for life."¹⁶

But Merezhkovsky was not yet a Nietzschean; he could not accept Nietzsche's statement that "God is dead," nor could he believe that art is *only* an illusion. Desiring happiness on earth, he was still unable to abandon the hope of eternal life. His mother, to whom he was extremely attached, had just died. Torn between love for beauty and desire to be reunited with her in heaven, he asked:

Where then is the truth . . . in death, in heavenly love and suffering?
Or in the shadow of the gods, in your earthly beauty?
They quarrel in the soul of man as in this divine temple,
Eternal joy and life, eternal mystery and death.¹⁷

Between 1891 and 1893 Merezhkovsky's Nietzscheanism coexisted with a romantic semireligious mysticism which viewed art as a path to the world soul. Attracted to the symbolism he discovered in France because of its mystical yearning for "other worlds than ours," he hoped that aesthetic intuition would lead to the new truths, the new faith, he needed.

In 1892 he published *Symbols*,¹⁸ a collection of versé influenced by modern French poetry. A mixture of religious and pagan themes, it exalts both pagan and biblical heroes. There is a long poem, "Vera," whose theme is that "love is stronger than death," a conventionally romantic tribute to nature, "Hymn to Beauty," and a semipagan poem, "Laughter of the Gods." Valerii Briusov, who became a leading symbolist writer, recalls that the appearance of *Symbols* was an "event" in his life; it became his "handbook" (*nastol'naiia kniga*), and he knew "Vera" by heart.¹⁹ Other poems lauded the citizens of Ancient Rome as the "equals of the gods," and admired the "free spirit" of the Roman Republic. "Future Rome" embodies Merezhkovsky's hopes for a new faith that would restore human greatness and unify the world:

Rome is the unity of the world; in the ancient Republic
A stern pagan spirit of freedom united the tribes.
Freedom fell, and wise Caesar, subjugated the entire world to Eternal Rome,
In the name of the good of the people.
Imperial Rome fell, and in the name of the All-Highest God
The Church wanted to gather all humankind in the temple of Peter.
But following Pagan Rome, Christian Rome perished.
Faith died out in our hearts.

16. "Volny," *PSS*, 23:157.

17. "Panteon," *PSS*, 23:159–60.

18. "Simvoly," *PSS*, 23:5–266.

19. Valerii Briusov, *Iz moci shizni* (Moscow, 1927), p. 76.

Now in ancient ruins, we wander around full of grief.

O can it be we will not find such a faith that would again
Reunite all tribes and peoples on earth?

Where are you, O Future Rome? Where are you, O Unknown God?²⁰

Arguing against blind imitation of ancient forms, Merezhkovsky warned against superficial Hellenism. The poet A. N. Maikov, he said, focused on the serenity of the Ancient Greeks without understanding their consciousness of suffering, tragedy, and evil. Mere form is useless as a guide to life. Cultures must be studied in depth, their eternally valid principles separated from their obsolete forms; an entirely new faith must be created.²¹

Reason has failed man, Merezhkovsky insisted; the new faith will be based on art. In an 1892 lecture, "On the Causes of the Decline and on the New Trends in Contemporary Russian Literature," Merezhkovsky set forth his view that populism, materialism, and science could not answer the needs of Russia. True enlightenment consists of spiritual transformation; it demands a new culture to unite intelligentsia and people on a higher level. A declaration of war against populism and science, the lecture exalts symbolist art as the vehicle leading to higher truths. Mystical, introspective, and imaginative, symbolism explores both the human soul and the cosmos; it enables the artist to penetrate through the veil of illusion to the eternal forms inaccessible to the ordinary man. His intuition and imagination are divine gifts. As the artist provides the materials for a new faith, the gulf between secular intelligentsia and believing peasants will be ended. Quite influential for many young poets, the lecture, which was published the following year, was their first exposure to French symbolism.²²

The lecture was a mixture of symbolist mysticism and Nietzsche. The Nietzschean aspects emphasized art as the highest form of human activity, imagination as the highest faculty, and the artist as the explorer of the human soul. The mystical aspects were strikingly reminiscent of romantic ideas in general and of Soloviev in particular—beauty is an expression of the soul's yearning to reach the Ideal, and art is the means to divine truth, the glimpse of eternity visible to man on earth.

The epistemological and metaphysical premises of Nietzscheanism, however, Merezhkovsky brushed aside. He did not even discuss them at length

20. "Budushchii Rim," *PSS*, 23:160.

21. "A. N. Maikov," *Vechnye sputniki*, in *PSS*, 18:71.

22. For the lecture itself see "O prichinakh upadka i o novykh tehnicheskikh sovremennoi russkoi literatury," *PSS*, 18:175–275. See also Ralph E. Matlaw, "The Manifesto of Russian Symbolism," *Slavic and East European Journal*, 15, no. 3 (Fall 1957): 177–91. Zinaida Vengerova's article "Poety simvolisty vo Frantsii," *Vestnik Evropy*, 1892, no. 9, pp. 115–43, was also important in diffusing knowledge about French symbolism. Briusov first learned about Verlaine from Merezhkovsky's lecture; see Rice, "Briusov," p. 29.

until 1915. In 1893 he simply refused to accept the Nietzschean idea that the world is meaningless and ultimately incomprehensible. Nietzsche's conviction that higher truths do not exist (there are only more beautiful illusions) was still in the background of Merezhkovsky's consciousness; he had grasped and concentrated on the Nietzschean celebration of beauty and life. The essential thrust of Nietzscheanism, in particular its "affirmation of the earth," its concentration on life in this world, was in direct contradiction to Merezhkovsky's desire to use art as a theurgy to reach other worlds. A common concern for the truth of man, a hope of ennobling him, and a mutual love of beauty were the points at which the conflicting orientations intersected. And both found the world of Philistines repulsive. But a true synthesis had not been achieved; one or the other element was bound to prevail.

