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The Problem of the Overman in Solov’ev and Nietzsche

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the problem of the overman becomes one of the most discussed problems in Russia. This was mainly a consequence of the boom in the popularity of Nietzsche’s writings; however, to a significant degree it was conditioned also by Solov’ev’s works. The religious pathos of Solov’ev’s philosophy prepared Russian specialists in the humanities to take an attentive interest in and eventually to accept precisely the “overhuman” aspect of Nietzschean thought. It would not be wrong to assert that the special nature of the Russian Nietzscheanism of the Silver Age (which encompasses the decade and a half between the beginning of the twentieth century and the First World War) consists precisely in the fact that the idea of the overman firmly occupied a central place in it. While the representatives of academic scholarship and religious writers in the final years of the nineteenth century recoiled in horror from the Nietzschean overman, seeing in him the mark of Satanic origin, the embodied idea of evil, indeed the Antichrist himself, the young generation of idealist philosophers, the activists of the Russian religious renaissance of the beginning of the twentieth century, on the contrary, welcomed the Nietzschean image as a symbol of the approaching religious renewal of culture. The general mood of those years was accurately conveyed by D. Merezhkovskii: “The overman is the last point, the sharpest summit of the great mountain ridge of European philosophy, with its age-old roots in the rebellious, solitary, and aloof personality. One can go no further: precipice and abyss, fall or flight: the way of the overman—religion.”¹

The vivid and bold ideas of the German philosopher gave a powerful impulse to the appearance of an extensive Russian-language literature about the overman principle. The overman and overhumanity, the Godman and Godmanhood, the man-God, the man of Christ and conciliar humanity, the perfect man, the higher man, the future man, the last man, and so on: the list of heroes on the pages of the literary-philosophical journals of those years is rich in symbolic names for the main problem of the epoch of the Silver Age—the search for paths to the religious renewal of personality and culture. Paradoxically enough, it was to a large extent thanks to the enthusiasm for Solov’ev’s philosophical teachings that the Nietzschean idea of the overman played an essential role in turning the new contingent of symbolists, modernists, intuitionists, and sophiologists toward the religious foundations of culture. The Russian neo-idealist philosophers read Nietzsche in such a way that his vision seemed to them to be based on faith in the absolute spiritual values of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, and on the necessity of fighting for them.

Despite the fact that, formally, the overwhelming majority of publications on Nietzschean motifs took a polemical stance toward the German philosopher’s conception, works on the overman theme comprised an independent layer in the Russian intellectual history of that time. Often Nietzsche’s overman served merely as a mask under which one or another author hid the original features of his own distinctive conception. Religious-metaphysical, anthropological, and culturological treatments of the “overhuman” at the turn of the nineteenth century were accompanied both by natural-scientific and moral-ethical “overhuman projects” and by sociohistorical interpretations.²

Besides the influence of Solov’evian thought, there were a number of reasons for the broad spectrum of Russian conceptions of the overman.

1. First of all, the distinctive way in which Russians understood this problem expressed the spirit of the times. Every cultural movement exists in the context of oppositions that are given objectively by history. Russian thought at the dawn of the twentieth century struggled to resolve the essentially insoluble antinomy between hierarchy, the

recognition of the hierarchical principle in culture, and spontaneity, the understanding of culture as life, elemental force. The phenomenon of the Russian religious renaissance of the beginning of the twentieth century grew out of a striving to be rid of the duality of consciousness: to overcome the rupture between high culture and everyday life; to return to alienated spiritual values the living meaning that had been lost over the centuries; to experience anew and thereby revive a culture that oppressed men with the weight of dead authorities. Nietzsche's doctrine of the overman became a means of emancipating individuality, helping man to know himself in the ancient sense of the word, to decide who he is and what is his calling in the world.

2. Religious personalism, existentialism, and anthropologism traditionally comprised the core of the Russian type of philosophizing, which was focused invariably on the problem of death and resurrection. It was precisely this specific trait of Russian philosophical thought that found expression in the Silver Age writers' deliberations about the overman.

3. A certain role in producing the variety of Russian portraits of the overman must be attributed to the variety of worldviews and intellectual orientations among Russian writers, as well as to Nietzsche and Solov'ev themselves, neither of whom (for all the differences in their styles of philosophizing) left a "systematic" description of what the overman really is.

4. Finally, it is germane that the original conceptions of the overman that took shape in the Russian religious renaissance of the beginning of the twentieth century often were not based directly on the Nietzschean image, which was vague, but rather unpacked and modulated the semantic meaning inherent in the very form of the Russian word. The Russian *sverkh* ["over"], unlike the German *über*, implies above all a qualitative assessment; *sverkh* is the highest level of a quality, so it is no coincidence that in Russian intellectuals' consciousness the path to the overman was the path to the elevation or improvement of the human type, irrespective of whether such elevation takes place on the biological or on the spiritual plane. The concept of the overman was transformed into the idea of the perfection of man. By contrast, for Nietzsche, who was a sensitive philologist, the word *Übermensch*, in accordance with the meaning of the prefix *über*—"beyond the limit," meant primarily something beyond the limit of the concept "man," "man surpassed."³

Nietzsche's doctrine of the overman and Solov'ev's doctrine of God-humanity, which contain in a nutshell the central ideas of their respective philosophical conceptions, occupy an essential place in the constructions of both thinkers.

