

Religious Topoi, Literary Experimentation, and Personal Transformation
in Early Russian Modernism: The Cases of Aleksandr Dobroliubov and Leonid Semenov

By

Thomas H. Tabatowski

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The dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Irina Shevelenko, Professor, Slavic Languages and Literatures

Karen Evans-Romaine, Professor, Slavic Languages and Literatures

Marina Zilbergerts, Assistant Professor, Slavic Languages and Literatures

Eric Carlsson, Lecturer, History

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Note on Transliteration and Translation	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter One Russian Religious Culture in the post-Petrine Period: Responses to Secularization	14
Chapter Two From Poet to Prophet: The Case of Aleksandr Dobroliubov	49
Chapter Three The Solitary Disciple: The Case of Leonid Semenov	106
Conclusion	189
Bibliography	191

Abstract

In this dissertation, I explore the interaction between religious and artistic expressions as manifest in the religious quests of the early Russian modernists in the first decade of the twentieth century. Artists and thinkers of the era grappled with this tension as they sought to translate their personal experiences and experiments into cultural universals; in these attempts, they frequently turned to religious topoi as a potential site for personal and societal transfiguration. While in many ways these modernist encounters with religious topoi mirror those of Western modernisms, the cultural and historical circumstances in late imperial Russia created an environment in which religious questions became central in the arts, philosophy, and politics.

This study begins with an overview of the emergence of Russian religious culture against the backdrop of state-sponsored secularization. This is followed by case studies of the lives and works of the *fin-de-siècle* poets Aleksandr Dobroliubov and Leonid Semenov, which show a unique path for Russian modernism, in which artistic creation is rejected in favor of radical self-transformation. Dobroliubov's case illustrates how a modernist writer could use ancient textual traditions to try to discern a path away from artistic culture. Semenov's case show an attempt—mediated to some degree by Lev Tolstoy—to follow Dobroliubov in rejecting culture while simultaneously reaching out to those still bound up in literature. The work of both writers illustrate attempts to resolve the tension between personal spiritual understanding and the public expression of that understanding through art.

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Note on Transliteration and Translation

Transliteration of Russian in bibliographic references and in most of the main text follows the Library of Congress system (omitting diacritics). For proper names in the text that appear very frequently in English-language scholarship, conventional spellings are used (e.g., Tolstoy instead of Tolstoi).

Most quotations are given only in English translation. Russian originals are provided for poetic texts, and, in isolated cases, phrases in Russian are included in parenthetical translation for clarity. All translations from Russian are mine unless otherwise noted.

Introduction

If not now then in the not-too-distant future, the enormous question of religious rebirth must stand before the consciousness of European humanity. The whole host of particular “questions” will not find any truly powerful answers while they yet do not appear to us synthesized in the form of one question. For this reason, present-day religious quests cannot be related to with indifference: however transient they might be, new paths might already be noticeable in them. Even if they are not the beginning of a great movement directed towards religious rebirth, then in them is manifested at least a premonition of such a movement.

A. A. Meier, “Religion and Culture” (1909)

At the beginning of 1912, the Moscow publishing house Musagetes (Musaget)—founded three years earlier by Andrei Belyi, Emilii Metner, and Ellis (Lev Kobylinskii) and named after Apollo in his role as protector of the Muses—debuted the bimonthly journal *Works and Days* (*Trudy i dni*), dedicated to the theory and criticism of Symbolism (as the original form of modernism, the “new art”), as well as to broader religious and philosophical questions of culture.¹ The first issue of the journal contained essays outlining the focus of each of the publisher’s three imprints: Musagetes, with titles primarily devoted to the arts; Orpheus, dealing with topics including mysticism and religion; and Logos, focused on philosophical issues. In his introductory essay as editor, Metner described a crisis, which he framed as a period of “storm and stress” in the various spheres of cultural production. This period had already come to pass in the arts: led by “the slogan ‘art for art’s sake’ under the one-sided banner of Dionysus,” would-be innovators, unable to transform their personal expression into something universal, found

¹ On Musagetes as a publishing project, see two articles by Mikhail Bezrodnyi: “Iz istorii russkogo germanofil’stva: Izdatel’stvo ‘Musaget,’” in *Issledovaniia po istorii russkoi mysli: Ezhegodnik za 1999 god* (Moscow: OGI, 1999), 157–98; “Izdatel’stvo ‘Musaget,’” in *Knizhnoe delo v Rossii XIX–nachala XX v.*, vol. 12 (St. Petersburg: Rossiiskaia natsional’naia biblioteka, 2004), 40–56. On the Musagetes venture as a project intended to systematize and historicize Symbolism, see Jonathan Stone, “Aleksandr Blok and the Rise of Biographical Symbolism,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 626–42. On the history of *Trudy i dni*, see A. V. Lavrov, *Russkie simvolisty: Etiudy i razyskaniia* (Moscow: Progress-Pleiada, 2007), 499–514. On Russian Symbolism generally, see Avril Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

themselves stranded “on the narrow bank of beautiful but soulless aestheticism.” In philosophy, the crisis was still looming on the horizon, with undisciplined, chaotic approaches like pragmatism, naturalism, monism, and theosophy on the one side and established, systematic, and self-satisfied neo-Kantianism on the other. In contrast to the other two spheres, Metner framed the crisis in religious culture as an acute issue:

The realm of faith has undergone in recent times, and is still undergoing, its own form of “storm and stress.” In the strained searching for the truth about God, two typical aspirations are notable: one, the individualistic, in the direction of strictly personal higher spiritual experiences [*chisto-lichnogo opyta vysshikh dukhovnykh perezhivanii*]; the other, the collective, in the direction of submission to the conciliar principle [*nachalu sobornomu*] of the existing churches or of some other form of community (for example, a theosophical one). Concurrently, the new religious consciousness led some to an ideological break with art and with culture in general; in their view creative work lost its independent value and was seen only as an instrument for revelation and a means for the preaching of religious views not yet fermented into the crystalline clarity of doctrinal formula [*verouchitel'nogo dogmata*].²

In Metner’s view, the crisis in religious culture thus occupied the Russian cultural “present” more than art and literature (the oldest Symbolist strains of Russian modernism were already some twenty years old, after all) or philosophy (its conflicts were, he felt, still to come). This arrangement also reflected the way in which Metner saw religion as a meeting place for the

² Emilii Metner, “‘Musaget’: Vstupitel’noe slovo redaktora,” *Trudy i dni*, no. 1 (January–February 1912): 54.

other two spheres of cultural activity.³ He hoped the general crisis might be resolved by the “organic” interaction of art and philosophy with religious searching.

The “strained searching for the truth about God” that Metner observed was typical of the atmosphere of the period in Russian cultural history around the turn of the twentieth century, a period often referred to in scholarship as the “Russian religious renaissance.” It was a period in which various cultural practitioners—writers and thinkers—crossed paths as they considered metaphysics, theology, mysticism, and spirituality as possible alternatives to the realism, positivism, and materialism that had come to dominate in the nineteenth century. As a convenient if somewhat imprecise term of historical periodization, the “Russian religious renaissance” still enjoys currency among scholars of *fin-de-siècle* Russian culture, nearly sixty years after the term was introduced by Nicolas Zernov.⁴ The era of the “religious renaissance” includes the neo-idealist philosophy of the “God-seekers” (*bogoiskateli*), including the ex-Marxists Nikolai Berdyaev and Sergei Bulgakov, as well as the work and theoretical writings of many key figures of the burgeoning modernist art movement.

It was evident to early modernists from Dmitrii Merezhkovskii onwards that modernist art and the “religious renaissance” were developing in tandem, and this has been soundly established as a key topic in over a century of subsequent scholarship on Russian modernist culture. At times, it is difficult (if not impossible) to draw clear boundaries between the artistic endeavors and religious quests of the era; modernist culture is marked by a sense of flux—as Irina Paperno has observed, intrinsic to modernist culture is an apocalyptic sense “that the

³ Underscoring the place of religion as a cultural meeting place, the two essays that follow Metner’s introduction, on the mystically-focused imprint Orpheus, were authored by major Symbolist writers, Belyi and Viacheslav Ivanov, both of whom also contributed theoretical essays on Symbolism to the inaugural issue.

⁴ Nicolas Zernov, *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1963). For a recent, broadly conceived description of the religious renaissance, see Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), esp. chapter 1.

accepted model of reality, or the world itself, is up for rearrangement.”⁵ In the last decade of the nineteenth century through the first decade of the twentieth, the creators of what would come to be called Russian modernist culture—i.e., the Symbolists—were preoccupied with questions about the nature of the material and spiritual worlds, and they were especially motivated by the sense that artistic creation could be a means not only for accessing and understanding spiritual truth, but for actually bringing it into material reality. The soon-to-come “Age of the Third Testament” for which Merezhkovskii, Zinaida Gippius, and Dmitrii Filosofov attempted to create a new Church; “mystical anarchism” as imagined by Georgy Chulkov (and Ivanov to a lesser extent) and the “collective [*sobornyi*] individualism” proposed by Modest Gofman; the Sophianic quests of Belyi and Aleksandr Blok—these are only a few of the better-studied examples of religious searching among members of the early Russian modernist literary circles.⁶ As studies over the preceding decades have shown, interest in spiritualism, the occult, and religious traditions, practices, and rituals underlie modernist attempts at life-creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*), the merging of art and life.⁷ Religious topics continue to be a fruitful avenue of exploration in modernist studies, as evidenced by Martha M. F. Kelly’s important recent book on Russian modernist culture understood as an Orthodox “religious movement,”⁸ or Aleksandr

⁵ Irina Paperno, introduction to *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*, ed. Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 3.

⁶ Maria Carlson provides a succinct summation of the links between *fin-de-siècle* religious thought and modernist literary production in *No Religion Higher Than Truth: A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875–1922* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 7. For a more in-depth examination of the religious ties between modernist writers and thinkers, see Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, “Religious Humanism in the Russian Silver Age,” in *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830–1930*, ed. Gary M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 227–47.

⁷ In addition to the contributions to Paperno and Grossman, *Creating Life*, see also Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia’s Fin-de-Siècle* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

⁸ See Martha M. F. Kelly, *Unorthodox Beauty: Russian Modernism and Its New Religious Aesthetic* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016). Kelly’s approach informs my own in the first chapter of this study.

Etkind's expansive study of Russian sectarianism and its influences on modernist cultural experimentation in behavior, artistic production, and political activity.⁹

Historically, the central point in these interactions between art, philosophy, politics, sociology, and religion must be located in the revolutionary tumult of 1905 and the years immediately following it.¹⁰ In the wake of those crises, the modernist penchant for spiritual-religious theorizing and private experimentation in life-creation gained intense urgency as its dimensions and implications shifted. At stake for practitioners of modernist culture was the potential transfiguration of the world through revolution, beginning in Russia. In the years of revolution and reaction, the already unstable values and boundaries of modern culture were mirrored in society at large, as cultural practitioners of different camps joined in opposition to arbitrary autocratic power. In this world-in-flux, religious approaches served as a potential route for reconceiving the foundations of society itself, as modernist artists strove to ascertain their place in a rapidly transforming culture.¹¹

This phenomenon was the epicenter of the cultural crisis that Metner observed in 1912.¹² For many early modernists, it was a disappointing test of their ability—particularly as a movement or collective—to effect the transformation of the world through religiously-motivated art. As Zara Mints put it,

⁹ See, Aleksandr Etkind, *Khlyst: Sekty, literatura i revoliutsiia*, 3rd ed. (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozreniie, 2019). Etkind's book is among the most important secondary sources for chapters two and three of the present study.

¹⁰ For a broad survey of the revolution, see Abraham Ascher's two-volume *The Revolution of 1905: Russia in Disarray* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).

¹¹ Consider Merezhkovskii's and Gippius's increasing preoccupation with society, the Church, and the autocratic state, or the advent of theories like Chulkov's "mystical anarchism" or Gofman's later "collective individualism." On the latter two phenomena against the backdrop of 1905, see two articles by I. V. Aladyshkin: "Mirovozzrencheskii crisis intellitentsii v usloviakh pervoi russkoi revoliutsii: 'misticheskii anarkhizm' i 'sobornyi individualizm,'" *Intelligentsiia i mir* (2006, no. 1): 141–62, and "Neklassicheskii anarkhizm i puti obnovleniia religioznogo soznaniia v Rossii pervoi chetverti XX stoletiiia," *Acta Eruditorum* 20 (2016): 66–74.

¹² On the reaction of modernist artists and their allies (and opponents) to the events surrounding Bloody Sunday and the revolution, see Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism*, chapter 9.

The encounter with the Revolution is the most important “fateful” encounter in the history of Russian Symbolism, defining its subsequent destiny and place in the culture.