In the space of only two years Merezhkovsky opted for Nietzscheanism. His earlier hopes that symbolist poetry would enable the artist to reach the people and create a new national culture were clearly not being fulfilled. Symbolist art was far too esoteric to serve as the basis for any popular movement. Even artists had difficulty understanding one another's work. Nietzscheanism provided theoretical justification for Merezhkovsky's failure to reach "the people"; it permitted him to acknowledge his secession from populism with finality and conviction and to proclaim proudly the individualism and elitism which had formerly been a source of embarrassment and guilt. The poet was not only a prophet; he became a hero—a "hero of contemplation." His creativity was the "highest form of action."²³ Opposing materialism and economic progress, Merezhkovsky insisted that the frenetic activity of economic man deals with trivia. It is the artist who destroys the old life and creates the new; a warrior for true culture, his field of action is the human spirit.

Between 1894 and 1896 Merezhkovsky exalted Nietzschean values and mocked Christian asceticism and humility. Militant and strident, these writings constituted his answer to social changes which threatened to leave artists in a backwater. Directed by Finance Minister Sergei Witte, the government's industrialization drive was succeeding. By 1896 a wave of industrial strikes signaled the advent of the "proletariat"—to Merezhkovsky, the urban "mass man." Nietzscheanism enabled Merezhkovsky to affirm his own importance, to set himself off against the vulgar "herd." A creed of defiant, asocial individualism, Merezhkovsky's Nietzscheanism exalted the creator in revolt, Zarathustra leaving the marketplace.

During these years Merezhkovsky attempted to make himself into a superman—to live according to Zarathustra. Symbolism had not led to faith. Deliberately turning his back on "other worlds," he set about overcoming

23. "Pushkin," *Vechnye sputniky*, in *PSS*, 18:137.

the “fear of life” which had enveloped him since childhood. Determined to forget the “mystery in all things,” the “eternal darkness and horror,” he would strive for earthly joys instead.²⁴ “Remain faithful to the earth,” Zarathustra had counseled. “Do not believe those who speak of otherworldly hopes! Poison mixers are they, whether they know it or not! Despisers of life are they, decaying and poisoned themselves. . . . so let them go! . . . To sin against the earth is now the most dreadful thing. . . .”²⁵ Obeying Zarathustra’s dictum, “Learn how to laugh,” Merezhkovsky also sought Zarathustra’s “dancing god.”

Soul became psyche as his search for higher truths assumed a secular form. Art and sensuality would make life bearable. Man would create himself, transcend his present human limitations. Beauty became Merezhkovsky’s god, and he based a new way of life on its worship. Featuring adoration of the flesh and defiance of established verities, beauty’s pioneer was the artist. Integrity to the artist’s personal goals and courage to defy convention were the only virtues; banality and ugliness, the only sins. All other forms of morality were obsolete. “For the new beauty,” Merezhkovsky proclaimed, “we will break all laws, transgress all limits.”²⁶ No constraints, no inhibitions to aesthetic expression would remain standing. For the artist, “all is permitted.”

Julian the Apostate (1895) is Merezhkovsky’s most famous work of this period. Essentially a Nietzschean tract, its central figure is based on the Roman emperor who attempted to restore paganism, and it exalts courage, worship of beauty, and defiance of death. Originally entitling the work *Outcast*, Merezhkovsky refused to call Julian an apostate. For him Julian was the prophet of a new faith. A successful novel in terms of sales, it was quickly translated into the major European languages. But basically it was a *succès de scandale*, and its characters only vehicles for ideas—thus its present oblivion.

Julian was obviously Merezhkovsky, or more exactly, the new man Merezhkovsky hoped to become. Julian’s paganism resulted from his having fallen in love with a statue of Aphrodite while still a young man (an allusion to Merezhkovsky’s experience in Greece). Hating the Christians who smashed such statues, Julian determined to destroy them. He referred to Christians as the “crows of Galilee,” and condemned them, their slave morality, and their obsession with death and suffering. Julian saw their symbol, the cross, as an instrument of torture; it did not merit the worship of free men. To their sickly

24. D. S. Merezhkovsky, *Smert' bogov: Julian Otstupnik*, in *PSS*, 1:183–85. Originally published as “Otverzhenyi” (“Outcast”) in *Severnyi vestnik*, 1895, no. 1, pp. 71–112; no. 2, pp. 73–125; no. 3, pp. 1–52; no. 4, pp. 1–46; no. 5, pp. 1–35, no. 6, pp. 41–88.

25. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in Walter Kaufman, ed., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York, 1968), p. 125.

26. D. S. Merezhkovsky, “Deti nochi,” as quoted by Modest Gofman, *Kniga o russkikh poetakh posledniago desiatiletia* (Moscow, 1909), pp. 13–14. These lines are omitted from the *PSS* version; see 22:171.

religion, Julian counterposed his own—worship of the “living soul of beauty.”²⁷ Based on self-exaltation and joyous love, the bright happiness it brings men will eliminate all shadows, all anxious questioning. “Despondency, fear, sacrifice, and prayer” will all become superfluous. Man will decide his own destiny, create his own meaning. Aesthetic gratification and the excitement of battle and struggle will bring man such ecstasy that he will cease to think of death. “Eternal Olympian laughter” will drive out the sound of weeping in a new world where men themselves are gods: “Do not say: the gods *already* are no more, but rather, the gods, *as yet* are not! They are not but they shall be, not in the heavens but here on earth. We shall all be as gods—only it is necessary to possess great daring such as no one on earth has had, not even the hero of Macedon himself.”²⁸

Julian teaches man how to conquer the fear of death. Meeting it courageously on the field of battle, he proclaims, “Let the Galileans triumph, we shall conquer later on. The reign of Godlike men, eternally laughing like the sun, will be on earth.”²⁹ Laughter is Julian’s leitmotif. A symbol of light-heartedness, it has been considered the weapon of the devil by many Christians, including Baudelaire.