What is the essence of the opposition between the approaches of Nietzsche and Solov'ev to the problem of the overman?

Where must we seek the source of the fundamental difference between the two philosophers' intuition?

Is a synthesis of their conceptions possible?

In the works of both Solov'ev and Nietzsche, the overman theme was connected inextricably with the problems of life and immortality. The relationship between the conceptions of the overman in the two thinkers can be represented in the form of the halves of a sphere: Solov'ev (following in the footsteps of N. Fedorov) saw the chief task of philosophy in preparing humanity to attain its final goal—victory over death. Nietzsche, conversely, denied categorically the very idea of personal salvation, which he regarded as the great lie of Christianity: "All at once the Evangel became the most contemptible of all unfulfillable promises—the *impudent* doctrine of personal immortality."⁴ Nietzsche tried to solve the problem in a fundamentally different way. In his doctrine of eternal recurrence, the thinker cast his glance beyond death and posed the problem of the meaning of existence before a human race that has become aware of its eternity on the wheel of death and rebirth. Solov'ev saw the goal of humanity in overcoming death, Nietzsche in overcoming eternity.

For both Nietzsche and Solov'ev, special attention to the problem of death and immortality was a result of personal experience. In the course of their short lives, both of them found themselves more than once facing death as a result of grave sickness. Both bore the burden of unrequited love. One of the greatest shocks for both of them was their fathers' demise (the only loss of a dear one to fall to their lot, but a loss that left a deep trace in their souls). Although Nietzsche suffered the tragedy of the loss in childhood and Solov'ev as a grown-up young man, these events fundamentally determined the value systems of their philosophical doctrines. It is, however, significant that the shocks caused by life crises and existential suffering led Nietzsche and Solov'ev to diametrically opposed conclusions.

Solov'ev was suffused with a passionate faith in the reality of resurrection and the necessity of conscious efforts on the part of all humanity to bring it about as soon as possible. In the last decade of his life, the dead became the dominant object of his thoughts. His father's death and his own struggle with death in 1883 gave Solov'ev a powerful impulse to a new awakening of his thought, to the realization that life holds deep misfortune that cannot be avoided but must be overcome.

Nietzsche, by contrast, discovered within himself a terrible knowledge of the inevitability of the eternal recurrence of the pain and torment of life, from which there is no salvation either in God or in human ideals. The main problem in Nietzsche's late works is the experience of endlessness, of eternity. The words of Zarathustra: "Behold a river that flows, winding and twisting, back to its source!"⁵ are applicable to both Nietzsche's personal intellectual history and to the history of his sickness. It is no coincidence that Nietzsche in his mature work arrived at the mystical doctrine of the endless repetition of the same events in the world: it is obvious that it was precisely his sickness that became for Nietzsche the most important existential source of knowledge: "saved several times at death's door and tormented by terrible suffering—thus I live from day to day; each day has its own history of sickness."⁶

In essence, both thinkers reached the same conclusion from different directions: Solov'ev's God-man must attain perfection on the road to resurrection; Nietzsche's overman is doomed to eternal recurrence and so must strive for perfection. Solov'ev's divine-human ideal, like Nietzsche's ideal of the overman, was based on the recognition of the unconditional value of human individuality and of the necessity of elevating and ennobling the personality and attaining the fullest possible perfection of the human type and of human culture.

Just as Nietzsche held that all life forces must be concentrated on the process of the ascendant formation of one's own personality (on augmenting the creative life force in the individual), so Solov'ev held that people's efforts must be directed to the ascent to Godmanhood for the sake of the resurrection of all mortal humanity. Inasmuch as it is obvious to Solov'ev that immortality is incompatible with the vacuity of everyday life in its present form, resurrection can be accessible only to a transformed humanity that has attained absolute life in the unity of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. "For an empty and amoral, an unfree and unconscious life—for such a life death is not only inevitable but also extremely desirable: can one even imagine without terrible anguish the endlessly prolonged existence of some lady of fashion, sportsman, or card-player? The incompatibility of immortality with such an existence is clear at first glance."⁷ Only the absolute and self-sufficient content of human individuality has to be immortal.

Nietzsche's doctrine of the overman was formed under the influence of the idea of eternal recurrence; it arose from the acceptance of the truth of the endless repetition of all that is now and was in the past. Nietzsche extracted from his inner mystical experience and placed at the foundation of being the law of the cycle, which eternally brings everything that exists to the state in which it once was and in which it will be on the next turn of the wheel of eternity. The very life of the world consists in nothing other than the constant eternal return of all things to the state in which they were previously. "O Zarathustra, . . . *you are the teacher of the eternal recurrence*—that is your destiny! That you as the first must teach this doctrine—how could this great destiny not be your greatest danger and sickness too? Behold, we know what you teach: that all things recur eternally, and we ourselves too; and that we have already existed an infinite number of times, and all things within us."⁸ The image of the circle—of eternal change amid eternal repetition—is a symbol, a mysterious sign over the entrance to Nietzsche's doctrine of the overman.

Man, according to Nietzsche, is deprived of the possibility of forever throwing off the burden of life. The reality of eternal recurrence takes away from him the power to destroy himself. Without this resource of freedom life begins to seem unbearable. When death is accessible, obedient, and reliable, life is possible, because it is precisely its accessibility that gives existence air, freedom, and joy.