The reality of the events of 1905–07, the brutality of the defeat of the revolution, became the downfall [*gibel'*] of mystical-aestheticized utopias of salvation by Beauty, of subjectivist illusions of an artist-“theurgist” transforming the world by their own will.¹³

This is not to say that the failures of the revolution put an end to artistic encounters with religion. Rather, in the subsequent decades of the early twentieth century, the religious topics nurtured in early modernist circles continued to be re-evaluated, reappropriated, and transformed, just as they had been throughout the outset of Russian modernist culture.¹⁴

In the present study, I take as a central problem the tension in modern Russian culture between individual and collective-communal drives (such as described by Metner) as it was manifest in the religious quests of the early Russian modernists in the first decade of the twentieth century. Artists and thinkers of the era grappled with this tension as they sought to translate their personal experiences and experiments into cultural universals; in these attempts, they frequently turned to religious topoi as a potential site for personal and societal transfiguration. While in many ways these modernist encounters with religious topoi mirror those of Western modernisms, the cultural and historical circumstances in late imperial Russia created an environment in which religious problems were uniquely foregrounded in the arts, philosophy, and politics. The religious topics that brought Russian modernist writers, artists, and thinkers into communication with one another inevitably involved questions of politics and

¹³ Z. G. Mints, “Russkii simvolizm i revoliutsiia 1905–1907 godov,” in her *Poetika russkogo simvolizma*, Blok i russkii simvolizm (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 2004), 205. Mints’s article originally appeared in *Al. Blok i revoliutsiia 1905 goda*, ed. Z. G. Mints, Blokovskii sbornik 8 (Tartu: Tartuskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1988).

¹⁴ Consider, for example, the relationship between Symbolist life-creation in the 1900s and the Marxist theory of God-building that emerged in the following decade.

society—the relationships between the state, institutions, and individuals, as well as the very nature of the associations between individuals and various collective endeavors—from the peasant commune to the Church, the state, and society writ large. Religious ways of thinking and acting provided modernist artists with a framework for understanding the self and society, as well as a path towards a transformed self (and in turn a transformed society) through the merging of artistic creation and life. This dissertation thus makes contributions to the study of early Russian modernist literature, as well as to the history of Russian religious culture.

In my broader theoretical approach to the problem of religion in early modernism, I accept Michael Levenson’s view of modernist art as a “social practice of culture,” constituting “a field of great social practices” together with other spheres of activity including religion, politics, and science. Especially important for the present study is Levenson’s stress on the formation of an “oppositional culture,” in which “singular disturbances [...] became connected to one another” as modernist art arose within modernity more generally.¹⁵ Levenson’s observation that, paradoxically, “modernity remains haunted by a search for novelty and by the recollection of precursors”¹⁶ has distinct significance in the Russian context, and provides a useful place for examining the role and place of religion within modernist culture.¹⁷ Here, I also draw on the sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s conception of religion as a “chain of memory.” Hervieu-Léger argues that religion is “the visible expression of a lineage which the believer expressly lays claim to and which confers membership of a spiritual community that gathers past, present and future believers.” Most relevant for the purposes of this study is her contention that religion

¹⁵ Michael Levenson, *Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 8.

¹⁶ Levenson, 2.

¹⁷ As Irina Shevelenko has shown, “archaism” was an important concept in Russian modernist aesthetics and modernist culture more broadly; see her *Modernizm kak arkhazim: Natsionalizm i poiski modernistskoi estetiki v Rossii* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2017).

be understood as “an ideological, practical and symbolic system through which consciousness, both individual and collective, of belonging to a particular chain of belief is constituted, maintained, developed and controlled.”¹⁸ Mircea Eliade proposes a similar process at work when he identifies the remnants of religious ways of being in supposedly secularized modern human beings:

Profane man cannot help preserving some vestiges of the behavior of religious man, though they are emptied of religious meaning. Do what he will, he is an inheritor. He cannot utterly abolish his past, since he is himself the product of his past. He forms himself by a series of denials and refusals, but he continues to be haunted by the realities that he has refused and denied. To acquire a world of his own, he has desacralized the world in which his ancestors lived; but to do so he has been obliged to adopt the opposite of an earlier type of behavior, and that behavior is still emotionally present to him, in one form or another, ready to be reactualized in his deepest being.¹⁹

As a general starting point, I also rely on Robert Bellah’s expansive understanding of religion. Bellah’s definition begins with a paraphrase of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz: “Religion is a system of symbols that, when enacted by human beings, establishes powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations that make sense in terms of an idea of a general order of existence.”²⁰ Bellah frames the development of religious culture as part of the biological evolution of human beings as social animals. He argues that religion, like other

¹⁸ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, trans. Simon Lee (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 81–2.

¹⁹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1959), 204.

²⁰ Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), xiv. See also Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 87–125.

cultural systems, has the potential to bridge the gaps between “overlapping realities,” namely the quotidian existence of ordinary perception which we take as the “real world,” and the potential worlds outside of ordinary time and space afforded by symbolic cognition: “It is through pointing to other realities, through beyonding, that religion and poetry, and science too in its own way, break the dreadful fatalities of this world of appearances.”²¹ What distinguishes religion from other cultural systems in this view is its tendency to function, in Geertz’s formulation, as “uniquely real”—a “model for” shaping the everyday world of participants as much as a “model of” that mundane reality and its relation to the larger order.²² Such a “model of” necessarily privileges semiotic behavior generally—and language specifically, as humanity’s primary way of working with symbols.²³ Bellah thus emphasizes “religious representation,” rooted in attempts to express the reality of a “unitive event,” in which the dualism characteristic of representational relationships is subsumed in the experience (Bellah’s use of the term “event” intentionally adds nuance to the idea of “experience,” so familiar to scholars of religion, embroiled as it is in an agent/patient dichotomy) of oneness.²⁴

As I will argue in the chapters that follow, it is the consciousness of their own participation in a “chain of memory,” such as described by Hervieu-Léger—the awareness of the need to work with the material of the past in order to create something new—that led to the embrace of religious topoi by so many practitioners of modernist culture in early twentieth-century Russia. The emerging conceptual awareness of social and cultural systems enabled

²¹ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 9.

²² See Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” 113–14.

²³ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, xiv.

²⁴ See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); and Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

artists and thinkers to recognize the power of ancient religious symbols to unite multiple realities—material and spiritual, individual and collective, peasant village and elite salon—even as they tested the limits of their use in the modern, secularized age. Increasingly cognizant of the ability for religious words to effect lasting change on both individuals and communities, a number of modernists envisioned their personal experiments as having the potential to directly shape society. Through written representations of their religious experiences and practices, they hoped to forge a new link on the chain connecting contemporary society—its values unstable and its culture in a state of critical flux—with the ancient past and the to-be-revealed future. This meant that for many modernists, artistic creation and religious expression were intrinsically linked. For some artists, however, religious questing would lead to the rejection of artistic culture; eschewing literature and the institutions that nurtured it, these modernist spiritual seekers embarked on projects of radical personal transformation that seemed to reject the value of artistic expression altogether. Nevertheless, they endeavored to distill their experiences and understandings in published texts, foregrounding the tension between the representation of religious events (to borrow Bellah’s term) or experiences and the ineffability underlying such phenomena.

In addition to tracing the evolving position of religion within post-Petrine Russian culture generally, I base my argument in case studies of the lives and writing of two modernist writers, Aleksandr Dobroliubov (1878–1945) and Leonid Semenov (1880–1917). Well-known among their literary contemporaries as poets whose religious quests led to the outright rejection of the values of modern culture, both figures are regularly mentioned peripherally in discussions of early Russian modernism. In their own right, each has been the subject of only a handful of article-length studies over the preceding half-century, with the vast majority of those appearing

only in Russian. In large part, scholars have chosen to emphasize the two writers' literary and spiritual biographies at the expense of textual analysis. Moreover, owing to the legacy of the Soviet academy with its official constraints vis-à-vis religious issues, there has yet to emerge a cohesive picture of the role of these two writers within the broader context of Russian modernist religious experimentation.

Dobroliubov and Semenov make for instructive examples of modernist religious-aesthetic experimentation on several accounts. As literary-historical figures, they both stand out as singular individuals and—simultaneously, if not seemingly contradictorily—as reflections of broader cultural trends. They each represent “singular disruptions” of culture, in Levenson’s terms, that come together to form modernism. In the first decade of the twentieth century, they turned from literary culture towards religious and social experimentation. Each in his own way (at least insofar as is possible), Dobroliubov and Semenov used religious topoi as the setting against which the conflict between individual and the collective impulses might be resolved. They recognized the cultural and social power of the symbolic systems with which they experimented, and both sought to fashion their own link in the chain. My examination of each case highlights the confluence of religious, artistic, and social-political concerns with which early Russian modernists grappled, while contributing more fully to the scholarly understanding of that era and its salient features.

This study is divided into three chapters. Chapter One is both the most theoretical and the most historical of the three. I begin by establishing the theoretical understanding of religion and secularization that underlies the entire study, and I follow with a brief survey of two centuries of state-sponsored secularization within the Russian Empire, from the reforms of Peter the Great through the advent of modernism at the turn of the twentieth century. My interest is in how

various state-driven secularization projects influence individual actors, and the ways in which those actors determine the tenor of Russian religious discourse. I follow the course of imperial secularization projects from Peter I through Nicholas II, showing how Russian religious dissenters of all stripes were nonetheless participants in Russian secularization. These processes culminate in the “religious renaissance” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the public religious dissention embodied in the later work of Lev Tolstoy, and the multi-vectored cultural ruptures of the 1905 revolution. This is the cultural and historical backdrop against which Dobroliubov and Semenov carry out their “disruptions.”

In Chapter Two, I turn to the case of Dobroliubov. After laying out the general parameters of his biography and literary output, I examine his final published book, *From the Invisible Book* (*Iz knigi nevidimoi*), published in 1905 amidst newly-defined freedoms of press and conscience. I argue that in this book, Dobroliubov organizes a chorus of prophetic voices, weaving together the inspired words of numerous sages with his own ideas. Within this ensemble, the individual prophets’ identities play conflicting roles. On one hand, Dobroliubov uses the names and words of traditional, historical prophets in order to have them testify to the truth of his message. On the other hand, he deliberately obscures the individual identities of these prophets, along with his own voice. The result is an emphasis on the message over the messenger: knowing exactly which wise person said exactly which wise words is far less important than sharing in the experience of Divine Wisdom. I show how the author incorporated contemporary discoveries in archaeology and historical Biblical criticism in his attempt to craft a new form of scripture suitable for the modern world. I argue that his adept knowledge of Biblical literature and citation is visible in—and indeed integral to—the structure and composition of the text, which by its author’s own declared aims was intended to serve as a kind of scripture for the

new era. My reading of Dobroliubov's text is further contextualized and explicated with help from theories of sacrifice elaborated by René Girard and subsequent scholars of religion.

In Chapter Three, I turn to the life and work of Leonid Semenov, Dobroliubov's most orthodox (and, ultimately, Orthodox with a capital "O") follower in literature and in life. More than anyone else, Semenov endeavored to follow Dobroliubov's path in both writing and in life. Coming of age in the turmoil of the 1905 revolution—experiencing profound religious doubt, imprisonment, and a deep skepticism towards both the origin and exercise of state power—Semenov sought a way of life that would best place him on the spiritual path. Originally identifying with the Decadent-Symbolist school—and for the bulk of his life a proponent of religious-literary ideas arising from that identity—I argue that in the years following 1905, Semenov endeavored to find his own approach for accessing and expressing religious reality. Like that of his predecessors and interlocutors—including both Dobroliubov and Tolstoy—Semenov's questing led him outside of aesthetics, even as he strove to continue to use artistic conventions in his self-conception and his attempts at communication with others.

Although Semenov's religious searching is inexorably linked to Dobroliubov's model, the two writers' paths came together only sporadically. Nonetheless, their cases, taken together, perfectly capture the tension between the individual and collective characteristic of early Russian modernism. Moreover, their work in the first decade of the twentieth century gives evidence for a unique path that emerged in Russian modernist literary-religious experimentation. Dobroliubov and Semenov each rejected artistic creation as a worthwhile endeavor: not merely abandoning literature to focus on spiritual pursuits, they used writing as a medium to express their annihilation of contemporary literary culture and its values.

Chapter One

Russian Religious Culture and Literature in the post-Petrine Period: Responses to Secularization

In his seminal 1892 lectures-turned-essay “On the Reasons for the Decline and on New Tendencies in Contemporary Russian Literature” (“O prichinakh upadka i o novykh techeniakh sovremennoi russkoi literatury”), Dmitrii Merezhkovskii presented a vision of an unprecedented spiritual crisis in contemporary culture. In the pre-Enlightenment age of “naive theology and dogmatic metaphysics,” he argued, that which was *unknown* had been virtually indistinguishable from that which was *Unknowable*. In such a world, mysticism was free to interfere with (and to “ruin”) science, while the “crude materialism of dogmatic forms enslaved religious feeling.” From Kant onward, thinkers dealt with this problem by building an impenetrable dam between the terra firma of phenomena and the noumenal abyss, that “boundless and dark ocean lying beyond our perception.”¹ Things that were merely unknown became distinguishable from the abstract Unknowable; empirical science, freed from interference from metaphysics and mysticism, illuminated the observable world like never before.