The Nietzschean exaltation of sensuality (“Sex, for free hearts, innocent and free, the garden happiness of the earth . . .”),³⁰ muted in Julian, is the theme of Merezhkovsky’s introduction to his 1896 translation of Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe*. Seconding Nietzsche, Merezhkovsky charged that Christian asceticism was directly responsible for man’s misery; it had forced him to deny his most vital instincts. Physical love, he said, is not sinful; it is “the eternal return of the human essence to nature, to the bosom of unconscious life. Love and nature are one and the same; love is the passionate flight of the soul to primordial spontaneous health from that artificial cultivated sickness which we call culture.”³¹ The entire essay lauds “guiltless and natural love” and bewails its absence from the life of intellectuals. Eros, Merezhkovsky claimed, has departed from the cities; it has retreated to “the quiet fields of the shepherds, with goats and sheep in desolate gardens, where one can hear the buzz of the bees and the fall of ripe fruits through the branches, [to] the

27. *Smert' bogov*, pp. 275–76.

28. “Otverzhenyi,” 6:53–54. The entire passage is omitted from the *PSS*. The later version deletes the most blasphemous passages and de-emphasizes the joyousness of paganism.

29. *Smert' bogov*, pp. 335–36, and “Otverzhenyi,” 6:75. The last fragment is omitted from the *PSS*, and in the original version the sun itself was almost a god.

30. Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 300. Soloviev’s *Meaning of Love* (1893), which sanctified physical love as an expression of the Divine, may also have influenced Merezhkovsky.

31. “Dafnis i Khloia,” *PSS*, 19:220.

empty shores of the sea, in forgotten corners of nature where, to this very day, people are still like gods and beasts. And here they still lead their childish untaught play which reveals the secret meaning of universal life. The voluptuousness of Pan . . . pure nymphs helping him, sheep and goats copulating . . . teach the children love. Here love moves rivers, the breeze breathes love.”³² But the natural and spontaneous life is gone; old forms cannot be resurrected. New forms, suiting modern life, must be created.

Man still does not know what those new forms are. But they cannot emerge until the old order has been destroyed; destruction, therefore, has priority. But destruction is a task for supermen. Only they are capable of authentic rebellion, of pushing forward into the void. Lesser men do not have the strength to maintain their revolt; they lack staying power and cannot bear the loneliness of long-term rebellion. They do not possess the courage to proclaim their own goals. Seeking social acceptance and security, after a brief show of defiance, they backslide to conventional behavior.³³

New Verse (1896) exalts heroes who challenge tradition, who wrestle with God, in order to create a truly new culture. Michelangelo, in particular, is lauded as a lonely superman, a tragic hero, whose stubborn attempt to dethrone old values was unceasing and uncompromising:

You [Michelangelo] cursed art, but while your mouth,
 Without faith, in torment summoned God,
 Your soul was morose and empty.
 And God did not alleviate your sadness.
 And you did not wait for salvation from people.
 Your mouth, with contempt, fell silent forever.
 You no longer prayed or grumbled,
 Embittered in lonely suffering.
 You perished, not believing in anything.
 And there you stood, unconquered by fate.
 You, a proud face, bowed before me.
 In despair, and peace, and profundity.
 Like a demon, hideous and great.³⁴

“Song of the Bacchanal” glorifies the Bacchanalian orgies, symbol of the elimination of all restraints. The Dionysian (ceaseless flux, instinct) overpowers the Apollonian (structure, reason), thus liberating the inner man. Through ecstasy, he achieves oblivion and overcomes the fear of death:

Do not be ashamed of nudity.
 Fear neither love nor death.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

34. “Mikel'-Anzhelo,” *PSS*, 22:141.

Do not fear our beauty.
 . . . To you, O youth
 Despondency is the greatest sin.
 There is one exploit in life—joy.
 There is one truth in life—laughter.
 Our groans are just like laughter.
 Approach, all powerful Bacchus, dare
 Break all limits and all laws
 With innocent laughter.
 We will drink the nectar of life,
 To the dawn, like gods in the heavens.
 With laughter we will conquer death.
 With mad Bacchanal in our hearts.³⁵

The line “Our groans are just like laughter” suggests that Nietzscheanism had not enabled Merezhkovsky to overcome suffering. Arsinoe, a character in *Julian*, is the spokesman for Merezhkovsky’s continuing reservations. Having led Julian to the forbidden Greek statues, Arsinoe is directly responsible for his paganism; therefore, her subsequent conversion to Christianity is crucial. Paganism had failed to bring her happiness; it had not obviated her distaste for life. Life, she tells Julian, is “more terrible than death.” Desiring to be reunited with her recently deceased sister, she is converted to Christianity. Happiness *after* death, at least, will be hers. Determined to squelch her intellect, she will achieve belief. “Intelligence is more seductive than any passion,” but through belief, life and death will become equal. She will then be immune from life’s vagaries.³⁶ Arsinoe’s statements indicate that at the very height of his rebellion, in a book celebrating an antichrist, Merezhkovsky was still unable to overcome his fears and enjoy life. The poem “De Profundis” (after Oscar Wilde) also reveals the confusion and conflict raging within him:

I love evil, I love sin.
 I love the daring of crime.
 My enemy scoffs at me.
 ‘There is no God: ardor and prayer are fruitless.’
 I bow low before You.
 He answers, ‘stand and be free.’
 I run once again to Your love.
 He tempts proud and evil.
 ‘Dare taste the fruit of knowledge.
 You will have strength equal to mine.’
 Save, save me! I wait.
 I believe. You see, I believe in a miracle.