Trusting in his intuition, affirming the absence of death as irreversible annihilation, Nietzsche constructed a practical ethics for a reality beyond death, for a world in which the customary signposts of "good" and "evil" no longer function. The philosopher made an attempt to work out new values and laws of morality to help people cope with life in a situation in which man is left alone to face the inescapable prospect of endlessly reliving what has happened once before, in which existence is self-enclosed and no power, divine or human, can break the cycle of infinity. Nietzsche's ethics is an ethics for the individual salvation of strong personalities who are capable of self-perfection. The same rules operate in the world of creative work, where it is easier for man to cope with eternity, where he is free to create himself and new values an infinite number of times. His moral doctrine is not for a world in which death and the hope of resurrection reign. M. Buber made the penetrating observation that for Nietzsche the problem of man is a boundary problem, that is, "the problem of a being that from the depths of nature has ended up at its very limit, at the dangerous margin of natural being, where there begins the head-spinning abyss called Nothing."⁹

The joyful optimistic faith in resurrection and eternal life was turned in Nietzsche into the hell of eternal recurrence, from which there is no escape. And the conception of the overman became an Ariadne's thread for humanity in the labyrinths of eternal recurrence, where man is doomed to endlessly reliving the same experiences, with no chance of breaking free of the circle and stopping once and for all the sequence of recurring events. It is impossible to overcome the closure of the circle, but it is possible to find meaning in this endless unrelieved chaos.

This meaning lies in working out new rules of life for the newly discovered reality, in perfecting the human type, in constantly unfolding the inner power, in elaborating and deepening the content of spiritual life, which raise the personality ever higher toward the ideal of the overman. “We answer to ourselves for our lives. Let us be real helmsmen of this life and let us not allow it to resemble a meaningless jumble of chance events. . . . Let us be our own experimenters and our own creators. A noble task—to shape out of ourselves a whole and complete individuality, to give style to our character, to give artistic expression to our personality—in knowledge and love and in contemplation and action. It is a great thing to become oneself and find satisfaction in oneself: he who fails to find proof in himself is always ready to take revenge for this on others.”¹⁰

For him who has learned to live according to the new rules in the overman’s world of eternal recurrence, reality is a source of endless joy: “Oh, how should I not lust after eternity and after the nuptial ring of rings—the ring of recurrence!”¹¹ says Zarathustra, and each verse of his “Yes and Amen Song” ends with the refrain: “*For I love you, O eternity!*”¹²

In the Nietzschean ideal of the overman is evident a transition from individualism to universalistic tendencies. In the world of eternal recurrence, the striving toward the overman is equivalent to the lost faith in God. “Once one said God when one looked upon distant seas; but now I have taught you to say: overman.”¹³ However, Nietzsche himself does not identify faith in the overman with religious faith: “Could you *create* a god? Then do not speak to me of any gods. But you could well create the overman.”¹⁴ Man has the power to create an ideal of a genius that is immanent to himself, a man-god—and cannot rise further than this.

It is precisely the absence of God in Nietzsche’s constructions and his contempt for Christianity as “the *lie* of the ‘resurrected’ Jesus”¹⁵ that for the religious thinker Solov’ev deprives his conception of the overman of all value and, what is more, turns it into an evil. To deny the existence of a supernatural absolute and to proclaim simultaneously man invested with the attributes of a god in its place, is for Solov’ev nothing other than Satanism. The Nietzschean overman appears as an embodiment of the Antichrist. In his *Short Story of the Antichrist*, the philosopher exposes the full implications of Nietzsche’s anti-absolutism, demonstrating that Nietzsche’s ideal is simply the godless human ego. The Solov’evian Antichrist is exceptionally clever, great, splendid, grateful, and almighty, and thanks to his merits sees himself as a worthy successor to Christ with the power to shower blessings upon humanity. However, like any man he is mortal and cannot save others from death. Consequently, for Solov’ev the overman-Antichrist obviously belongs to the camp of evil, among humanity’s false prophets, false miracle-workers, and false benefactors.

The main points of agreement and disagreement in Solov’ev’s future polemic with Nietzsche are already clear from the Russian thinker’s early works: *Sophia* (1875–76) and *Lectures on Godmanhood* [Cheniia o Bogochelovechestve] (1878–81). Solov’ev’s ethics of Godmanhood is an ethics of the soonest possible entrance of humanity into God’s Kingdom, of its arrival at resurrection and immortality. God’s Kingdom descends from above; Godmanhood ascends to meet it halfway. Here ethics is a means not of individual salvation but of accelerating the realization of a historical project. In Solov’ev there is not and cannot be an overman as the representative of a special breed of people. In his conception, any human being partakes of the Divine and is therefore a God-(over)-man. Humanity is mortal, but is subject to certain resurrection from the dead in all its fullness without exceptions—be they saints or sinners.