Merezhkovskii noticed that while science brought unprecedented clarity to the realm of phenomena, it also created a new problem, keenly felt by the generation coming of age at the end of the nineteenth century. Evoking the Schellingian imagery of Fyodor Tyutchev, he argued that metaphysics, mysticism, and legend had once served humanity—however imperfectly—as a “shining veil” cast over the abyss of the Unknowable, a “dull but comforting” ray of light in the

¹ Dmitrii Sergeevich Merezhkovskii, “O prichinakh upadka i o novykh techeniakh sovremennoi russkoi literatury,” in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: M. O. Vol’f, 1914), 18:211–12.

darkness. Positivism tore away that protective cover, leaving the underlying night exposed in its impenetrability, its unknowable-ness. Now unmediated, the profound mystery of that which lies beyond consciousness gnawed at the heart like never before; at the same time, human beings were bound to matter and reason, and were thus thoroughly aware that they lacked any means for interaction with the Unknowable. “Never before have people so sensed with their hearts the need to believe,” Merezhkovskii wrote of the new generation, “or understood through reason so well the impossibility of believing.”² The solution to this dilemma, he hoped, would be found in a new (but at the same time ancient and eternal) artistic idealism, which through the use of symbols would bring the Unknowable into contact with the phenomenal world.

Secularization: Religion in the Social Environment

The general parameters of the spiritual crisis perceived by Merezhkovskii in 1892 were not unique to Russia, but in fact link Russian and other European modernisms. At the beginning of the twentieth century, modernists across Europe frequently found themselves drawn to idealism as something *new*, a viable alternative to the already *old* materialism and naturalism of the scientific age.³ They responded to what they perceived as the shifting role of religion in society, perhaps its inevitable extinction—“secularization,” as the emerging social sciences deemed the process.

As a scholarly term, “secularization” is as fraught with problems as the term “religion” has been. Much ink has been spilled by sociologists and historians attempting to define, identify, refute or re(de)fine it. From the Latin *saeculum* (literally “a generation,” but in the context of

² Merezhkovskii, “O prichinakh upadka,” 212.

³ For example, see the discussion of French Symbolism in Levenson, *Modernism*, esp. 24–25.

Roman Christianity taken to mean “the world” as opposed to the Church), it finds its origin in the Reformation, as the property of the Roman Church was given over to secular (i.e., non-ecclesiastical) entities. As Hugh McLeod has observed, historians and sociologists in the nineteenth century adopted the term to describe what European social thinkers—particularly Comte, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber—variously perceived as the waning influence of religion in the wake of the Enlightenment, as concepts such as reason, scientific progress, and national interest superseded the authority and importance of religious institutions in various spheres of human activity.⁴ In the twentieth century, as scholars questioned the usefulness of teleological models derived from mainstream Western European experiences, more nuanced variations of the so-called “secularization thesis” or “secularization paradigm” emerged, described the shifting role of religion in society, rather than its simple annihilation by the march of reason-driven progress. These views of secularization describe a process by which religion becomes less of a central, universal societal element and is rather seen in terms of the privacy of the individual’s conscience—as the philosopher Charles Taylor observes, in a secular society “belief is an *option*” and it is “no longer axiomatic.”⁵

In sociology, such an understanding of secularization was first clearly articulated by Bryan Wilson in the mid-1960s and in recent decades has been most persistently defended by Steve Bruce.⁶ Its chief weakness seems to be that despite the supposed displacement of religion by other spheres of activity, we continue to see many people and groups of people in the present day who think and act religiously—one only need to consider the rise of theocratic states and

⁴ Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848-1914* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 1–17.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3. My emphasis.

⁶ See Roy Wallace and Steve Bruce, “Secularization: The Orthodox Model,” in *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, ed. Steve Bruce (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 8–30.

quasistates like revolutionary Iran or Daesh, or the contentious and powerful role of religious identity in the politics of nominally secular democracies and quasidemocracies such as the United States, Israel, India, or Russia. Bruce maintains that while religious people may continue to exist within societies, the increasing availability of alternative ways of thinking and being nonetheless leads inexorably towards religion's demise as an element of society:

The declining power of religion causes a decline in the number of religious people and the extent to which people are religious. As religious faith loses social power, it becomes harder for each generation to socialize its children in the faith. It also becomes progressively harder for those who remain religious to preserve the cohesion and integrity of their particular belief system. As religion becomes increasingly a matter of free choice, it becomes harder to maintain boundaries. Alternative reworkings of once-dominant ideologies proliferate, and increasing variation encourages first relativism—all roads lead to God—and then indifference as it becomes harder to persuade people that there is special merit in any particular road.⁷

This model of secularization has received an ample amount of criticism both within and outside of sociology, beginning with the work of David Martin, whose responses to Wilson and Bruce spanned five decades. Historian J. C. D. Clark has recently argued that as a cohesive model, the “secularization paradigm” is fundamentally ahistorical, too wedded to a “grand narrative” of selected causes and effects to form a cohesive paradigm capable of addressing the complex realities of Western European history and contemporary societies, let alone non-

⁷ Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defense of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2–3.

Western contexts.⁸ Clark instead proposes that to be useful, secularization should be divorced from the idea of a teleological process. He argues that secularization is

not something happening autonomously within the phenomena, like ocean currents or hurricanes, but a *project* urged by some individuals who seek historical validation for a cause. In this sense the secularist and the evangelist are mirror images of each other, and atheism, articulated in a sociological scenario as secularization, is an act of faith as much as is theism.⁹

Helpful insights into secularization are also to be found in Rudolf Schlögl's recently published study of Christianity in Western Europe. Examining a variety of cases in the turbulent hundred-year period straddling the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Schlögl employs Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory in his approach to questions of religion and secularization.¹⁰ In his historical analysis, Schlögl argues that the loss of property and rights of the various Churches allowed for them "to be incorporated into a civil society built on participation and [made] a

⁸ J. C. D. Clark, "Secularization and Modernization: The Failure of a 'Grand Narrative'," *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 1 (2012): 161-194. Clark's historiographical review provides a succinct summation of the general debate over the term. The "grand narrative" of secularization he rejects is that of a unified Catholic Europe experiencing the disruption of a mythically singular Protestant Reformation, leading to the Enlightenment and the inevitable eclipsing of religion by reason and science.

⁹ Clark, "Secularization and Modernization," 190. My emphasis.

¹⁰ See Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz with Dirk Baecker, fwd. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995). Central to Luhmann's complex theory is the differentiation of system from environment. He proposes that the boundaries of self-referential and self-replicating social systems (which are assumed to exist in social reality) are created through the observation of difference between such a system itself and the other same-order systems comprising its environment. Such systems can also exist as environments for their own constituent subsystems and are constantly defining themselves relative to their environments in instantaneous communicative events. Communication in this context is not taken to mean simple transmission: "the entire metaphor of possessing, having, giving, and receiving, the entire 'thing metaphoric' is unsuitable for understanding communication. [It] locates what is essential about communication in the act of transmission, in the utterance"; rather, Luhmann conceives of communication as a complex unity in which the utterance, as a "selection proposal," something limiting potentiality, is received as meaningful information: "Communication emerges only to the extent that this [information] is picked up, that its stimulation is processed" (139). Luhmann's theory of society has obvious implications for language and art; some of these are explored in his *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

plurality of confessions possible.” Redefined in this way, the Christian Churches served as models for other (secular) systems of voluntary association, particularly for voluntary, participatory political association in the emerging constitutional nation-states. Secularization, he posits, should thus be seen

not as the opposite of religion but as a constitutive component of the history of religious forms in the modern period. Piety was in need of new occasions and points at which it could be connected to processes of social inclusion. Family and construction of a type of individuality suited to modern society took on this function. Such new forms of piety shaped the means of communicating with transcendence in such a way that they could serve to reflect the social integration of society through communication.¹¹

Following Luhmann’s theory, Schlögl thus conceives of secularization as forming a unity with religion, as each is necessarily only observed and understood relative to the other. The emergence of the concept of secularization, he argues,

indicates Christianity was already aware in the Early Modern period that it existed within a social environment organized according to other principles and producing meaning through a different kind of rationality to religion. [. . .] Secularization can thus be understood primarily as a category of observation rather than as a teleological concept or normative stipulations, and it allows the social entity of religion to be regarded as distinct from others. As secularization does this in the context of society, it focuses on how this distinction is endowed with meaning, maintained and socially reproduced, that is to say, how religion gains social form.¹²

¹¹ Rudolf Schlögl, *Religion and Society at the Dawn of Modern Europe: Christianity Transformed, 1750–1850*, trans. Helen Imhoff (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 8.

¹² Schlögl, *Religion and Society at the Dawn of Modern Europe*, 251.

Perhaps most importantly for our purposes, Schlögl stresses the importance of mass media for the continued differentiation of religion into the nineteenth century. He links widespread religious revivals among Protestants and Catholics across Western Europe with growing literacy and the rapidly expanding print market. Participation in mass communication shifted the boundaries of social systems, including religion. “Christianity became a phenomenon of mass media,” he argues, identifying

a new sphere of public worship beyond church services, which developed as a social reality of religion supported by mass media. Socially, religion took place through media events. In this way, the degree to which every kind of divine worship could be perceived increased, and even the most private forms of communication with transcendence could still become communication in a social space. It was, therefore, not surprising that this private communication with transcendence became a discursive space of reflection and an archive of imaginative visions through which communication as a phenomenon of transmission could be contemplated more generally and experimented with.¹³

Participation in mass media helped the modern Churches (and non-church religious institutions) emerge as participants in civil society on the same order as secular associations and institutions. Moreover, the development (differentiation) of religious culture in print media, alongside the rapid expansion of secular mass media, changed the shape of popular religion in early modern Europe: “Printed materials provided models of a Christian way of life which members of brotherhoods and congregations could follow. Above all, however, they conveyed new styles of piety and various models of individual pious experience.”¹⁴ Popular texts on piety stressed the

¹³ Schlögl, 256–7.

¹⁴ Schlögl, 165.

value of inward self-reflection and individual refinement, and in so doing changed the nature of religious activity, reconceptualizing prayer as a conversation between one's inner self and God. At the same time, as religious texts proliferated on the mass market alongside other types of communication, many became more self-referential, acknowledging their existence as printed texts and grappling with the difficulties inherent in using texts to shape life.¹⁵

As the past decades of scholarly debate have made clear, theories and paradigms of secularization tend to pose as many problems as they aim to solve, especially in those cases where they have been reductively taken as universal, teleological models of human social and intellectual development rather than context-bound projects of European cultural production. For instance, the various models of secularization discussed above arose in response to the particularities of Western European cultural development (itself hardly a tidy monolithic entity). Formed in interaction with the religious culture of post-Renaissance Western Europe, their applicability to other contexts—at least automatically—has rightly been challenged.¹⁶ We do not need to subscribe to any particular “grand narrative” of universal social evolution to appreciate the various formulations of secularization for the historical phenomena they highlight: the legal, political and social consequences of the loss of temporal power and claims to exclusivity by various Churches, religious organizations, and communities across Europe in the wake of the Renaissance, especially the increasing privatization and individualization of Christianity (and eventually religion and questions of conscience at large) in post-Enlightenment

¹⁵ Schlögl traces this phenomenon in the genre of prayer books and devotional manuals during the first half of the nineteenth century, identifying a tension that will later emerge as a central concern in modernist literature: “Prayer books were primarily performative texts because they produced what they contained. Reading the texts meant that what they described occurred. Increasingly, however, the texts also drew attention to their printed nature and to the fact that any authentic encounter with God or with oneself could not occur within the text or through reading, thus undermining the performative aspect of the prayer text,” *Religion and Society at the Dawn of Modern Europe*, 167.

¹⁶ See Clark, “Secularization and Modernization,” 163, 193. A defense of the secularization paradigm as it applies to non-European, non-Christian cultures context can be found in Bruce, *Secularization*, chapter 9.

societies, carried out against the backdrop of mass print culture and the expansion of scientific and academic disciplines.

Understanding secularization as the way in which “religion gains social form” in modern European history encourages us to consider the complex interactions between that which is deemed “religious” and that which is deemed “secular” as these systems define themselves and each other within society. Such an understanding of secularization makes it well-suited for the present study on several accounts. It provides a lens through which to examine the place of religion vis-à-vis the other “social practices of culture” that constitute modernity as understood by Michael Levenson.¹⁷ Keeping in mind the complex interactions between religious and secular spheres of human activity provides added nuance and context for depictions of modernist culture as part of a what Peter Gay calls the “post-Christian era,” in which traditional religious authorities saw their claims to exclusivity in the realm of the spirit weakened by competition from many other spheres of cultural activity: science, art, philosophy, and even new, syncretic spiritual approaches (e.g., theosophy, anthroposophy, the various “occult sciences”).¹⁸

A number of recent studies have taken up the relationship between Christianity (and religion more generally) and the modernist movements in Western Europe,¹⁹ complicating assertions like Gay’s that “most modernists were more active in the negative side of [religious and spiritual debates], working to destroy religion rather than to create a new one.”²⁰ Erik

¹⁷ See Levenson, 8–9.