35. “Pesnia Vakkhanok,” *PSS*, 22:45–46.

36. *Smert’ bogov*, pp. 240–41. The reader is reminded of the death of Merezhkovsky’s mother only a few years earlier.

I do not fall silent. I do not go away.
 And I will knock at your door.
 In me burns a desire for blood.
 In me is a hidden seed of decay.
 O give me pure love.
 O give me tender tears.³⁷

In this one poem, Nietzschean revolt, Christian love, *fin de siècle* decadence, and Schopenhauerian quietism (“But sometimes it seems that joy and sadness / and life and death are one and the same / Peacefully to live, peacefully to die / That is my final consolation”) all clash. Though no single world view emerged victorious, the desire for Christian love is most prominent.

Works written between 1896 and 1899 indicate Merezhkovsky’s growing reservations about Nietzscheanism. While still living a life devoted to art and worship of the flesh, Merezhkovsky was inwardly groping for new values. Beauty was not enough. The pessimism of “Children of the Night” betrays his disillusion with Nietzscheanism as a guide to life:

Children of grief. children of the night.
 Wait, our prophets will approach.
 With hope in our hearts,
 Dying we yearn
 For worlds not yet created.
 We have a presentiment of the future.
 Our speech is daring,
 But we have been condemned to death.
 Too early forerunners
 Of a too slow spring.

 We are hanging over an abyss.
 Children of darkness, waiting for the sun.
 The sun will come, and like shadows,
 We will die in its rays.³⁸

Nietzsche had stated that the first generation is a sacrifice. Presumably, Merezhkovsky and his contemporaries were the unfortunate casualties of a transition era; they would not live to see the new world.

His treatment of Greek culture shifted to an emphasis on its tragic aspects, and he tended to regard its joy as almost inconsequential. Apparently the emotional gratification he had sought in Nietzscheanism still eluded him; his life (like Nietzsche’s) remained basically ascetic. As his doubts about pure

37. “De Profundis,” *PSS*, 22:176–77.

38. “Deti nochi,” Gofman and *PSS*, 22:171.

paganism increased, he immersed himself in its art even more and translated additional Greek tragedies. His version of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* appeared in 1896. In his prefatory remarks he stated that the issue was that Oedipus posited himself against the entire world order, attempting to make himself a god. But the ending, he noted, was almost Christian in its tenderness. His translation of *Antigone* appeared in 1899; he considered it a tragedy of voluptuousness and wisdom which prefigured the Christian theme of sacrifice for an ideal. Through these comments and translations Merezhkovsky made knowledge of the culture of classic Greece and Rome part of the cultural baggage of the era.

With all his doubts, he was still in love with beauty. Between 1896 and 1900 he and Hippus made several trips to Greece and Italy. The Italian Renaissance particularly interested him as an attempt to combine pagan and Christian ideals. An article on Leonardo da Vinci appeared in 1897 and a biography of him, *Birth of the Gods*, in 1900. Merezhkovsky also wrote several imitations of Italian novellas of the fifteenth century; "Love is Stronger Than Death" is typical of the Neo-Platonism which began to predominate in his works.³⁹ Directing his sensuality to visual enjoyment, he withdrew ever more from society and became almost indifferent to real life. As before, his associations were confined to fellow artists.

Eternal Companions (1897) is a collection of essays, many published previously, which reveal Merezhkovsky's misgivings about Nietzscheanism as a creed. Still convinced that art is the means to truth, he read extensively in the classics of world literature. (This was unusual for the time; the intelligentsia did not value culture.) Treating each author as an exemplar of the consequences of a particular world view, Merezhkovsky counterposed love to struggle, balance to extremism, and purpose to endless flux and moral chaos. Inner harmony remained his ideal, and he became less hostile to Christianity. The essays on Flaubert, Ibsen, and Dostoevsky clarify his disillusionment with Nietzscheanism as a guide to life, and the essay on Pushkin set forth his criteria for a new creed.

To Merezhkovsky, Flaubert symbolized the failure of art as religion. Flaubert sought oblivion in aesthetic creativity; he "fled from the world to art as a hermit flees to a cave." But Flaubert was unsuccessful; his pursuit of beauty ceased to be an abstract principle and became a mania. Seeing both himself and others only as objects to be studied, Flaubert lost his capacity for feeling and his moral sense. Sacrificing happiness and love, he created his own loneliness. Unable to love, he became fascinated with evil and depravity; virtue seemed boring. Merezhkovsky concluded that genius unguided by love

39. "Ital'ianskiiia novelly," *PSS*, 19:5–180.

will “devour the heart” and destroy the artist himself. Probably he was aware of the fate of artists such as Rimbaud whose experiments with their own sensations led them to madness.⁴⁰