One of the names of Solov’evian God(over)manhood is Sophia. By the mystical name of Sophia Solov’ev understands the ideal, perfect humanity, eternally contained within the whole divine being—Christ. “Every human being is rooted and takes part in the universal or absolute human being. All human elements form a whole, universal, and individual organism—the pan-human organism—Sophia, each of whose elements is an eternal and necessary component of eternal Godmanhood. When we speak of the eternity of humanity, we mean the eternity of each individual who comprises humanity. Without this eternal life humanity itself would be an illusion. Recognition of the fact that each human being by his or her deepest essence is rooted in an eternal divine world gives authenticity to human freedom and human immortality.”¹⁶

Solov’ev speaks of the resurrection not of an abstract person but of the body, a concrete human being: “the human person is not an abstract concept but a real live person, each human individual has an unconditional divine significance.”¹⁷ Like Nietzsche, Solov’ev pronounces man free of any inner limitation and capable of overstepping any finite limit. It is this unconditional capability of each person that guarantees humanity’s endless development. Inability to be satisfied with any finite content or partial and limited reality passes over into the demand for fullness of life and immortality.

In the works of both Nietzsche and Solov’ev, two approaches to the question of the overman may, evidently, be distinguished. In their earlier constructions, both philosophers, deliberating in the manner of experimental scientists, are oriented toward the appearance of a “higher” (in Nietzsche) or “transfigured” (in Solov’ev) new overhuman type. Solov’ev (asserting that only complete victory over death will make man overman) saw the path

to immortality in the evolution of living forms: “The law of the identity of Dionysus with Hades—of species life with individual death—or, which is the same thing, the law of struggle between the species and the individual operates ever more powerfully on the lowest rungs of the organic world, but with the development of the higher forms it becomes ever weaker; and if this is so, then with the appearance of an unconditionally higher organic form, embodied in a self-conscious and self-acting individual being that separates itself from nature and relates to it as to an object and, consequently, is capable of inner freedom from the demands of the species—with the appearance of this being must there not be an end to the tyranny of the species over the individual? If nature in the biological process strives increasingly to limit the law of death, then must not man in the historical process abolish this law completely?”¹⁸ The ascent to the final overcoming of death presupposes change in the outer and inner form of human organization, the appearance of a new androgynous type. In his work *The Meaning of Love* [Smysl liubvi], Solov’ev demonstrates the necessity of restoring the wholeness (integration) of the human form as an obligatory stage on the road to eternal life or God’s kingdom: “In empirical reality, man as such does not exist—man exists only in a specifically one-sided and limited fashion as a masculine and feminine individual. . . . But the true man in the fullness of his ideal personality, obviously, cannot be only a male or only a female, but must be a higher unity of them both.”¹⁹ The philosopher saw the immediate task of the ascent to Godmanhood at this stage as the creation of the true integral man who is a free unity of the masculine and feminine principles.

The first variant of Nietzsche’s conception of the overman (which also represents his preliminary sketches and approaches to the problem) was created before his revelation of the eternal recurrence, and for that reason corresponds in spirit to Solov’ev’s eschatological logic. Nietzsche in effect reproduces the structure of the early Solov’evian doctrine concerning the ascent of collective humanity to Godmanhood. According to Nietzsche’s conception, contemporary humanity, which today occupies the highest rung in the hierarchy of world development, in time will give way to an even more perfect species, which will no longer belong to the genus *homo sapiens* but will constitute a special biological species *homo supersapiens*. (In Solov’ev’s theory, this is a special integral androgynous type.) Outlines of this conception of the overman can already be made out in the essay “Schopenhauer as Educator.” The evolutionary version of the overman is fully developed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “Our way goes upward, from species to higher species”! And further on: “All beings so far have created something beyond themselves; and do you want to be the ebb of this great flood and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome man? What is the ape to man? A laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment.”²⁰

In their later versions of the ascent to overhumanity (Nietzsche) or Godmanhood (Solov’ev), the two thinkers leave behind the idea that it is necessary to transform the human being and favor the idea that humanity can be perfected without fundamental changes in its external type.

In his essay “The Idea of the Overman” [Idea sverkhcheloveka], Solov’ev emphasizes that the essence of the ascent to Godmanhood consists in continuing to improve moral and physical functioning within the current form of the human species. “No new overhuman form of the organism is created by history or is needed, because the human form can be perfected without limit both internally and externally while remaining the same form: by its type or prototype it is capable of incorporating and binding everything within itself, of becoming the tool and bearer of everything that can be striven for—capable of being the form of perfect total-unity or godhood.”²¹ The striving to become overman belongs not to one or another form of the human being, but only to the mode of functioning of these forms. Each person, according to Solov’ev, is already a Godman. The philosopher does not tire of repeating that the divine nature in every human soul impels us to desire infinite perfection. People by nature are drawn to the ideal of the overman—they naturally wish to be better and greater than they are in reality. But just as it is impossible for God to bring about man’s spiritual and bodily regeneration without the participation of man himself—that would not be a human path—so it is impossible for man to create the overhuman out of himself. Man can become divine only by the power of God.

In his late works, Nietzsche works out the version of the overman that is central to his philosophy. The feature that distinguishes this second conception of Nietzsche’s overman from the first is the intuition of eternal recurrence. The second version is based on the proposition that man cannot pass over into a different state of being; he is the immutable biological crown of the natural world. Already in *The Dawn*, Nietzsche emphasized that perfection is possible only within the bounds of the existing species. In his work *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche is even more categorical: “The problem I thus pose is not what shall succeed mankind in the sequence of living beings (man is an *end*).”²² If in *Zarathustra* Nietzsche declared that there has never yet been a overman, then in *The Antichrist* he says, on the contrary, that there have already been people of the overhuman type. “This more valuable (overhuman—*Iu.S.*) type has existed often enough already: but as a lucky accident, as an exception”²³ Nietzsche expresses regret that hitherto such a type has been a fortunate coincidence and never “the product of

deliberate creation.” And so, according to the second conception, which can be called cultural-historical, the overman is only *homo sapiens perfectus*—the most perfect human type.