¹⁸ See Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 27–30.

¹⁹ For examples from the Anglo-American tradition, see the contributions to *Modernism, Christianity and Apocalypse*, ed. Erik Tønning, Matthew Feldman, and David Addyman (Leiden: Brill, 2015). On Western European modernism and religion and spirituality more generally, see Pericles Lewis, “Modernism and Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 178–96; and Alex Owen, *Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), esp. 100–105.

²⁰ Gay, *Modernism*, 29.

Tonning observes a pervasive sense of an impending apocalyptic crisis in Anglo-American modernist culture and argues:

The fundamental reason why Christianity is intrinsic to any coherent account of Modernism is that the very idea of an epochal cultural transformation at this time would necessarily involve some confrontation with the still-dominant religion and cultural paradigm of the West. How was the Christian past to be assessed? Was it worth preserving, or should it be overcome once and for all? How to relate to Christianity's present influence, both socially and individually? And did it have a future?²¹

Perhaps nowhere in Europe were such questions more acutely perceived and responded to by the practitioners and theoreticians of modernism than in late imperial Russia. The nascent modernist movement in Russia—especially but not only in its Symbolist guise—is replete with overt attempts at creating, appropriating, and redefining religion. Moreover, modernist religious experiments in Russia tended to have a firm basis in Christianity (broadly understood and, as was typical of the age, often combined with non-Christian elements): the era of early Russian modernist culture is thus more “neo-Christian” than “post-Christian.” In her recent book, Martha M. F. Kelly has shed new light on the ways in which key modernist figures—Aleksandr Blok, Mikhail Kuzmin, Anna Akhmatova, and Boris Pasternak, among others—understood and refashioned Orthodox religious culture in their work, as they endeavored to find a means for unity in the fractured cultural fields of modernity. “Russian modernism was a religious movement of a unique kind,” she writes, in which artists and intellectuals sought to use Orthodox

²¹ Erik Tonning, *Modernism and Christianity* (Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.

culture as a means to bridge the profound gaps in Russian society through “a new aesthetics based on the unity of spirit and matter.”²²

In this chapter, I trace a path through territory similar to what Kelly has mapped out, that of Russian modernist culture as religious culture, though I diverge in several key areas. My interest is not only the refashioning of Orthodox culture that occurs throughout so much of Russian modernist art, but particularly the *non-Orthodox* religious-aesthetic experiments that helped to shape modernism, specifically in the first decade of the twentieth century. My approach foregrounds the concept of secularization as much as it does that of religion: by focusing on the way in which religious culture “gains social form” in late imperial Russia, we can better see its complex relationships with philosophy, science, economics, politics, and especially with literature and the arts. The writers and thinkers whose work makes up the bulk of this study were keenly aware of the emergence of “religion” as an autonomous sphere of activity—not just as something to be embraced or rejected, but as something that could be redefined for one’s own purposes, used to create new meanings in art and in life.

For modernist writers in particular, religion was a potential common cultural ground between intellectual elites and the rest of the population—particularly the immense peasantry, still almost wholly alien to educated Russian society nearly half a century after the emancipation of the serfs. Caution is warranted here—although religion (including the Orthodox Church, various strands of Old Belief, and a number of diverse “sectarian” movements) played a central role in peasant life, we should resist the urge to see peasant culture as “unsecularized.” As we will see, peasant religious cultures were not untouched by the activity of the rest of modern society, even as isolated and esoteric as they could be—the myriad options for peasant religiosity

²² Kelly, *Unorthodox Beauty*, 5.

alone give some indication of that, not to mention the attitudes of some groups towards the autocratic state. Among the peasants, modernist writers and thinkers found models of religion and of social organization that operated freely from the autocracy. Moreover, for a number of modernists, religious ways of thinking and acting provided the means for conceiving and carrying out projects of life-creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*). In what would become a cultural pattern, they documented these projects in actual texts—religious representations, in Bellah’s terms.

As Tønning, Lewis, and others have shown, questions about the relationship of matter and spirit—of life and art—drove modernist writers to reconsider the role of religion and spirituality for the individual and in society. In Western Europe, this took place within a well-developed print culture, in societies for which the differentiation of spheres of activity—religion, philosophy, the arts, economics, politics—was increasingly apparent. In the Russian Empire—where the arbitrary power of the tsar remained unchecked (and seemingly intransigent, especially following the assassination of Alexander II in 1881), where industrial development lagged that in the West and most of the population remained in rural agricultural communities, where censorship and legal restrictions precluded civil liberties like the freedom of speech, of the press, and even of conscience—the religious problems taken up by modernist writers had a unique urgency.

As Levenson argues, modernism as a practice is marked by “the emergence of an oppositional culture,” wherein “individually audacious artifacts” are united in a complex of individual and group relationships.²³ Modernism in Russia began, as it had elsewhere, with a collective backlash against the dominant philosophical and aesthetic trends of the previous era. It

²³ Levenson, *Modernism*, 8.

was not enough to want to create something new; to be a modernist meant to propose a new set of values, and to seek others who shared the same aims (even if they disagreed on the means to achieve those aims). Of course, when modernists in Russia wrote against realism or positivism, their complex of cultural associations naturally differed from those held by their Western European counterparts. As troublesome as blanket terms like realism and positivism may seem today, in the Russian context—especially from the perspective of the modernists themselves—they represented a distinct cultural pattern: that of the radical nineteenth-century intelligentsia. In the following sections, I explore the state-sponsored secularization project that began with Peter the Great in the eighteenth century, tracing it through the nineteenth and into the beginning of the twentieth centuries.

The Secularizing State: The Creation and Emancipation of Culture in Imperial Russia

Secularization in Russia began with the widespread reforms of Peter the Great. Victor Zhivov argues that in contrast to Western Europe, “no institutionalized forms of secular culture existed in medieval Rus’.”²⁴ He sees the roots of secular culture coalescing in the Muscovy court towards the end of the seventeenth century, but holds that autonomous secular culture only truly begins to emerge during Peter’s reign. As the project of an autocratic ruler, the secular culture that emerged in early eighteenth-century Russia was “autonomous” only in the sense that it was (or aimed to be) distinguishable from religious culture. There was still no social autonomy for

²⁴ Victor Zhivov, *Language and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 42. By “secular culture,” Zhivov means a sphere of human cultural activity independent and distinguishable from religious-ecclesiastical culture. He provides the following examples such cultural institutions as they existed elsewhere: secular education linked directly to the classical tradition, universities (especially those with faculties devoted to secular studies such as law and medicine), juridical corporations (presumably, this includes a coherent secular legal tradition capable of recognizing the concept of a juridical corporation as an entity with rights and standing), and the chivalric tradition and the cultural practices associated with it.

either cultural domain; as Zhivov shows, secular and religious cultures in Russia remained state projects until the end of the eighteenth century.

For nearly his entire mature reign, Peter undermined the autonomy of the Orthodox Church, adapting the models he observed in the West—particularly that of England, where the monarch was the head of the state Church.²⁵ The intellectual foundations for Peter’s project were laid down by the Kievan theologian and preacher Feofan Prokopovich. Prokopovich, who had been educated in Rome and was exposed there to the breadth of the Western intellectual tradition, inaugurated a turn in Orthodox theology toward Protestant scholasticism.²⁶ His preaching and writing (both literary and theological) conveyed a full-throated endorsement of the tsar’s power over both state and Church. Peter’s reforms—Russia’s first modern secularization project—culminated in the *Spiritual Regulation (Dukhovnyi reglament)* of 1721. Authored by Prokopovich at Peter’s behest, the *Spiritual Regulation* effectively abolished the Moscow patriarchate (already rendered headless by Peter two decades earlier) and established outright state control over the Church administration under the guise of the Holy Synod. Georges Florovsky, in his landmark history of Orthodox theology, holds that the *Spiritual Regulation* was “more than a law”; it was a truly modern secularizing program:

The Regulation is a manifesto and a declaration of a new way of life. The signatures of the bishops and ranking clergy on such a pamphlet [. . .] were deliberately demanded and collected as part of the routine of state servitors making an act of submission and demonstrating their political loyalty. As such it represented a demand that this program

²⁵ See James Cracraft, *The Church Reforms of Peter the Great* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971), esp. 35–7.

²⁶ For a not unbiased account of Feofan’s theology, see Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology: Part I*, trans. Robert L. Nichols, (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1979), 123–6; a more measured account of Prokopovich’s life and intellectual concerns can be found in Cracraft, *The Church Reforms of Peter the Great*, 50–60.

depicting a new way of life be accepted and acknowledged—a recognition of a new order and a new worldview.²⁷

As Laura Engelstein writes, by the end of Peter’s reign the Church was “deprived of institutional autonomy;” it had become an organ of “a state that now conceived of its own objectives in secular terms and demanded that the Church meet secular standards.”²⁸

The Russian reception of the Enlightenment in the age of Catherine II was, in Zhivov’s assessment, primarily a “mythological action of state power,” a “Petersburg mirage.”²⁹ In Western Europe, he argues, the flourishing of Enlightenment thought and ideology coincide with emergence of cultures that have been “emancipated,” in the sense that they are freed from dependence upon the state (though not from interaction with it). In Russia, where the state was “the creator and master of culture,” Enlightenment ideology served the political needs of the state in both the religious and secular spheres. The “Russian Minerva” corresponded with Voltaire and hired Diderot as her librarian, introduced the language of western political philosophy (though not its substance) into Russian law, sponsored the development of the press as a forum for intellectual exchange, and oversaw the development of secular Russian literature, the print market in which it existed, and the educated audience for which it was made. At the same time, there was no possibility of a Russian Voltaire in her realm; in exchange for permitting the gradual institutionalization of literature, the empress simultaneously

²⁷ Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology: Part I*, 117.

²⁸ Laura Engelstein, *Slavophile Empire: Imperial Russia’s Illiberal Path* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 104.

²⁹ Zhivov, *Language and Culture*, 351.

institutionalized censorship and required that literature be put to use for the propagation of a state mythology that bore little relation to the political reality.³⁰

Catherine proved to have a defter touch in the religious sphere than her predecessor. During her reign, Church authorities like Metropolitans Gavriil and Platon promoted an Orthodox recension of the Enlightenment, while Protestant theological methods and Western secular learning were integrated into seminary education.³¹ As Andrei Zorin has shown, Orthodoxy was a key element of Catherine's "Greek project" (*grecheskii proekt*), which sought the liberation of Greece from the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of an Orthodox Greek monarchy with her grandson Konstantin Pavlovich as its founder. In Catherine's vision, Zorin writes, "Constantinople and Athens were marked as equivalent and by definition Russia's role as the single heir to the Byzantine church also made her the only indisputably legitimate heir to classical Greek culture."³² As Engelstein argues, Orthodoxy for Catherine thus served as a useful instrument for achieving secular aims. While embracing the Church as a promoter of morality and social order, she "nevertheless continued Peter's policy of undermining the institutional

³⁰ See the discussion of Sumarokov as he attempted to establish himself socially and economically as a writer in V. Zhivov, "Pervye russkie literaturnye biografii kak sotsial'noe iavlenie: Trediakovskii, Lomonosov, Sumarokov," *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 25 (1997): esp. 55–61.

³¹ For example, see Florovsky's discussion of Platon Levshin, a skilled preacher, court tutor to Catherine's heirs, and eventually Metropolitan of Moscow, in *Ways of Russian Theology: Part I* 142–6. Florovsky argues that the Metropolitan's "doctrinal 'theology' can scarcely be distinguished from the prevailing vague and moralistically emotional Lutheranism of the time" (145). On the merging of Enlightenment ideas and Orthodoxy in Platon's preaching, see Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Orthodoxy and Enlightenment in Catherinian Russia: The Teachings of Metropolitan Platon*, in *Thinking Orthodox in Modern Russia: Culture, History, Context*, ed. Patrick Lally Michelson and Judith Deutsch Kornblatt (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 43–63.

³² Andrei Zorin, *By Fables Alone: Literature and State Ideology in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Russia*, trans. Marcus Levitt with Nicole Monnier and Daniel Schlauffy (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2014), 27–8; also see Gregory L. Bruess, *Religion, Identity and Empire: A Greek Archbishop in the Russia of Catherine the Great* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1997).

autonomy of the Church,” confiscating monastic lands (i.e., secularization in its original sense), and allowing for a measure of religious toleration in order to quell potential political problems.³³

By the end of the eighteenth century, nearly a century of state-sponsored secularization projects within the Russian Empire resulted in a variety religious cultures that were aware of their place within society, and which could maneuver to define themselves and maintain their autonomy relative to the state or other institutions and groups. Zhivov argues that it is only at the end of the Enlightenment era—particularly the last decades of Catherine’s reign—that truly emancipated secular and religious cultures emerge in Russia. The emancipation of religious culture led to a “turning back to traditional wellsprings of Orthodox piety,”³⁴ including a revival of the institution of spiritual eldership (*starchestvo*) and the appearance on Russian soil of the medieval anthology of Greek Hesychastic writing known as the *Philokalia* (translated into Slavonic as *Dobrotoliubie* in 1793 and into vernacular Russian under the same title in 1877).³⁵ The volume’s editors were members of the Greek Orthodox revival movement known as the *Kollyvades*, who sought a traditional Orthodox spirituality to counteract the influence of the Enlightenment. The texts contained within the volume speak to a traditional, Orthodox form of “heart prayer,” the cultivation of an interior—and ultimately non-rational—communion with the Divine:

If while striving to practice the commandments you suddenly feel an inexpressible secret joy that strangely and unaccountably transforms you [...] this is because God has come to dwell within you [...] now raising you to the angelic state. [...] Once you have achieved this lofty state you cannot be constrained by sensory attachment to things. You are not

³³ Engelstein, *Slavophile Empire*, 105.