Ibsen is Merezhkovsky’s symbol of the negative aspects of individualism—its stance of perennial revolt. All Ibsen’s heroes, Merezhkovsky noted, are essentially alone and unable to achieve either inner peace or social integration. Though they do overcome restrictions, the defiant rebel within them is insatiable. Uncommitted to anything or anyone, they lead lives that will always lack meaning. Hedda Gabler epitomizes this nihilism; she demonstrates that a person needs a positive goal, that it is “not possible to live this way.” Ibsen himself died lonely and unhappy. Unwittingly, Merezhkovsky concluded, Ibsen proved that revolt cannot be a way of life, that affirmation is also necessary.⁴¹

The essay on Dostoevsky continues this theme; his characters all testify to the failure of secular individualism. Ivan Karamazov was responsible for the death of his father and was himself ruined. Kirillov consented to Shatov’s murder and killed himself, and Raskolnikov actually murdered two old women. Although Raskolnikov was ultimately saved, it was love, not intellect, that saved him. The instrument of his salvation, moreover, was not a superman but a humble prostitute. Intellect, Merezhkovsky warns, must be guided by an ethical ideal, by love for one’s fellow man. Otherwise it results in the “passion of fanaticism,” the tendency to disregard human life when it obstructs the fanatic’s abstract goal.⁴²

According to Merezhkovsky, Dostoevsky was the only writer with the courage and vision necessary to identify the problems of modern man. He neither ignored the complexities of modern life nor advocated a retreat to simpler times. His characters live in the city; they grapple with the very same problems afflicting all men today: “He is us, with all our thoughts and suffering . . . , he knows us . . . knows our most secret thoughts, the most criminal desires of our hearts.”⁴³ (Note Merezhkovsky’s allusion to his own decadence.) Dostoevsky had realized that freedom could be a curse. Unchecked by faith and love, it could lead to all sorts of horrors. Dostoevsky had also foreseen the advent of the superman. Calling him the “man-God,” he had specifically warned against him and advocated a return to religion. Only through religion, he said, can man achieve inner wholeness; only the consciousness of brotherhood under one Father in heaven can enable man to love.

40. “Flobert,” *PSS*, 17:189–204. The inclusion of the essay (written in 1888) in *Vechnye sputniki* suggests that Merezhkovsky had returned to his earlier conclusion that art alone cannot provide values by which to live.

41. “Ibsen,” *Vechnye sputniki*, in *PSS*, 17:240–42.

42. “Dostoevskii,” *PSS*, 18:14.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Although Dostoevsky himself wavered between the ethical idealism of Father Zosima and the cynical realism of the Grand Inquisitor, he posed the problem—the relation of Christianity to life in this world—which, Merezhkovsky insisted, must be answered.

The essay on Pushkin marks the beginning of Merezhkovsky's life work—the unification of paganism and Christianity in a higher synthesis. Each, he said, embodies an "eternal principle," each is half of a yet unknown truth. "Paganism" is love of the earth; Christianity is love of the sky, man's search for an Ideal. Paganism strives for happiness on earth; it values freedom, beauty, culture, and prosperity and is individualistic, realistic, and practical. Christianity strives toward eternal life. Scorning this world, it values asceticism, humility, and altruism. Christians refuse to accept the idea that anything is impossible; they are imbued with a limitless search for the "eternal and endless." The "golden mean" is foreign to them. Neither paganism nor Christianity is sufficient in itself; paganism denies the soul, and Christianity denies the body. The struggle between these two "eternal principles," Merezhkovsky argued, gives history its dynamic. Nietzscheanism, positivism, and utilitarianism are merely variants of secular paganism.⁴⁴

Only Pushkin was able to unify the two principles. Paganism accounts for the beauty and clarity of his poetry, for his love of life. But his love of all people, his compassion for those who are suffering, is Christian. Though Pushkin admired Peter the Great, he sympathized with Peter's victims. (Merezhkovsky refers to Pushkin's poem *The Bronze Horseman*. The statue of Peter comes to life during a flood and tramples a humble clerk to death.) Pushkin's idealism is also Christian; his *Eugene Onegin* holds the life of the "superfluous man" up to scorn. Pleasure is not enough. Merezhkovsky stressed Pushkin's love of freedom, his hatred of tyranny in all its forms—autocracy, conventional morality, and mob rule. This too, he said, derived from a combination of Christianity, which frees the soul, and paganism, which frees the body.

But the means by which Pushkin combined the "two truths" is not known; their unity was unconscious. Unable to follow him, his successors in Russian literature gravitated to either the pagan or the Christian pole. The pagans were atheists and materialists; the Christians rejected art, sensuality, and even worshiped suffering. The generation of the sixties combined the worst features of both worlds; they were pagan in their materialism but Christian in their asceticism. If Russians could fathom Pushkin's source of inner strength, they would be able to resolve all conflicts including the perennial problem of Russia and the West. Pushkin, Merezhkovsky claimed, was a

44. "Pushkin," *PSS*, 18:130–32, 136–37, 144, 154.

universalist, but he never advocated Russia's losing her own identity. His successors, however, were either Westernizers, who would make Russia into a copy of Europe, or Slavophiles, who resisted all change and made the primitive peasant their ideal.

Since the late eighties Merezhkovsky had been associated with *Severnii vestnik*, the only important "thick journal" that accepted writing without social relevance and was willing to publish the symbolist writers. But in 1897 Merezhkovsky quarreled with its editor, Flekser-Volynsky, over the necessity of developing precise new aesthetic principles. Flekser was a vague Kantian idealist; Merezhkovsky and Hippus sought a more definite creed.

Merezhkovsky's crusade for a new art, however, was successful. In 1898 a new journal, *Mir iskusstva*, was founded by Sergei Diaghilev. It was exclusively devoted to art and aesthetic problems, and its founding is usually considered the beginning of the "silver age." Its guiding spirits were all Nietzscheans of sorts. Diaghilev, Minsky, Filosofov, Shestakov, Bakst, and Benois were all devoted to art and individualism. The ideological differences which ultimately wrecked the journal in 1904 were not yet apparent. Religion was one of them.