However, whether we regard the overman as a distinct biological species or as the most perfect type of man, Nietzsche holds that the attainment of perfection requires a threefold transformation of the human essence into the overhuman principle. In his speech “On the Three Metamorphoses,” Zarathustra points to three stages or metamorphoses of the human spirit, which correspond to three phases in the ascending transformation of man into the ideal type of the overman.

In the initial phase, the human spirit is symbolized by a camel, loaded down with the burden of numerous outworn precepts, dead authorities, and traditions that have lost their meaning.

In the second phase—the metamorphosis of the camel into a lion—man throws off the bonds that impede his advance toward the overman and wins for himself the freedom to create “new values.” From this moment there begins the transition from man to overman. A description of this stage can be found in the opening pages of the book *Human, All Too Human*. Within man there stirs dissatisfaction with himself, a striving to become the master of his virtues. Zarathustra calls this condition “the hour of the great contempt”: “What is the greatest experience you can have? It is the hour of the great contempt. The hour in which your happiness, too, arouses your disgust, and even your reason and your virtue.”²⁴ And further: “I love the great despisers because they are the great reverers and arrows of longing for the other shore.”²⁵ In the fourth part of *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche leads onto the stage a whole string of great despisers, of “higher people.” Into Zarathustra’s cave there come two kings who have fled from “good manners” and “good society,” a pessimist—prophet and herald of a great weariness, a “conscientious thinker” who has devoted his whole life to studying the brain of a leech, a “magician”—an eternal actor, truthful only in his longing for the ideal, a “voluntary beggar” who feels disgust at the superfluity of civilization, the “last pope,” the “ugliest man.” All these people are united in their dissatisfaction with the ideals that reign in their everyday life.

The great contempt, the rejection of those doctrines that impede the free development of the personality by preaching “the equality of people” and the renunciation of pessimism represent the last steps on the ascent to the overman. Nietzsche interprets pessimism broadly, having in mind both the metaphysical doctrine (which asserts that nonbeing is better than being) and the ethical doctrine (which regards the body as by nature evil and sinful): “I shall not go your way, O despisers of the body! You are no bridge to the overman!”²⁶

The higher people, who have broken their ties with the ideals of the society around them, are still not free of the “spirit of gravity”—of the melancholy that oppresses man and kills the thirst for life within him. “As long as there have been men, man has felt too little joy: that alone, my brothers, is our original sin. And learning better to feel joy, we learn best not to hurt others or to plan hurts for them.”²⁷ Pessimism or *Weltschmerz* appears in Nietzsche in the image of a fire hound, which is opposed by another hound which “speaks out of the heart of the earth. He exhales gold and golden rain. . . . Laughter flutters out of him like colorful clouds. . . . This gold, however, and this laughter he takes from the heart of the earth; for . . . *the heart of the earth is of gold*.”²⁸ Gold, laughter, and dancing are symbols of the cheerful and joyous spirit, of the unoppressed mood of the person who has overcome the spirit of gravity within himself.

It is significant that the theme of optimism and cheerfulness of the spirit occupies an important place in Solov’ev’s later reflections. In the well-known parable of Varsonofii, the wanderer from Mount Athos, from the life of ancient hermits (*Three Conversations* [Tri razgovora]), he says straight out: “There is only one mortal sin—dejection, because from it is born despair, and despair is, properly speaking, not even a sin, but spiritual death itself.”²⁹

The final metamorphosis—of the lion into a child—is the positive phase in the emergence of the overhuman type. Childhood symbolizes the affirmation of life: “The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred ‘Yes.’”³⁰ He who sets out on the way of the overman accepts life, gives it his blessing, and is in this sense the redeemer of earthly reality: “But this is my blessing: to stand over every single thing as its own heaven, as its round roof, its azure bell, and eternal security; and blessed is he who blesses thus. For all things have been baptized in the well of eternity and are beyond good and evil.”³¹ Accepting and justifying life is the starting point of the “way of the creator.” Nietzsche asserts that moral norms must be derivable from man’s inner nature. Like Solov’ev, he bases the truths that he postulates upon man’s personal experience—religious, mystical, and bodily experience.

Solov’ev’s participation in the discussion of Nietzschean ideas played an enormous role in establishing Russian Nietzscheanism—he was the first Russian thinker to look at Nietzsche’s work from a religious point of view. However, despite evident parallels and correspondences between Nietzsche and Solov’ev on many problems, mainly in their treatment of the overman theme, the question of whether Solov’ev read Nietzsche or was familiar with his ideas only at second-hand remains controversial. Thus S. Solov’ev—the thinker’s