³⁴ Zhivov, *Language and Culture*, 351–3.

³⁵ Zhivov, 308.

distracted by any of the delectations of this life, nor do you regard some people as holy and others as unholy; but just as God makes the rain fall and sun shine equally on the just and unjust, on the evil and on the good, so you irradiate love and diffuse its rays to all men.³⁶

In the Russian context, the rediscovery of Hesychasm in the late eighteenth century served as “an antidote to moralistic, Westernized academic and popular theology,”³⁷ of the sort employed by Peter the Great and his Church in order to serve the interests of the growing imperial state.

Central to Hesychast practice is the guidance of a spiritual elder. Irina Paert has explored the development of spiritual eldership as an institution within the Russian Church, particularly within monasticism. While not an immensely widespread practice, spiritual guidance focusing on the lay practitioner’s inner life became an important feature of Russian Orthodoxy in the nineteenth century. The practice led to a revival of Russian monasticism, which had been severely curtailed under the secularizing policies of Peter and his successors in the eighteenth century.³⁸

The emancipated secular culture, on the other hand, was also free to engage in religious and spiritual questions in new ways. As Zhivov observes, “the disintegration of the state-oriented cultural synthesis meant that faith in progress and enlightenment by themselves ceased to satisfy the religious needs of society, and the result was new spiritual searching.” The religious culture that thus emerged *within* secular culture, he argues, was increasingly based on non-Orthodox models like Freemasonry, Halle pietism, and mysticism: “Europeanized culture, having been

³⁶ Nikitas Stithatos, “On the Inner Nature of Things,” in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, trans. and ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, & Kallistos Ware, vol. 4 (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 118.

³⁷ Irina Paert, *Spiritual Elders: Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 39.

³⁸ Paert, *Spiritual Elders*, 82–3; Cracraft, *Church Reforms of Peter the Great*, 251–261.

freed, demanded Europeanized religion.”³⁹ Catherine, wary of culture that could not be controlled, regarded both Orthodox mystical asceticism within the Church and Western spiritual practices (especially Freemasonry) among secular elites with suspicion. The participants in and venues for secular culture expanded, and the “state-cultural synthesis” could no longer be maintained.⁴⁰

When Catherine’s grandson Alexander came to the throne in 1801, religious and secular cultures were increasingly defined—internally and externally—without the direct control of the state. The twenty-four-year-old emperor came of age alongside the newly emancipated secular culture, and he embraced many of its new religious ideas. Alexander I continued his predecessors’ pattern of subjugating the Church to the state, but his approach was practically the inverse of that of Peter or Catherine. Essentially he sought to un-emancipate culture, both secular and religious, promoting a view of a sacralized nation-state led by a humble servant of God. To that end, he promoted the career of Prince A. N. Golitsyn (1773–1844), a confidant who shared his interest in sentimental pietism—as Florovsky writes, Golitsyn “suffered from an outright mystical curiosity” and had “converted to ‘universal Christianity,’ to a religion of tender imagination and experience of the heart.”⁴¹ Despite his rather non-Orthodox private understanding of Christianity, Golitsyn became Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod in 1803, marking the beginning of Alexander’s unique approach to state-sponsored secularization.

By the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the tsar’s mystical leanings had taken on an apocalyptic air and had become a driving force for matters of state. Guided by mystical inspiration and a conviction that the Kingdom of God was at hand, Alexander promoted a vision

³⁹ Zhivov, *Language and Culture*, 353–4.

⁴⁰ See Engelstein, *Slavophile Empire*, 104–6; and Zhivov, *Language and Culture*, 354.

⁴¹ Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology: Part I*, 167.

of a political order based in Christian universalism, with nations led by sovereigns guided by divine grace, acting as intermediaries between their peoples and God. This was the principle underlying his 1815 treaty with the rulers of Prussia and Austria establishing the so-called Holy Alliance. Without the knowledge or consent of the other signatories, Alexander published the treaty on Christmas Day, accompanied by a manifesto in which he explained the context for the agreement, at least as he understood it. According to the tsar, the Holy Alliance represented a pledge to conduct affairs of state, domestic and foreign, in line with “the one rule drawn from the teaching of Our Savior Jesus Christ, proclaiming to people that they should live as brothers, not in enmity and malice, but in peace and love.”⁴² At the same time as he heralded this new spiritual-political world order, Alexander enacted domestic policy reflecting a similar vision of sacralized secular government. A new Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Enlightenment (the so-called “combined ministry”) was formed with Golitsyn at the helm, combining the administrative apparatuses of the Orthodox Church, the officially recognized minority religions, and institutions of secular learning. In Florovsky’s assessment, Golitsyn’s new ministry was in fact “a Ministry of Religio-Utopian Propaganda,” a “cruel and coercive regime” demanding adherence to un-Orthodox mysticism, a reflection of Alexandrine “theocratic statism.”⁴³

Alexander used the privatized, interior religion that arose within secular culture to propose a “new” conception of the very idea of secular power, one endowed with cosmological and eschatological significance. As tsar and as a member of the true “interior Church,” he understood his personal role to be that of an intermediary between God and the Russian people, Orthodox and otherwise. He believed he was called to usher in an age of peace and unity with his

⁴² Qtd. in Zorin, *By Fables Alone*, 308.

⁴³ Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology: Part I*, 166–9.

fellow Christian monarchs (although, as Zorin details, they did not share his view of Christianity and were wary of its implications), a preamble to the apocalyptic transformation of the world.⁴⁴ This was in sharp contrast to the approaches of Peter and Catherine, both of whom used religious culture to further their secular aims, remaining largely uninterested in theological nuance or cosmological visions.

Perhaps not surprisingly for such an idiosyncratic endeavor, Alexander's project did not outlive him—in fact, it began to collapse during his lifetime. Despite a century of administrative control by the state, the institutional Church—i.e., the clergy and the monastic communities from which the bishops were elevated—was resilient enough to resist the pietist reformation in Russia: in 1824, clerics persuaded the tsar to disband the ministry, ending Golitsyn's two decades of control over the institutions of religious and secular culture.⁴⁵ Alexander died the following year and was succeeded by his youngest brother Nicholas, who did not share the elder brother's mystical zeal. As Engelstein argues, the “aggressively conservative” new tsar “valued the Orthodox Church as an arm of the state, not as the repository of absolute truth.”⁴⁶

Like his predecessors, Nicholas I saw the potential for the Church to be a stabilizing element in society. For the martially-minded new tsar, whose reign began with the violent suppression of the Decembrist revolt, stability was paramount. He continued the tradition of tightening state control over the Church; Florovsky argues that Peter's reforms reached their completion during Nicholas's reign: “Henceforth the Church was known as the ‘Department of the Orthodox Confession.’ The clergy and the hierarchy were included. The office of Over-Procurator was transformed by means of a ‘Synodal Command’ from an organ of state

⁴⁴ See Zorin, *By Fables Alone*, 298–309.

⁴⁵ See Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology: Part I*, 194–6.

⁴⁶ Engelstein, *Slavophile Empire*, 107.

surveillance and supervision into an organ of real power.”⁴⁷ Although he rejected the Western, Protestant-influenced pietism that dominated Alexander’s reign, the tsar was not averse to keeping religious culture at the center of his construction of the secular state. He and his ministers inaugurated the age of “official Orthodoxy,” emphasizing traditional religion as an intrinsic element of national identity and collective belonging. As Engelstein writes, he “borrowed the aura of stability and continuity associated with a purportedly unchanging national faith for purposes of state.”⁴⁸

Nicholas’s official ideology was expressed in the doctrine of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality” (*Pravoslavie, Samoderzhavie, Narodnost’*). Conceived and promoted by S. S. Uvarov, Nicholas’s longest-serving Minister of Public Education, this program was proposed in response to threats of political and social instability supposedly creeping in from Western Europe (although as scholars have long observed, the philosophical origins of the doctrine itself are to be found in German Romanticism):

Amidst the rapid decline of religious and civil institutions in Europe, given the widespread dissemination of destructive ideas, in view of the sorrowful circumstances surrounding us from all sides, it was necessary to fix the fatherland upon solid foundations [*ukrepit’ otechestvo na tverdykh osnovaniiaakh*], those on which welfare, power, and the people’s life [*zhizn’ narodnaia*] are based; to find the principles that comprise Russia’s distinctive character and that belong exclusively to it; to gather into one whole the holy remnants of its nationality [*narodnost’*] and to fasten to them the anchor of our salvation [*ukrepit’ na nikh iakor’ nashego spasenie*].⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology: Part I*, 239.

⁴⁸ Engelstein, *Slavophile Empire*, 111.

⁴⁹ S. S. Uvarov, *Desiatiletie Ministerstva narodnago prosveshcheniia* (St. Petersburg, 1864), 2–3.

The “national principle” of Orthodoxy meant that the people—as individuals and as a whole—were united in a “love for the faith of the ancestors.” As Zorin has shown, Uvarov did not necessarily even have Russian Orthodoxy in mind when he formulated the doctrine, but rather any traditional “national religion” that could support the state—the autocracy being the “keystone” of the three principles. In the context of his native Russia, of course, the national religion meant Orthodoxy. For both Nicholas and his minister of education, the Church was thus “significant [...] not for its truth but for its tradition.”⁵⁰ By constructing Russian nationality in terms of common membership in the body of the traditional Church, as well as in loyalty to the tsarist autocracy, Uvarov aimed to address a problem that would remain salient throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century: how was a Russian national identity possible when the empire was made up of what seemed to be several different, overlapping social systems with only tangential interactions?

In the early nineteenth century, “society” (*obshchestvo*) meant the upper classes, the traditional landowning nobility and those who managed to rise up through the Table of Ranks. This was a distinct group from “the people” (*narod*)—the peasants who comprised nearly ninety percent of the population and upon whom “society” was dependent.⁵¹ It was *obshchestvo* for whom the major eighteenth century reform projects were intended, not *narod*. Those eighteenth-century reforms that did reach the peasants concerned their legal status; by the nineteenth century they were not only bound to the land in serfdom, but non-state-owned peasants were essentially treated as the personal property of the landowners, a commodity that could be traded like any

⁵⁰ Zorin, *By Fables Alone*, 345.

⁵¹ See Abbott Gleason, “The Terms of Russian Social History,” in *Between Tsar and People: Educated Society and the Quest for Public Identity in Late Imperial Russia*, ed. Edith W. Clowes, Samuel D. Kassow, and James L. West (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), esp. 16–19.

other. The resultant cultural divisions between the upper and lower classes were, Zorin argues, “insuperable”: by the early nineteenth century,

to find any common customs, say, among the Russian nobility and peasantry was truly impossible. The issue was no more encouraging as concerned language; suffice it to say that the very document that declared nationality the foundation of Russian statehood was written in French. As for ancestry, the great majority of ancient Russian aristocrats traced their genealogy back to Germanic, Lithuanian, and Tatar stock.⁵²

Operating within and between these fractured social systems was the national religion:

Membership in the Orthodox Church and observance of its customs and rituals was as close to a cultural universal among the tsar’s subjects as could be found (as Zorin notes, Orthodoxy as a “national principle” of course necessarily excluded numerous adherents of minority religions and sectarian groups from the nation).⁵³

Mikhail Epstein has argued that Nicholas’s era saw the abrupt end of the period of “Enlightenment secularism” in Russian culture, introduced at Peter’s command and sponsored by his successors. Elaborating on Berdyaev’s thought, he traces the beginning of what he calls Russia’s “new middle ages” to the split between Nikolai Gogol and Vissarion Belinsky in the wake of the former’s *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* (*Vybrannye mesta iz perepiski s druz’iami*), first published in St. Petersburg in 1847.⁵⁴ Although Epstein’s conception of secularism/secularization differs somewhat from the one adopted in this chapter, his observations about the religious nature of the writing of both Gogol and his friend-turned-

⁵² Zorin, *By Fables Alone*, 348.

⁵³ Zorin, 350.