In 1899 Merezhkovsky decidedly rejected Nietzscheanism and announced his "turn to Christ." In 1900 he, Hippus, and Filosofov began their attempt to create a new Christianity based on the Second Coming of Christ as prophesied in the Apocalypse. The New Christianity had a marked Nietzschean touch. Arguing that "historical Christianity" was incomplete because the New Testament contained only part of Christ's full message, Merezhkovsky retained the individualism, aestheticism, and sensuality of his Nietzschean period. Exactly how to combine them with Christianity was yet to be revealed. The Christian tenets of his new faith were love and eternal life; apropos the latter, Merezhkovsky insisted that both the body and the soul would be resurrected. The New Christianity was a direct, though implicit, response to Nietzsche's shortcomings as Merezhkovsky perceived them. For the rest of his life Merezhkovsky tried to meet the challenge to religious faith posed by Nietzsche, to combine the best of both worlds in a new creed. He still advocated destruction of the old order and based his new views on the Apocalyptic prophesy of "a new sky and a new earth."

Though Merezhkovsky began to speak, in general terms, of the failure of aesthetic individualism, he waited until 1915 to describe the inner turmoil Nietzscheanism had caused him. *Two Secrets of Russian Poetry: Tjutchev and Nekrasov* (1915) reveals the personal anguish he experienced during the nineties.⁴⁵ Aestheticism, he admitted, had brought him to the verge of

45. D. S. Merezhkovsky, *Dve tajny russkoi poezii* (Petrograd, 1915).

suicide. The fault was Tiutchev's. It was Tiutchev's, not Nietzsche's, because by 1915 Merezhkovsky had become so Christian that he denied his former views. (Tiutchev did influence the symbolist poets, but that is beside the point.) As early as 1908 he described Nietzscheanism as "a childhood sickness . . . fatal to adults," and denied that he was ever "seduced by that chaff."⁴⁶ By 1911 and 1914 he had deleted passages offensive to Christianity in the two editions of his collected works. By 1915 Merezhkovsky had positively re-evaluated the populist poet Nekrasov, who had been the symbol of everything Merezhkovsky had previously detested in art. Now sympathetic to the Socialist Revolutionaries, Merezhkovsky exhorted Russian artists to learn from Nekrasov.

Tiutchev's spirit, Merezhkovsky proclaimed, was a sickness; it was poisoning Russia:

The sick man knows his pain better than all the doctors because he knows it from within; thus we know Tiutchev better than all the critics. . . . Today in Russia, suicide and suicidal loneliness are as much an everyday occurrence as capital punishment. Who has done this? Russian decadents, Balmont, Blok, Briusov, Bely, Z. Hippius? Yes, they, but through them . . . Tiutchev. . . . And the suicides themselves do not know that the cyanide of potassium with which they poison themselves is *Silence, Silentium*.

Keep quiet, conceal and hide

Your feelings and dreams.

Be able to live only in yourself.

This is our sickness—individualism, loneliness, asociability. . . .⁴⁷

The aesthetes of the nineties, Merezhkovsky explained, tried to carry out Tiutchev's idea of solitude. Accepting Tiutchev's conviction that communication between people is impossible and that friendship does not exist, they secluded themselves. Hoping to become invulnerable, they tried to make themselves into supermen, to take God's place. But only God is invulnerable; as human beings the aesthetes still suffered. Indeed, loneliness increased their suffering. Withdrawing even further from the world, they tried to obliterate consciousness by either overstimulating or deadening their senses and retreating from activity and life.

The atheism of the aesthetes, Merezhkovsky emphasized, could only lead to despair. A world predicated on the absence of God cannot have any order or meaning. With no higher good, conflicting human will becomes the only law; struggle becomes the only constant. Such a world is too frightening for

46. D. S. Merezhkovsky, *V tikhom omute*, in *PSS*, 16:54 (first published in 1908).

47. *Dve tainy*, p. 13. Briusov's writings also show extreme loneliness during these years. See Rice, "Briusov," p. 62.

man to accept. To preserve some meaning, he invents an impersonal God and calls it "blind will," "dionysian flux," the mystical "All," or some other form of pantheism. But names do not solve the problem of meaning. God himself is lost in the chaos; chaos becomes God. Pantheism's denial of personal immortality removes all source of hope. The brief period of earthly self-affirmation fails to compensate for eternal death. Happiness, sensual enjoyment, and beauty—all pale at the thought of the abyss that lies ahead. Furthermore, in a meaningless universe, nothing is sacred. If the universe is unknowable, moral standards are impossible. Without a referent, good cannot be distinguished from evil. Indeed, if God is All, he must sanction evil and suffering themselves. Evil thus becomes acceptable, even predominant. Men cease to regard one another as brothers of one father: "At night all cats are gray; in pantheism all gods are demons."⁴⁸ In a world of unchecked evil, existence is indeed a curse, Nirvana or nothingness, a deliverance. Suicide again becomes attractive.