nephew—remarks in his authoritative literary biography of Solov'ev: "For a philosopher brought up on Kant and Hegel it was difficult to grasp Nietzsche in all his significance; he had hardly read his works attentively, and in his polemics with Nietzsche he tried to limit himself to joking and irony."³² In Solov'ev's extensive and well-preserved correspondence of the 1890s, there are no references to any work on Nietzsche's texts, and his articles lack specific references to the German philosopher's works. It must also be acknowledged that often Solov'ev's judgments concern not so much the views of Nietzsche himself as the ideas that were at that time customarily associated with his name. (See, for instance, the preface to *The Justification of the Good* [Opravdanie dobra].) Nevertheless, it is likely that Solov'ev was familiar with Nietzsche's work from primary sources. Solov'ev took the German philosopher's ideas very seriously, and could hardly have paid no attention to his works. It is also noteworthy that his article on K. Leont'ev, which appeared soon after the thinker's death in the journal *Russian Review* [Russkoe obozrenie], 1892, no. 1³³ (that is, shortly before the publication of the first Russian-language work on Nietzsche's philosophy, a work by V. Preobrazhenskii),³⁴ contains a comparison of Leont'ev's and Nietzsche's views, a comparison that was later to become fashionable. Solov'ev declared that in his contempt for pure ethics and in his cult of the self-affirmation of strength and beauty Leont'ev surpassed Nietzsche.

In the evolution of Solov'ev's attitude toward Nietzsche it is possible to distinguish several phases. It is remarkable that at the start Solov'ev's attitude is quite neutral. His first statements about Nietzsche's philosophy (see the articles "K. Leont'ev," 1892) and "A First Step Toward Positive Esthetics" [Pervyi shag k polozhitel'noi estetike, 1894]) contain neither any special interest in Nietzsche's deliberations, in which Solov'ev (in contrast to the first Russian Nietzscheans V. Preobrazhenskii and N. Mikhailovskii) stubbornly refuses to see originality or depth, or offer any sharp criticism of the German philosopher's ideas (such as was customary in academic circles at that time). Solov'ev is also far removed from the position of the idealists of the older generation (L. Lopatin, N. Grot), who saw Nietzscheanism as an expression of the moral decline of Western culture. Nietzsche's philosophy is for him no more than an insignificant secondary phenomenon that has hardly any influence on the future of human culture or on the development of morality, for "the resurrection of dead ideas has no terrors for the living."³⁵ Solov'ev's attention at the beginning of the 1890s was focused at a point beyond Nietzscheanism: "These ideas [Nietzscheanism—Iu.S.], in which the subjects of the Egyptian pharaohs and Assyrian emperors once believed and by which they lived, . . . were greeted in our Europe as something fresh and original, and as such had a *grand succès de surprise*. Does this not demonstrate that we have managed not only to live through but even to forget what our ancestors lived by, so that their worldview has now acquired for us the charm of novelty?"³⁶

The Justification of the Good—the apogee of Solov'ev's glory, which it makes sense to read as an extended and detailed reply to Nietzsche (notwithstanding the fact that the German philosopher's name is mentioned in it in passing and only in the prefaces to the book), already contains a critique of the German philosopher's ideas. Nevertheless, Solov'ev did not fail to note that Nietzscheanism contains the seeds of its own destruction and, consequently, represents no serious danger and requires no special refutation or serious attention. Solov'ev speaks against the estheticization of life in Nietzsche and criticizes him for separating beauty and power from the religious context, insisting that true realization of the values of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty is possible only as the synthesis of these three essences within the framework of religion, and that it is precisely Christianity that is called upon to preserve beauty from annihilation.

The shift in Solov'ev's attention to the Nietzschean idea of the overman opened a new stage in his relation to Nietzsche. The overman theme becomes for Solov'ev the central object of criticism in the German thinker's works. In the Nietzschean overman—the prototype of the Antichrist—the religious philosopher saw a grave danger threatening Christian culture. In his works, Solov'ev counterposes to Nietzsche's ideal the true Godman—Jesus Christ, who defeated death by means of bodily resurrection.

In March 1897, just as he completed the first version of *The Justification of the Good*, Solov'ev published a small note, "Literature or Truth?" [Slovestnost' ili istina?] in the newspaper "Rus'." In this essay, which—as the author himself admitted—"supplements and clarifies the main ideas of *Three Conversations*,"³⁷ Solov'ev first declared that he sees his aim as fighting the Nietzschean conception of the overman as the key element of the German thinker's philosophy. By this time Solov'ev started to say openly that the growing influence of Nietzsche's ideas in Russia poses a danger to Christian thought.

In the last years of his life, Solov'ev's attitude toward Nietzsche acquired a new nuance. While he remained extremely wary, Solov'ev became deeply interested and at the same time more rational in his approach. In his article "The Idea of the Overman" [Ideia sverkhcheloveka], pointing to the three fashionable trends in European thought at the end of the nineteenth century—"economic materialism" (Karl Marx), "abstract moralism" (Lev Tolstoi), and "the demonism of the overman" (Friedrich Nietzsche)—Solov'ev gives priority of significance to Nietzsche's doctrine, stressing that the secret of its popularity lies in the fact that it responds to the spiritual

demands of contemporary thinking people. The idea of the overman is in itself timely and necessary; it faithfully reflects reality: the human must be surpassed. However, for Solov'ev it is absolutely obvious that the authentic overhuman principle has already been manifest in history in the person of the Godman Christ—"the true overman," "the real conqueror of death," and "the first-born of the dead."