⁵⁴ On the content of Gogol’s *Selected Passages*, see V. V. Gippius’s discussion in his landmark study *Gogol*, trans. Robert A. Maguire (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1981), 138–151.

opponent Belinsky provide useful context for understanding later religious experimentation of Russian writers and thinkers. Epstein holds that Gogol, his inner self publicly aflame with religious fervor,

is not only the first neo-medieval writer, but also the first Russian modernist. Modernism marks the end of the new era, when its secular reserves, its rationalism, humanism and liberalism are exhausted, when new religious striving and avant-garde projects to save the world crop up in the social arena, when the flow of time is reversed and the Middle Ages wind up in our future.⁵⁵

In contrast to Epstein, I would suggest that Gogol's religious transformation in the 1840s be understood as yet another example of secularization, rather than a cultural phenomenon marking its end. It is true that his embrace of religion became an essential element of his public persona in a way seemingly unimaginable for earlier writers like Pushkin or Zhukovsky. While his faith was Orthodox, Gogol's Christianity was also an especially idiosyncratic, personal religious experience. Epstein's identification of Gogol as the first Russian modernist is particularly apt in this light, and Gogol's proto-modernism extends beyond his "new religious strivings and avant-garde projects to save the world." Most notably, it includes the publicization of his inner life by means of print culture, a modern endeavor intrinsic to secularization as explored earlier in this chapter.

Most significantly for the purposes of the present study, Gogol's final period was one of profound frustration with—and opposition to—the limits of aesthetic expression as a means for communicating what he perceived as spiritual truth. Michael R. Kelly argues that Gogol, even

⁵⁵ Mikhail Epstein, "The Demise of the First Secularization: The Church of Gogol and the Church of Belinsky," *Studies in East European Thought* 58 (2006): 96–97.

well before his spiritual crisis and turn toward religious nonfiction, “is one of many writers who refuse to acknowledge strict divisions between art and life, aesthetics and ethics, and he is particularly persistent in stressing the permeability of any perceived boundaries between these spheres.”⁵⁶ Beyond a Romantic literary musing on the inadequacy of language, Gogol’s crisis led him to take action, i.e., the burning of the manuscript of the second volume of *Dead Souls* (*Mertvye dushi*) in 1845:

There are times when it is not possible to turn society, or even one generation, towards the beautiful [*k prekrasnomu*], so long as it is not shown in the depths of its present abasement; there are times when one may not even speak of the sublime and the beautiful [*o vysokom i prekrasnom*], if the way and roads to it for everyone are not shown clear as day. This last circumstance was badly and weakly developed in the second volume of *Dead Souls*, where it should have been the chief thing, and therefore it was burned. But my hope is not a bit diminished. It is He Who by pride, ailments, and obstacles has quickened the development of my powers and my thoughts, without which I would never have conceived my work, it is He Who has formed the greater half of it in my brain, it is He Who will give me the strength to accomplish the rest—and put it down on paper.⁵⁷

Similarly to the later experiments in religiously-motivated life-creation discussed in this and subsequent chapters, Gogol’s quest led him outside the bounds of literature proper. Despite the hope that Providence would grant for his vision of the sublime and beautiful to be committed to paper, the second volume of *Dead Souls* would not materialize in his lifetime (being published in

⁵⁶ Michael R. Kelly, “Gogolian Paradox and Aesthetic Credo,” *The Russian Review* 65 (January 2006): 15–34.

⁵⁷ Nikolai Vasil’evich Gogol, *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, trans. Jesse Zeldin (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969), 109–110. Epstein sees this event as a precursor to Gogol’s subsumption to religious concerns.

fragmentary form in 1855, three years after his death and following yet another incineration of the manuscript).⁵⁸ Moreover, *Selected Passages*, his last major work, was roundly rejected by the reading public, most famously by Belinsky.

“I am incapable of giving you the slightest idea of the indignation which your book aroused in all noble minds,” Belinsky wrote to Gogol in his famous letter of 1847, “or of the howl of wild joy with which its appearance was greeted by all your enemies.”⁵⁹ Belinsky’s letter, first published in 1855, “burns with revolutionary ardor.”⁶⁰ Marc Raeff calls it “a landmark in Russian intellectual history,” for its excoriation of the writer’s reactionary sentiments and apparent abdication of (what Belinsky saw as) the role of the writer in shaping Russian society.⁶¹ Belinsky took particular issue with Gogol’s seeming obliviousness to the looming crisis caused by the cultural divisions between the peasants and the rest of Russian society:

The most topical, the most vital national questions in Russia today are the abolition of serfdom, the repeal of corporal punishment, and the introduction, as far as possible, of the strictest possible application of at least those laws which are already on the books. Even the government itself is becoming aware of these things (for it knows full well what the landowners do to their peasants, and how many of the former have their throats cut by the latter every year), as is shown by its timid and futile half-measures. [...] These are the questions by which Russia is stirred in her apathetic half-sleep! And at such a time a great writer, one who has so powerfully stimulated Russia’s self-awareness by his marvelously

⁵⁸ See Robert Maguire’s discussion of the history of the second volume in his *Exploring Gogol*, Studies of the Harriman Institute (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 322–32.

⁵⁹ Vissarion Grigor’evich Belinskii, “Letter to N. V. Gogol,” trans. Valentine Snow, in *Russian Intellectual History: An Anthology*, ed. Marc Raeff and intro. Isaiah Berlin (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), 253.

⁶⁰ V. V. Gippius, *Gogol*, 155.

⁶¹ Introductory comments to V. G. Belinskii, “Letter to N. V. Gogol,” in Raeff, *Russian Intellectual History*, 252.

artistic, deeply true works [...] comes forward with a book in which he teaches the cruel landowner in the name of Christ and of the Church to squeeze more money out of his peasants, whom he curses as “unwashed brutes”!⁶²

Putting religion in the service of political conservatism would increase the appeal of atheism for the members of Russian intelligentsia in the second half of the nineteenth century.

From Radicalism to Idealism to Modernism

By the mid-nineteenth century, intelligentsia culture—its ethos emerging in Belinsky’s letter—had become thoroughly radicalized. Realism and positivism were promoted in the arts, while atheism was embraced as a form of opposition to both traditional culture and the autocratic state. The radicals’ project was focused on the divisions between educated elites and the common people. Victoria Frede has defined this culture as “a set of expectations, articulated in ever more pressing terms [. . .], that to be an educated person brought with it certain obligations toward the nation and toward humanity.”⁶³ Radical writers like Nikolai Chernyshevsky and Nikolai Dobrolyubov called for art that articulated and served the needs of the people—a people with whom, as educated proponents of atheism, they in fact had little cultural common ground. The inability to connect with a peasantry they felt compelled to serve proved to be a decades-long struggle for the radical intelligentsia. The populist movement of the late 1870s saw unsuccessful attempts to unite the educated elite and the peasants, sometimes by means of repurposed (secularized) religious metaphor—for example, the salvation of the people through

⁶² V. G. Belinskii, “Letter to N. V. Gogol,” in Raeff, ed., *Russian Intellectual History*, 254–5.

⁶³ Victoria Frede, *Doubt, Atheism, and the Nineteenth-Century Russian Intelligentsia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 14.

the “apocalypse” of revolution and the institution of a new society.⁶⁴ While some radicals saw fit to rework religious ways of thinking for their own aims, they tended to dismiss the importance of religion itself to the people: populists like Afanasy Shchapov interpreted peasant religiosity in a thoroughly secularized manner, as mere “social protest under religious masks.”⁶⁵

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, conservative and liberal voices alike spoke out in response to the radicals. Of these, perhaps the two most influential for the course of early Russian modernism and the religious renaissance belonged to Vladimir Solov’ev and Lev Tolstoy. For philosophers like Marxists-turned-idealists Nikolai Berdiaev, Sergey Bulgakov, Semyon Frank, Pavel Novgorodtsev, and the Trubetskoy brothers, Solov’ev’s thought served as virtually the only useable model for a Russian Christian religious philosophy that could be capable of addressing the broader questions of contemporary Western philosophy. For early modernist writers from Merezhkovskii to Blok and Belyi, it was Solov’ev’s theologically imbued aesthetics that proved most interesting (and this despite the philosopher’s well-documented distaste for the Symbolist poetry of the 1890s). In Solov’ev’s thought, humankind’s capacity for artistic creation provides the means for effecting the synthesis of the spiritual and material, allowing the noumenal to appear in the phenomenal world: “Perfect art in its final task must

⁶⁴ See Frede, *Doubt*, 156–62; and Laurie Manchester, *Holy Fathers, Secular Sons: Clergy, Intelligentsia, and the Modern Self in Revolutionary Russia*, Studies of the Harriman Institute (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008). Manchester traces the role of the sons of priests (*popovichi*) in the formation of the radical intelligentsia in the latter part of the nineteenth century. She shows how the children of clerical families—raised outside the nobility but also distant from the peasants—used religious topoi for secular purposes.

⁶⁵ Alexander Etkind, “Whirling with the Other: Russian Populism and Religious Sects,” *Russian Review* 62, no. 4 (October 2003): 574. This view resurfaced in the twentieth century, dominating the scant Soviet scholarship on Russian sectarianism. Under the broader framework discussed earlier in this chapter, the existence of sectarian movements—as alternatives to the official state religion—gives evidence of secularization, without the need to ascribe overly reductive motives to their beliefs and practices.

incarnate the absolute ideal—not in a single imagination, but in actual fact. It must spiritualize, transubstantiate our actual life.”⁶⁶

If Solov’ev provided the artists and intellectuals of the Russian religious renaissance with the philosophical underpinnings for their religious-literary experiments, it was post-conversion Tolstoy who showed how one (and not just anyone, but the preeminent public voice) could make religion a matter of private choice. As Inessa Medzhibovskaya has argued, by bringing his private, individual search for God into the public sphere, Tolstoy was “Russia’s first modern man.”⁶⁷ It is worth noting that unlike Gogol’s public turn to spirituality (which, as discussed above, has caused him to be called “Russia’s first modernist” by at least one scholar),⁶⁸ Tolstoy’s project is decidedly un-Orthodox. Publicly opposed to the state religion, and ultimately to the state itself, Tolstoy’s public search for religious truth indeed bears the hallmark of modernism as an oppositional culture described by Levenson. Moreover, in addition to publicly redefining and reshaping religious concepts in his writing to accord with his personal beliefs, Tolstoy then endeavored to rearrange his life to conform to these beliefs. In essence, he used religion as a means for bringing an idea into the physical world; this is not entirely dissimilar from the Solovyovian theurgy that would play such an important role for the religiously-motivated modernists.

⁶⁶ V. S. Solov’ev, “Obshchii smysl iskusstva,” in his *Filosofia iskusstva i literaturnaia kritika* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1991), 89. On the metaphysical details of Solov’ev’s thought, see Oliver Smith, *Vladimir Soloviev and the Spiritualization of Matter* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2011). On Solov’evian aesthetics and their influence on modernist theoreticians (especially Belyi), see Irina Paperno, “The Meaning of Art: Symbolist Theories,” in *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*, ed. Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 13–23.

⁶⁷ Inessa Medzhibovskaya, *Tolstoy and the Religious Culture of His Time: A Biography of a Long Conversion, 1845–1887* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2008), 352.

⁶⁸ See note 55.

Tolstoy's effective excommunication from the Orthodox Church in early 1901 became a rallying point for a number of writers and philosophers, who came together to defend freedom of conscience from the autocratic state and its subservient Holy Synod. The significance for the liberal intelligentsia of the Church's pronouncement against Tolstoy was captured in a speech to an Orlov missionary conference by the statesman Mikhail Aleksandrovich Stakhovich, which subsequently received considerable attention in the press. Speaking "in the name of the Church" itself (which he opposed to the institutional leadership and the priesthood), Stakhovich criticized the Synod's actions and declared that "violence upon the conscience is unconscionable [*nasilie nad sovest'iu bessovestno*]; where there is no freedom, there is no sincerity, no faith that is true and non-deceptive."⁶⁹ In large part, the writers and thinkers in modernist circles were interested not as much in the content of Tolstoy's religious ideas as in the fact and form of his dissent, and its meaning for Russian culture. As Berdyaev would write two years later,

It is acknowledged by all that the initiator of religious ferment in Russia is L. Tolstoy; he has pierced a hole in the religious indifference of the intelligentsia and placed religious inquiry in the center of attention. For this he was excommunicated from the Church, precisely for his religious seeking [. . .]. It was sensed only after Tolstoy's sermons, the power of which we in no way see in [their] negation of religious metaphysics, that questions of religious consciousness could not be related to with passive indifference, that to free the religious conscience from state oppression was possible only through a positive, active attitude toward religion.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Quoted in M. A. Kolerov, *Ne mir, no mech: Russkaia religiozno-filosofskaia pechat' ot "Problem idealizma" do "Vekh," 1902–1909* (St. Petersburg: Aleteiia, 1996), 13.

⁷⁰ Nikolai Berdyaev, "Politicheskii smysl religioznogo brozheniia v Rossii," in his *Sub specie aeternitatis: Opyty filosofskie, sotsial'nye i literaturnye (1900–1906 g.)* (St. Petersburg, 1907), 137. Kolerov argues that Berdyaev's view of Tolstoy was likely shared by others in his circle (*Ne mir, no mech*, 14).