Realizing all this, Tiutchev still hesitated to admit his preference for darkness, his love of evil, and his belief that since the world is illusion, action is futile. Thus his "Silentium." "Poor Tiutchev, poor us," Merezhkovsky concluded. "He only related what went on in most of us."⁴⁹

Nietzscheanism failed to bring Merezhkovsky happiness, and it did not deliver him from fear. Instead, it actually increased his misery and made him actively desire death. Tiutchev's alleged conclusion, "There is no need to strive for chaos because life is already chaos, no need to strive for death because life is already death," was Merezhkovsky's testimony to his own despair. His previous allusions to criminal thoughts and to the fascination of evil become clear. (Devil worship existed in avant-garde circles of the *fin de siècle* in both East and West. Both Hippus and Briusov affected a demonic pose.) Again referring to himself, Merezhkovsky said that from his desperate conclusion Tiutchev, "having recoiled in horror, grasped at Christianity like a drowning man at a straw."⁵⁰ Merezhkovsky's attempt to create a life centered on art crumbled before the prospect of the abyss that loomed ahead of him. Reluctantly he realized that he was not a superman, that he could not sustain a philosophy of self-exaltation in a cosmic void. Thus he began to seek a specifically Christian faith with absolute values and eternal life.

Taking upon himself the role of Christian prophet, Merezhkovsky called on the aesthetes (whom he now called decadents) to follow him in his New Christianity. Russia, he said, is like a dry forest; the life-giving sap of faith is gone. The decadents are the highest branches of the trees. When the inevitable

48. Ibid., pp. 81–94.

49. Ibid., p. 97.

50. Ibid., pp. 95–97.

lightning strikes, it will hit them first. From them, the entire forest will go up in flames.⁵¹ In answer to Zarathustra's statement, "The people . . . are becoming weary of themselves and languish even more than for water—for fire . . . herald of the Great Noon,"⁵² for Merezhkovsky the "Great Noon" was the Second Coming of Christ. Having been through the abyss (the term is used by both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, but the imagery here is Nietzsche's), man thirsts for truth—for the Word of God and for the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth. Again answering Nietzsche, Merezhkovsky insisted that the universe is not ceaseless flux; it has a definite meaning, a definite beginning, and a definite end:

[We] believe in the end, see the end, want the end . . . , at least the beginning of the end. In our eyes is an expression which has never before been in human eyes—in our hearts, feelings which people have never before experienced. . . . We have been on the very edge of the abyss, on too great a height where nothing grows. There below in the valleys, high oaks leave roots deep in the soil. . . . And we, weak, small, hardly visible from the earth, open to all wind and storms, almost deprived of roots, almost withered. From the early morning and from the heights of the oaks still surrounded by fog—we see that which no one else sees; we are the first to see the Sun of the Great Day already shining; we are the first of all to say to Him, "Aye, approach, O Lord."⁵³

Merezhkovsky's evolution from aestheticism to religion was recapitulated, in varying degrees, by many Russian artists and intellectuals. By 1900 Nietzsche was in vogue and the beginning of a spiritual revival was evident in art and philosophy. Though Merezhkovsky's conscious search for a new religion was the exception, a free-floating mysticism, a new spirituality, and various attempts to define the essence of Christian doctrine and delete the rest were common. Viacheslav Ivanov's *Hellenic Religion of the Suffering God*, which treated Dionysus as a precursor of Christ, is an example of the new interest in religious questions. Nicholas Zernov argues that a Russian religious renaissance occurred during this period.⁵⁴

The Nietzscheanism of the nineties had served as a battering ram to break down various orthodoxies. Merezhkovsky himself viewed the nineties as a period of "religious trial," as he and his fellow aesthetes had attempted to

51. D. S. Merezhkovsky, *Ne mir, no mech*, in *PSS*, 13:84.

52. Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 284.

53. D. S. Merezhkovsky, *L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii*, in *PSS*, 12:272.

54. Nicholas Zernov, *The Russian Religious Renaissance* (London, 1963). Note the parallel to developments in France, where the turn of the century witnessed a number of conversions to Catholicism. At that time J. K. Huysmans, author of *A rebours* (*Against the Grain*), felt he was facing a choice between Catholicism and suicide, and returned to the church.

redefine good and evil and carve out a new way of life. Their revolt, he said, was a revolt against the entire order of the universe; metaphysically it was the “nonacceptance of the world.”⁵⁵ By turning their backs on objective reality, and refusing to accept the limits of reason, facts, and logic, he and his group became the first “self-generated mystics” of Russian society. Theirs, he insisted, was the most radical revolution of all. Having experienced the futility of amoral individualism and asocial aestheticism, they sought an entirely new creation. They challenged traditional Christianity and broke the populist monopoly on art and thought.

Russian society was changing rapidly; clearly the old order was doomed. By 1900 the left itself was split. Marxism emerged as a strong rival to populism, and by 1903 Marxism was itself polarized into Bolshevik and Menshevik wings. Also in 1903 a group of former Marxists, including Berdiaev and Bulgakov, began their attempt to supplement Marx with ethical idealism. Repressed spiritual forces were surfacing, and on all sides there was a search for new ideals. Great expectations coexisted with premonitions of doom; their combination gave the age the air of excitement, of philosophic urgency, which is its hallmark.⁵⁶ Prometheans of all types hoped to remake the world in their own image. A new appreciation of art, cultural creativity, and the individual began to percolate through educated society, and slowly artists gained an audience.

Nietzscheanism was prominent—but as a mood, a set of attitudes, rather than a doctrine. Too diffuse to serve as the basis of a new order, its aestheticism and individualism were grafted onto other philosophies. Symbolism remained the predominant mode of aesthetic expression, and it is the amalgam of symbolist mysticism and Nietzschean individualism that gives the creative work of the age its distinctive flavor. Their mutual preference for inner experience, for the subjective vision, pervaded all the arts and philosophy. To use Berdiaev’s words, the “wings of Dionysus” swept over Russia.⁵⁷ In different ways, artists and thinkers attempted to transcend the limits of empirical reality, to experiment with new combinations of sight and sound, to conjure up other worlds. Atonality in music and nonobjective painting both exemplify the search for new means of expressing emotions and states of mind.