Solov'ev recognizes that undoubtedly there is truth in Nietzsche's conception, but this truth is distorted. For Solov'ev it is important to show where exactly Nietzsche's error lies. The edge of his criticism is directed against the "nasty aspects" of Nietzscheanism: its contempt for weak and sick humanity; its pagan view of strength and beauty; and the idea that overhumanity is the lot of the select few. The true goal of overhumanity is victory over death, and the path to achieving this goal is that of moral heroism, the suppression of egoism and pride.

Viewing the Nietzschean conception of "false overhumanity" through the prism of his own doctrine of Godmanhood, Solov'ev energetically sought precursors of Nietzsche in intellectual history. In his lecture on Lermontov, delivered in 1899, he called the poet a precursor of Nietzsche—tempted by the demon of evil, cruelty, pride, and voluptuousness. In his speech Solov'ev set out his previous anti-Nietzschean argumentation, demonstrating that Lermontov's and Nietzsche's main error lies in their contempt for humanity, while every person on earth is a potential God(over)man.

In the essay "Plato's Life Drama" [Zhiznennaia drama Platona] (1898), Socrates is named a kind of forerunner of Nietzsche, who embodied the idea of the overman not in theory but in his personal fate, thereby demonstrating the necessity of the advent of "the real overman," that is, the Godman. Socrates' noble death, by which he exhausted the moral power of purely human wisdom, proved for Solov'ev the impossibility of man's fulfilling his purpose, that is, becoming a real overman, by strength of mind and moral will alone. "After Socrates, who by both word and example taught a death worthy of man, only he could go further and higher who possesses the power of resurrection for eternal life."³⁸

The concluding "synthetic" period of Solov'ev's work, the upper boundary of which is usually considered to be *The Justification of the Good* and the lower *Three Conversations*, passed under the sign of "the struggle against Nietzsche."³⁹ Solov'ev was disturbed at the rapid growth in the popularity of the Nietzschean idea of the overman among the young generation of Russian intellectuals—precisely the part of the audience that he regarded as potentially close to his own views and prepared to adopt them. Despite the fact that traces of his inner polemic with Nietzsche and the Nietzschean cult of the overman and of overhuman beauty can be discovered in practically all of Solov'ev's later works, he left no more or less serious investigation of Nietzsche's works from a historical or metaphysical point of view and, unlike the majority of his contemporaries, never attempted to refute Nietzsche's doctrine as a philosophical problem. In most cases, Solov'ev wrote about the German philosopher's views exclusively as an estheticism of no real interest, and called Nietzsche a "superphilologist" who strove by means of beautiful and imposing phrases to make the reader believe not in the real Godman Jesus Christ but in the "mythical *Übermensch* and his prophet Zarathustra, as a result of which . . . instead of all the powers of heaven, earth, and underworld, it is only the psychopathic decadents of both sexes in Germany and Russia who tremble and bend their knees before this name."⁴⁰ Solov'ev did not publish a single work about Nietzsche in a philosophical journal. Even the preface to *The Justification of the Good* saw the light in the popular literary supplement *Books of the Week* [Knizhki nedeli].

And yet behind Solov'ev's statements that the overman is no higher being but "a new department in the faculty of philology," while Nietzsche's ideas are no more than "verbal exercises, splendid in their literary form but lacking in any real content,"⁴¹ there unavoidably arose the question: "Were the verbal exercises of the Basel philologist perhaps only feeble expressions of a real premonition?"⁴² Recalling his last conversation with Solov'ev (a few months before his demise), A. Belyi wrote: "I spoke with Vladimir Sergeevich about Nietzsche, about the relationship between the overman and the idea of Godmanhood. He did not say much about Nietzsche, but there was a deep seriousness in his words. He said that Nietzsche's ideas were the sole profound danger threatening religious culture that now had to be reckoned with. However far my views of Nietzsche might have diverged from his, I was deeply affected by his serious attitude toward Nietzsche. I realized that in calling Nietzsche a "superphilologist" Vladimir Sergeevich was being merely a tactician, ignoring the danger that threatened his aspirations."⁴³

In "The Idea of the Overman," Solov'ev openly announced his readiness for a serious polemic with the Nietzschean conception of the overman: "Today, thanks to Nietzsche, progressive people are declaring themselves in such a fashion as to require and make logically possible a serious discussion with them—a discussion, moreover, about issues of overhumanity."⁴⁴ However, this discussion did not take place. At first it was thwarted by the break that soon occurred between Solov'ev and the World of Art circle, and then the philosopher's death brought the matter to a close.

For the activists of the Russian religious renaissance the two contemporaries, Nietzsche and Solov'ev, became teachers and principal creative guides in a newly recovered and personally experienced cultural heritage. It is precisely to them that we owe the precipitous ascent and collapse of Russian culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. Young thinkers at the turn of the century tried to unite the doctrines of the two philosophers in real life. While striving to revive Orthodoxy and bring closer Solov'ev's Godman ideal, they relied on Nietzsche's value system. Trying to combine high culture with everyday life, Solov'ev's religious system with Nietzsche's ideals of the God-abandoned world of eternal recurrence beyond good and evil, they overstrained themselves without managing to overcome the duality of consciousness and life. The two halves did not fit together into a whole. They were, after all, from different worlds, the boundary between which was vanquished death. Hence the shattered personal destinies, hence the tragic outcome of the spiritual movement of the religious renaissance in Russia. The philosophical systems of Solov'ev and Nietzsche became the wings of Icarus—of the Russian Silver Age—which thanks to their enormous creative might raised it above everyday life, rushing upward, but because they belonged to different spiritual dimensions they did not (and, evidently, could not) preserve it from disintegrating into the chaos of revolution, sectarianism, perversion, and diabolism.