For Berdyaev and others, Tolstoy's excommunication thus served as the starting point for their debates on freedom of conscience, which in turn appeared to be a lead-up to philosophical idealism. In late 1901, inspired by Stakhovich's speech, the ex-Marxist Petr Struve began to organize a collection of essays in defense of freedom of conscience. The project quickly evolved into a collective defense of idealism in the tradition of Solov'ev, but with a distinct social-political aim. The neo-idealists sought to find a philosophical basis for Russian liberalism. The project initiated by Struve culminated in the 1902 publication of *Problems of Idealism (Problemy idealizma)*, the contributors to which included Struve, Bulgakov, Berdyaev, Pavel Novgorodtsev (who also edited the volume), and others.⁷¹

At the same time as they began their collaborative work on *Problems of Idealism*, a number of the ex-Marxist-turned-neo-idealist philosophers (especially Berdyaev and Bulgakov) came into close contact with modernist writers and other members of the liberal intelligentsia under the guise of the St. Petersburg Religious-Philosophical Meetings (1901–1903). Conceived and organized chiefly by Merezhkovskii and Gippius, together with their confidant Dmitrii Filosofov and the essayist and religious philosopher Vasily Rozanov, the Religious-Philosophical Meetings were proposed as a forum in which the religiously inclined intelligentsia and representatives of the Church hierarchy could meet to discuss issues of mutual interest.⁷²

⁷¹ For an overview of the project and the philosophical views presented in the volume, see the editor's introduction in *Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian Social Philosophy*, trans., ed., and intro. Randall Poole (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 1–78. On the authors' philosophical idealism, see N. S. Plotnikov, "Filosofiiia 'Problem idealizma,'" in *Problemy idealizma* (Moscow: Tri Kvadrata, 2002), 5–60. On the social and political context of the volume, see M. A. Kolerov, "Idealismus militans: Istoriia i obshchestvennyi smysl sbornika 'Problemy idealizma,'" in *Problemy idealizma*, 61–224. Frances Nethercott explores the development of several contributors' legal and political philosophy in "Russian Liberalism and the Philosophy of Law," in Hamburg and Poole, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, 248–65. On the authors'

⁷² On the history of the Meetings, see S. M. Polovinkin, "Na izlome vekov: O religiozno-filosofskikh sobraniiax 1901–1903 godov," in *Zapiski peterburgskikh Religiozno-filosofskikh sobranii 1901–1903 gg.* (Moscow: Respublika, 2005), 490–510.

Discussion of Tolstoy and the Church dominated the third and fourth sessions, with Merezhkovskii presenting a lecture in which he subjected both parties—and the liberal intelligentsia itself—to scrutiny. Tolstoy had never been the spiritual leader of Russian society, Merezhkovskii argued, nor could he be: his religious project was too private, too individual. Tolstoy had rejected society and all its institutions (art and literature, Church, state, private property) and thus was incapable of leading it. Moreover, his religion was fundamentally nihilistic and therefore ill-suited to the task of becoming the new church:

People can enter into a stable inner union only in the name of some kind of affirmation, in the name of some kind of “yes”; a union in the name of only negation, without any affirmation, is always external, incidental and temporary. [. . .] The union of the Russian people with Tolstoy has a common “no,” the rejection of Orthodoxy, without the common “yes.”⁷³

Merezhkovskii held that while the liberal intelligentsia, hoping to reform church and state, could not draw out a “yes” from Tolstoy’s “no,” they also could not remain silent in regard to the writer’s excommunication. Tolstoy’s fate led him to question the nature of the Orthodox Church: was it a secular institution or spiritual body? Furthermore, he wondered, which Tolstoy received the Synod’s condemnation: the thinker (by Merezhkovskii’s admission, a “pseudo-Christian” and “a deceptive ‘double,’ a ghostly ‘shapeshifter,’” or the “true religious being [*podlinnoe religioznoe sushchestvo*]”? He argued that the latter, embodied in Tolstoy the artist, believed in God and sought spiritual understanding in a way that was pre-Christian; as ignorant of Christianity as Homer was, this Tolstoy could not truly be a heretic.⁷⁴ Merezhkovskii was willing

⁷³ D. S. Merezhkovskii, “Lev Tolstoi i russkaia tserkov’,” in *Zapiski peterburgskikh Religiozno-filosofskikh sobranii*, 49.

⁷⁴ “Lev Tolstoi i russkaia tserkov’,” 54.

to grant that the Church was justified in calling out Tolstoy as a thinker, but he also wondered if it might not one day see in the great artist what it saw in the virtuous pagans of antiquity.

The questions that Merezhkovskii raised in his address to the Religious-Philosophical Meetings reflected not only his public views on Tolstoy's situation, but also the private beliefs he was developing along with Gippius and Filosofov. In fact, as Gippius indicated in her diary *On the Past* (*O byvshem*, 1899–1914), the Meetings were initially conceived at least in part as an “external” face for the trio's own “internal” religious experiments.⁷⁵ As evidenced by his article “On the Reasons for the Decline,” Merezhkovskii had long considered mystical-religious problems and the “new art” together. Originally, he rejected Christianity for what he considered its exclusive focus on matters of the spirit, instead seeing the future synthesis of religion and art through a return to the corporeality of ancient paganism.⁷⁶ By the turn of the twentieth century he came to advocate a revitalized, renewed Christianity—a new church, to be brought about in the synthesis of earthly paganism and otherworldly Christianity. In *On the Past*, Gippius recorded how, beginning in 1900, she, Merezhkovskii, and Filosofov embarked on a secret quest to usher in the age of the Third Testament, praying together and eventually developing rituals to solemnize their spiritual union.⁷⁷

The trio's attempt to create a new church and transform society is of course only one of the better-known religious projects among Russian intellectuals in the first years of the twentieth century. In the years leading up to the failed revolution of 1905, a number of these projects were

⁷⁵ See Z. N. Gippius, “O byvshem,” in her *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 8 (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 2003), 86; Polovinkin, “Na izlome vekov,” 495–97; and Matich, *Erotic Utopia*, chapter 6.

⁷⁶ See Judith E. Kalb, “Shifting Time-Frames and Metaphorical Spaces: Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Russian Modernism, and the Classical Past,” in *Reframing Russian Modernism*, ed. Irina Shevelenko (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018), 53–77.

⁷⁷ Z. Gippius, “O byvshem,” 71–78.

marked by the tension between individual and collective impulses, as their proponents sought to understand the relationship between an individual's inner life and communal culture. In response to the spiritual crisis described by Merezhkovskii in his 1892 essay, a religious approach provided modernist writers and thinkers with the means for transforming life—creating life, in the Solovyovian theurgic sense, as one would a text—and by extension transforming society itself.

In the following chapters, I argue that this pattern continues—and indeed is magnified—in the lives and works of Aleksandr Dobroliubov and his sometimes-disciple Leonid Semenov. Dobroliubov and Semenov are both products of the early *fin-de-siècle* as much as they are producers of modernist culture. My analysis of Dobrolyubov's work focuses on his interpretation and appropriation of the Biblical literary tradition. In taking up Semenov's case, my interest is in his recension of Dobroliubovianism, particularly as evidenced by his correspondence with Tolstoy and his later literary output. In the life and work of both figures, I see a particularly clear manifestation of the religious trends in Russian modernism. In responding to secularized culture, Dobroliubov and Semenov embarked on distinctly non-Orthodox religious projects with the aim of effecting a radical self-transformation as individuals. Their religious quests were enacted not only in life, but also in artistic texts, as both writers sought to transform society itself as much as their own inner worlds.

Chapter Two

From Poet to Prophet: The Case of Aleksandr Dobroliubov

In the summer of 1905, amidst the cultural and political crises unfolding across the empire, the Symbolist-aligned Moscow publishing house Scorpio (Skorpion) released Aleksandr Dobroliubov's third and final book, *From the Invisible Book* (*Iz knigi nevidimoi*). It was a decade since the author made his literary debut with the 1895 collection *Natura naturans. Natura naturata*. In the intervening years, Dobroliubov—once considered an “arch-Symbolist”—had completely transformed his public persona, cultivating a reputation among literary elites as the poet who left literature in order to become an itinerant religious teacher. In *From the Invisible Book*, he makes the case for his radical experiment and encourages others to join him on the path. Its publication cemented his status—in the minds of contemporaries and historians alike—as an almost mythical figure who left urbane literary culture behind in favor of a simple life of silence, song, and work among the people.

The literary-historical reality underlying the myth of Aleksandr Dobroliubov and his enigmatic last book is the focus of the present chapter. Dobroliubov's is one of a number of instances in the history of Russian modernism in which an individual artist attempts to transcend aesthetics in pursuit of a private, spiritual goal and endeavors to distill that experience in a published text so that others may follow. One of the ways his case stands out from other religious-aesthetic experiments in Russian modernist culture is the degree to which he succeeded in executing his project. As Aleksandr Etkind has argued, “More than anyone else, Dobroliubov

carried out the symbolist dream of transferring art into life, of constructing life according to the laws of art.”¹

My discussion of Dobroliubov’s case begins with a brief overview of the poet’s early biography and his first literary experiments, as well as his turn to religion in the final years of the nineteenth century. I pay special attention to the perception of the author’s works and life by contemporary practitioners of modernist culture, as well as his treatment by subsequent generations of scholars of Russian modernism. I am particularly interested in the way in which Dobroliubov’s reputation as a practitioner of life-creation coalesced early in his career, displaying many of the patterns that would drive his later religious experimentation and writing. I then turn to the text of *From the Invisible Book*, starting with a discussion of the book’s structure, overarching message, major themes, and critical reception. I elaborate on three elements of the text that encapsulate Dobroliubov’s message: the prophetic chorus constructed through the author’s use of voices from various religious traditions; the constellation of motifs drawn from Biblical sources centered around the idea of the sacrificial feast; and the figure of Christ who appears in various forms throughout the book as the embodiment of the spiritual path.

To accomplish the first of the above tasks, I show how Dobroliubov organizes a chorus of prophetic voices, weaving together the inspired words of numerous sages with his own ideas. Within this ensemble, the individual prophets’ identities play conflicting roles. On one hand, Dobroliubov uses the names and words of traditional, historical prophets in order to have them testify to the truth of his message. On the other hand, he deliberately obscures the individual identities of these prophets, along with his own voice. The result is an emphasis on the message over the messenger: knowing exactly which wise person said exactly which wise words is far

¹ Etkind, *Khlyst*, 264.

less important than sharing in the experience of Divine Wisdom. This is not to say that the individual's identity is lost altogether; rather, central to Dobroliubov's message is the privileging of a collective mystical experience—and the collective expression of that experience—to which all individuals have access (and in which, at its fullest, all individuals partake).

Next, I examine a key constellation of motifs at work in the text and locate their origins in Biblical literary tradition. I argue that the central message of *From the Invisible Book* is encoded in a web of related motifs—including birds, flowers, clothing, imprisonment, law, sacrifice, resurrection, and a mystical marriage feast—drawn from various parts of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Elucidating a common theme in sacred writing from the Pentateuch to Revelation, this web of imagery underscores the singular message that the author hears in the voices of the prophetic chorus. I pay particularly close attention to the motif of sacrifice, signaled chiefly by the image of an “altar of earth” (*zhertvennik iz zemli*), arguing that Dobroliubov connects the idea of a sacrificial offering with the act of aesthetic expression. When properly made, the offering of song becomes in his view the feast at which all of creation is united in communion with God.

Finally, I conclude the chapter with a portrait of the most prominent figure in *From the Invisible Book*, that of Christ whose image emerges within the text as a spiritual-literary model. Dobroliubov sees a Christ who is neither the God-man of Nicene Christianity, nor a completely demythologized figure. The Dobroliubovian Christ is the great teacher who went into the wilderness, lived among the wild beasts, and received the counsel of angels, the preacher who traveled throughout Galilee and Judea and commanded his followers to forsake what is familiar and follow his example. He is also the proof of bodily resurrection and the model for all human beings in that regard. I show how Dobroliubov draws on the literary traditions of the apostle

Paul, Francis of Assisi, and Thomas à Kempis in developing the image of the Son of God as the Word made flesh, the divine being who, through his human nature became a model for those who would follow the path. Reflective of the underlying tension of *From the Invisible Book*, Dobroliubov's Christ exists within the text but beckons the would-be disciple to see that the text itself is just clothing for a spiritual reality that transcends the limits of human expression. The path he shows the reader is the one taken by the author, leading outside of literature and artistic expression and into the transfigured world of the Kingdom of God.