Tremendous variety resulted; both superstition and spirituality flourished. Experiments in the occult, often in combination with orgiastic theories, existed alongside movements for church reform. Unseen forces, divine or diabolic, tended to replace scientific explanations. Astrology became popular. “Skorpion,” a symbolist publishing house, was named after the astrological symbol

55. *Ne mir, no mech*, pp. 82–83.

56. Berdiaev, *Dream*, p. 141.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

of the demonic. *Vesy* (*The Scales*), a symbolist journal, is the symbol of the planet Libra, ruled by Venus. Even the secular decadents stressed the "inner man," and favored emotion over intellect, imagination over reason. Resolutely they ignored economic, legal, and political questions.

After the Revolution of 1905, however, many aesthetes were politicized. The same attitudes then formed a natural complement to millenarian radicalism. Newly conscious of the masses, and desiring to be integrated into society in order to influence it, many formerly apolitical aesthetes supported various schemes of eschatological communism. Merezhkovsky and Hippius were close to the neopopulist Socialist Revolutionaries. Blok, Bely, and Briusov supported the Bolsheviks, and Briusov actually became a party member. Revolution became a theme of art. Briusov's "Fire-Angel," later set to music by Stravinsky, symbolized the redemptive powers of violence. Skriabin, a follower of Nietzsche, expected a creative and free new order to emerge from the crucible of revolution. To him, the masses were the dionysiac, the source of primitive strength. Debating the nature and function of art and the relation of artist and people, symbolist artists were divided between Apollonians (Briusov, the Acmeists) and Dionysians (Blok, Bely, Viacheslav Ivanov). The latter desired to merge with the people, to transcend individuation by creating an organic society based on a religious conception of art. Politically, they viewed revolution as part of a redemptive process.⁵⁸

After 1905 Nietzscheanism and mysticism even pervaded the left. Plekhanov, founder of Russian Marxism, bewailed his followers' new interest in religious questions.⁵⁹ Three Bolsheviks, Gorky (the famous writer), Lunacharsky (later minister of culture), and Bogdanov, created a Nietzschean form of Marxism and called themselves the "God-Constructors."⁶⁰ They were one of the targets of Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908), which aimed to reinforce a purely materialist line. But Lenin's own stress on revolutionary will was itself a form of prometheanism: it pitted the impatient revolutionary against the laws of history which bade him wait for economic processes to develop. And Trotsky's oft-quoted prediction that under communism the average man will attain the height of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx, and

58. For the polemic between the artists see Victor Erlich, *The Double Image* (Baltimore, 1964), pp. 70–74, and Rice, "Briusov," chap. 5, esp. pp. 133–77. In 1905 a number of artists, including Blok, Bely, and Ivanov, calling themselves "mystical anarchists," founded a journal, *Fakely*, to promulgate their views. *Zolotoe Runo* was its successor. For Blok's politics see Erlich, *Double Image*, pp. 13–14 and 106–17.

59. Georgii Plekhanov, *Sochineniia* (Moscow, 1924), 14:318.

60. See Kline, "Changing Attitudes Toward the Individual" and "The God-Builders." See also his "Theoretische Ethik im russischen Frühmarxismus," *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte*, 9 (1963): 269–79, for a description of the views of the Nietzschean Marxists Lunacharsky, Volsky, Bazarov, and Bogdanov.

that above those heights new peaks will arise,⁶¹ prophesies a Communist superman and bears the imprint of the “silver age.”

There is a peculiar parallel between Russian Nietzscheanism and Marxism. Both developed as a result of the obsolescence of populism; both were reactions to industrialization. In different ways, each welcomed the demise of the old order and aimed to liberate and ennoble man. Equally aware of the isolation and anomie of the city-dweller, they attacked different aspects of his malaise. Marxists stressed the eradication of the economic and political causes of misery; Nietzscheans, the psychological. To the former, industrialization and the advent of the proletariat presaged the beginning of the end of exploitation; to the latter, would-be aristocrats, it presaged the extinction of “personality” and culture by a faceless mass of new barbarians. Merezhkovsky, for example, complained that in the burgeoning cities “to reach one another is not possible and remains hopeless. . . . Each is more alone in the crowd than in the desert. . . . I and they, I and it, alien, black, dead. . . . Having conquered the forces of nature, people themselves become forces. Human waves approach, depart, rise, fall. I do not know anyone and no one knows me. Every face is the same; it is impossible to distinguish one from the other. . . . [People] become drops of water in a waterfall which plunges into an abyss, into nothingness. All are united in this nothingness.”⁶² To him, loneliness, isolation, anonymity, and uprootedness are the price of progress, and he refused to pay it. Mysticism and aestheticism were his answer to what Max Weber calls rationalization, the “disenchantment of the world.”

For Merezhkovsky, and for others like him, the turn of the century presaged an uncertain future. Hoping to have something to hold onto in the maelstrom of the new era, something far more tangible than vague mysticism, they sought to supplement the superman with eternal verities, to combine individualism and love. The thirst for faith, for rootedness, for a unifying philosophy of life, and for some sort of closely knit community, assumed an increasingly compelling form.

61. Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Ann Arbor, 1971), p. 156.

62. *Nc mir, no mech*, p. 98. This passage is reminiscent of Baudelaire's comments on being in the midst of a “human sea,” the crowds of the Paris streets. But Baudelaire was a “dandy” who used the crowd as his mirror. Merezhkovsky rarely ventured into it.