Notes

1. D. Merezhkovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 24 t.* (Moscow, 1914), vol. 9, pp. viii–ix.2. See N. Avksent'ev, *Sverkhchelovek. Kul'turno-eticheskii ideal Nitsshe* (St. Petersburg: Sever, 1906); A. Efimenko, "'Sverkh-chelovek' i 'Poslednii chelovek' v uchenii Nitsshe," *Vestnik i biblioteka samoobrazovaniia*, 1905, no. 8; S. Znamenskii, "'Sverkhchelovek' Nitsshe," *Vera i razum*, 1909, nos. 1–3/4; S. Levitskii, "Sverkhchelovek (Uebermensch) Nitsshe i chelovek Khrista," *Bogoslovskii vestnik*, 1901, nos. 7–9; V. Shuliatikov, "Novoe iskusstvo: mechtly o sverkhcheloveke," *Kur'er*, 1900, no. 29, and other works.
3. On this see: M. Koreneva, "Merezhkovskii i nemetskaia kul'tura (Nitsshe i Gete. Pritiazhenie ottalkivanie)," in *Narubezhe XIX i XX vekov* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1991), pp. 64–66.
4. F. Nitsshe [Nietzsche], *Antikhrisť in Sochineniia v 2 t.* (Moscow: Mysl', 1990), vol. 2, p. 666.
5. F. Nitsshe, *Tak govoril Zaratustra in Sochineniia v 2 t.* (Moscow: Mysl', 1990), vol. 2, p. 119.
6. Cited from Lu Andreas-Salome [Lou Andreas-Salomé], "Fridrikh Nitsshe v svoikh proizvedeniakh," in *Fridrikh Nitsshe i russkaia religioznaia filosofiia* (Minsk, 1996), vol. 2, p. 468.
7. V. Solov'ev, "Smysl liubvi" in *Sochineniia v 2 t.* (Moscow: Mysl', 1988), vol. 2, p. 520.
8. Nitsshe, *Tak govoril*, p. 160.
9. M. Buber, *Problema cheloveka* (Kyiv, 1998), p. 42.
10. Cited from V. Preobrazhenskii, "F. Nitsshe: kritika al'truizma," *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii*, no. 15, 1892, p. 145.
11. Nitsshe, *Tak govoril*, p. 166.
12. Ibid., p. 166.
13. Ibid., p. 60.
14. Ibid., p. 60.
15. Nitsshe, *Antikhrisť*, p. 666.
16. V. Solov'ev, *Chteniia o Bogochelovechestve in Sochineniia v 2 t.* (Moscow: Pravda, 1989), vol. 2, p. 118.
17. Ibid., p. 20.
18. Solov'ev, "Smysl liubvi," p. 521.
19. Ibid., p. 513.
20. Nitsshe, *Tak govoril*, p. 8.
21. V. Solov'ev, "Ideia sverkhcheloveka," in *Sochineniia v 2 t.* (Moscow: Mysl', 1988), vol. 2, p. 631.
22. Nitsshe, *Antikhrisť*, p. 634.
23. Ibid., p. 634.
24. Nitsshe, *Tak govoril*, p. 9.
25. Ibid., p. 10.
26. Ibid., p. 25.
27. Ibid., p. 62.
28. Ibid., p. 96.
29. V. Solov'ev, *Tri razgovora o voine, progresse i kontse vseмирnoi istorii in Sochineniia v 2 t.* (Moscow: Mysl', 1988), vol. 2, p. 672.
30. Nitsshe, *Tak govoril*, p. 19.
31. Ibid., p. 118.
32. S. Solov'ev, *Vladimir Solov'ev: zhizn' i tvorcheskaiia evoliutsiia* (Moscow: Respublika, 1997), p. 347. 33. The article "K. Leont'ev" was included in volume 17 (2) of *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'* of Brokgauz and Efron.

34. The first detailed analysis of Nietzsche's philosophical views in Russia was given in V. Preobrazhenskii's article "F. Nitsche: kritika al'_truizma," published in the last issue (no. 15) for 1892 of the journal *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii*, that is, at least half a year after Solov'_ev's essay came out.
35. V. Solov'_ev, "Pervyi shag k polozhitel'_noi estetike," in *Sochineniia v 2 t.* (Moscow: Mysl_', 1988), vol. 2, p. 351.
36. Ibid., p. 551.
37. Solov'_ev, *Tri razgovora*, p. 643.
38. V. Solov'_ev, "Zhiznennaia drama Platona," in *Sochineniia v 2 t.* (Moscow: Mysl_', 1988), vol. 2, p. 625.
39. See S. Solov'_ev, *Vladimir Solov'_ev*, p. 6.
40. V. Solov'_ev, "Slovesnost_' ili istina?" in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (St. Petersburg, 1914), vol. 10, p. 30.
41. Ibid., p. 31.
42. Ibid., p. 32.
43. A. Belyi, "Vladimir Solov'_ev. Iz vospominanii," in *Kniga o Vl. Solov'_eve* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel_', 1991), pp. 281–2.
44. Solov'_ev, "Ideia sverkhcheloveka,," p. 634.