First Steps: 1876–1895

Joan Delaney Grossman introduced Dobroliubov's life and work into the English-language scholarly discourse with the contention that the Petersburg Decadent turned religious seeker "was arguably the most singular figure in the Russian fin-de-siècle."² Similar superlative terms had long been used to describe the poet, stretching back to his earliest mentions in literary criticism. Writing in the 1910s, S. A. Vengerov called him "one of the most characteristic figures of Russian Decadence," and argued that his "personal biography is considerably more interesting than his literary activity."³ Six decades later, in the opening line to the most significant Soviet-era treatment of Dobroliubov's work, K. M. Azadovskii observed that the poet "became a

² Joan Delaney Grossman, "Aleksandr Dobroliubov: The Making of a Decadent," introduction to Aleksandr Dobroliubov, *Sochineniia: "Natura naturans. Natura naturata." "Sobrianie stikhov." "Iz al'manakha 'Severnye tsvety' na 1901, 1902 i 1903 g."* *Modern Russian Literature and Culture: Studies and Texts 10* (Berkeley: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1981), 7. This essay and its companion, Grossman's "Aleksandr Dobroliubov and the Invisible Book," the introduction to Dobroliubov, *Iz knigi nevidimoi*, *Modern Russian Literature and Culture: Studies and Texts 11* (Berkeley: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1983), remain the most comprehensive studies of Dobroliubov's life and work in English. On Dobroliubov's life and work within the context of a broader study of sectarianism, populism, and Russian Symbolism, see William John Comer, "The Russian Religious Dissenters and the Literary Culture of the Symbolist Generation." (PhD diss, University of California at Berkeley, 1992), 99–108.

³ S. A. Vengerov, ed., *Russkaia literatura XX veka. 1890-1910* (Moscow: Respublica, 2004; first published in Moscow, 1914–1916), 159.

legendary figure even within his own lifetime,”⁴ an assertion echoed by A. A. Kobrinskii a quarter of a century later: “the myth of Aleksandr Dobroliubov, having begun to come together already in the earliest period of the development of Russian symbolism [...], came into its full form at the beginning of the twentieth century, that is, when Dobroliubov himself left literature and broke off from his literary circle.”⁵

Over the past several decades, a handful of scholars have included Dobroliubov’s literary output and biography within broader studies of modernist culture. Aage Hansen-Löve, for example, features Dobroliubov rather prominently in his study of Symbolist motifs, albeit out of “heuristic” rather than “artistic” interest.⁶ N. A. Bogomolov has discussed Dobroliubov’s contribution to the development of the Symbolist genre system, counting *Natura naturans*. *Natura naturata* among early examples of the “Symbolist book,” a new type of literary work that presents itself as “a unity from which it is impossible to extract an individual poem without causing considerable semantic damage.”⁷ Along somewhat similar lines, Jonathan Stone has thoroughly examined the 1900 publication of Dobroliubov’s second book, *Collected Verses* (*Sobranie stikhov*), in his recent studies of the institutional and material history of Russian modernist culture.⁸

⁴ K. M. Azadovskii, “Put’ Aleksandra Dobroliubova,” in *Tvorchestvo A. A. Bloka i russkaia kul’tura XX veka. Blokovskii sbornik 3*, ed. Z. G. Mints (Tartu: Uchenye zapiski Tartuskogo universiteta, 1979), 121.

⁵ A. A. Kobrinskii, “Zhil na svete rytsar’ bednyi’ (Aleksandr Dobroliubov: slovo i molchanie),” in Nikolai Minskii and Aleksandr Dobroliubov, *Rannie simvolisty: Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, Novaia biblioteka poeta (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2005), 452.

⁶ See A. Khansen-Leve, *Russkii simvolizm. Sistema poeticheskikh motivov. Ranniy simvolizm*, trans. S. Bromerlo, A. Ts. Masevich, and A. E. Barzakh (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 1999), 11. Originally published as Aage A. Hansen-Löve, *Der Russische Symbolismus. System und Entfaltung der poetischen Motive. I. Band: Diabolischer Symbolismus* (Vienna: Verlag Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1989).

⁷ See N. A. Bogomolov, “Zhanrovaia sistema russkogo simvolizma: Nekotorye konstatatsii i vyvody,” in *Vokrug “serebrianaogo veka”. Stat’i i materialy* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010), 23.

⁸ Jonathan Stone, *The Institutions of Russian Modernism: Conceptualizing, Publishing, and Reading Symbolism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), especially chapter 3. Also see his “Making the Symbolist

Nonetheless, it is Dobroliubov's biography-as-myth, and the position it occupies in the historiography of Russian modernism, that has captured the bulk of scholarly attention. As noted above, this began contemporaneously with Dobroliubov's career as a writer. Kobrinskii further identifies two aspects of the poet's biographical myth:

On one hand, Dobroliubov's rejection of literary creation for the sake of life itself was seen by many contemporaries as a type of "construction sacrifice" [*stroitel'naia zhertva*] [...], as atonement for collective "intelligentsia" sins. [...] The second side of the myth is the perception of the constant—virtual, as we would say today—presence in everyday literary reality of the poet who left.⁹

For contemporaries, he argues, Dobroliubov's life was "a literary recension of the myth of the holy wanderer whose very existence serves as a reproach to contemporary people living fleeting, empty, vain lives."¹⁰ As I will argue, Dobroliubov's final book would serve a similar role within literature itself, acting as a textual witness to the poet's prophetic message.

Dobroliubov's biography-as-myth is important to the history of Russian modernism not only by virtue of its presence in the minds of contemporaries, but also as an exercise in life-creation. It is important to understand it foremost as a project conceived of and carried out by the poet himself, part of his fusion of artistic expression and everyday life. This self-fashioned life text is what made Dobroliubov such a fascinating personality to the early modernists.¹¹ In

Book / Fashioning the Symbolist Reader: The Case of Aleksandr Dobroliubov's *Collected Verses*," in *Reading in Russian: Practices of Reading and Literary Communication, 1760–1930*, ed. Damiano Rebecchini and Raffaella Vassena (Milan: di/segni, 2014), 229–48. See further discussion of Stone's research below.

⁹ Kobrinskii, "Zhil na svete...," 452–53. "Construction sacrifice [*stroitel'naia zhertva*]," a concept Kobrinskii borrows from Roman Timenchik, refers to the practice described in various world folkloric traditions of entombing a living human sacrifice in the walls of a new building.

¹⁰ Kobrinskii, 454–55.

¹¹ Azadovskii, "Put' Aleksandra Dobroliubova," 143.

Dobroliubov's early "Decadent" period, we find the beginnings of the approach to aesthetics and to life that would eventually lead him to abandon art altogether. In *From the Invisible Book*, references to his former life and work serve as examples of the ruinous idolatry of artistic culture.

Dobroliubov was born in Warsaw on August 27, 1876, the first of his parents' eight children. His mother, Maria Genrikhovna, came from a Polish-Danish (possibly Jewish) family and mixed French with her reportedly weak Russian. His father, Mikhail Aleksandrovich, was apparently adored by the family. He had a relatively important position in the office of peasant affairs and by all accounts took his responsibility to the people as a civil servant quite seriously. He retired from the civil service in 1891 and moved the family to St. Petersburg. He died unexpectedly shortly thereafter, leaving the large family in an unfamiliar environment and with extremely limited means.

At the time, Dobroliubov was enrolled in the Sixth St. Petersburg Gymnasium. His classmate, the poet Vladimir Gippius (a distant relation of Zinaida Gippius), described him as a handsome, swarthy youth, with particularly striking eyes. At first teased by his peers for his shyness and peculiar manner, the young Dobroliubov won their respect through provocative literary activity:

In the middle of the year (sixth grade), Dobroliubov began to publish the school magazine *Leaves (Listki)*, very sharp and of a somewhat civic orientation. It was printed in red hectographic ink, and he went around at that time with hands stained by the red dye. Everyone greatly enjoyed the magazine—especially for the artistic appendix in the first issue, in which the faculty was depicted as a comic orchestra.¹²

¹² Vladimir Gippius, "Aleksandr Dobroliubov," in Vengerov, *Russkaia literatura XX veka*, 164.

Work on the magazine brought the two future poets together. They bonded over a mutual love of literature, ideas, and youthful pretension: “we both read a lot—we ‘knew everything’ and judged everything sharply and incontestably.” Dobroliubov was, in Gippius’s recollection, given to maximalism already at this early stage: first he embraced aestheticism almost religiously, “bowing down before art as before an idol [*preklonivshis’ pered iskusstvom, kak pered kumirom*],” and then gave himself over completely to Decadence in the French manner.¹³

The pair greeted with great enthusiasm the 1894 publication of the first volume of *Russian Symbolists* (*Russkie simvolisty*), edited—and in large part authored—by Valerii Briusov. That summer, while Dobroliubov stayed with Gippius’s family outside Moscow, the two students resolved to make Briusov’s acquaintance. “On Saturday there came to see me a little gymnasium student who turned out to be the Petersburg Symbolist Aleksandr Dobroliubov,” Briusov noted in his diary on June 19, under the heading “A Week of Symbolism [*Nedelia simvolizma*].” He recalled their first several meetings in rather glowing terms; Briusov was enchanted by the young poet, but his interest had less to do with Dobroliubov’s abilities as a poet as it did with his critical sensibilities, strange theories, and especially his aestheticized behavior: “in general [Dobroliubov] was an arch-Symbolist [*voobshche byl arkhisimvolistom*].”¹⁴

It was Briusov who facilitated Dobroliubov’s formal entry into literary life in 1895, with the publication of the collection *Natura naturans. Natura naturata*. The 99-page volume—comprising enigmatic experimental verse and passages of rhythmic prose, with cryptic epigraphs and even musical directions for tempo and mood—was not particularly well-received by critics,

¹³ V. Gippius, “Aleksandr Dobroliubov,” 165; Azadovskii, “Put’ Aleksandra Dobroliubova,” 124.

¹⁴ Valerii Briusov, *Dnevnik 1891-1910* (Moscow: Izd. Sabashnikovikh, 1927), 17-18; the English translation used here is Valery Yakovlevich Bryusov, *The Diary of Valery Bryusov (1893-1905)*, ed., trans., and intro. Joan Delaney Grossman (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1980), 39-40 (modified to make the transliteration of Dobroliubov’s name consistent with the usage in this study).

many of whom shared Briusov's original assessment of the poet's talent.¹⁵ The overarching themes of the collection are death and nonbeing, not atypical for early modernist poetry, although Grossman notes that the death motif by and large lacks the erotic or necrophilic elements commonly associated with the Decadent aesthetic.¹⁶ As Kobrinskii has observed, the collection is an early manifestation of many modernist techniques: "The structure, composition, and poetics of *Natura naturans*. *Natura naturata* anticipate nearly all of the avant-garde devices that representatives of various literary schools will use for decades after the book's publication."¹⁷

However noteworthy *Natura naturans*. *Natura naturata* is as an example of artistic experimentation, critics have not generally seen it as an example of poetic mastery. Dobroliubov's attempts to impart musicality into his writing often fall flat; his use of musical terms as titles and classical musical directions for tempo, dynamics, and mood come across as artificial, while his endeavor to construct poems according to the rules of musical composition went misunderstood or unnoticed.¹⁸ E. V. Ivanova has argued that instead of lending the work the sort of musicality championed by the French Symbolists, these devices have the opposite effect, making the verse distinctly non-musical.¹⁹

¹⁵ Kobrinskii has discussed the structure and content of the collection at some length in "Zhil na svete...," 434-36. On the collection's publication and reception, see A. A. Kobrinskii, introduction to notes, in Minskii and Dobroliubov, *Rannie simvolisty*, 605-607.

¹⁶ Grossman, "The Making of a Decadent," 13. For more on the poetics of death and nonbeing in *Natura naturans*. *Natura naturata*, see Ivanova, "Aleksandr Dobroliubov," 213; and Azadovskii, "Put' Aleksandra Dobroliubova," 126-7.

¹⁷ Kobrinskii, "Zhil na svete...," 434.

¹⁸ Discussions of the musicality—or lack thereof—in the collection can be found in Kobrinskii, "Zhil na svete . . .," 435; Ivanova, "Aleksandr Dobroliubov," 207-209; Grossman, "Aleksandr Dobroliubov," 13-14; and Azadovskii, "Put' Aleksandra Dobroliubova," 124-5.

¹⁹ See Ivanova, "Aleksandr Dobroliubov," 208.

Dobroliubov's performance of Decadence extended from the printed page into his dress, dwellings, and behavior; his reputation as an arch-Symbolist preceded him. Zinaida Gippius notes in her memoirs that she was already familiar with Dobroliubov prior to first meeting him, having heard rumors of the student-poet who dressed in black, lived in a black-wallpapered room, and talked young women into committing suicide. He was known to be an enthusiastic user of opium and hashish, and that same black-walled room was said to be the setting for occult rites and black masses.²⁰ Z. G. Mints has described this aestheticized behavior as one of the “systems of signals of ‘Decadent’ culture, which are located outside of the literary (musical, artistic, and so on) texts of the ‘new art,’ while forming with them—in a collage-like manner—a unified whole: that very culture.”²¹ Extraliterary contributions to culture of this sort will figure prominently in the next stage of Dobroliubov's path, the undertaking of his religious quest.

On the Path: 1896–1905

Briusov noted in his diary that as early as 1896, not long after the publication of *Natura naturans*, Dobroliubov began to perceive a “rift in his soul.” Briusov saw that this was a major change for the younger poet, who before recognized only this three-dimensional world, believed in no life beyond, did not distinguish good from bad, but only distinguished the image from the vulgar idea, the artist's creation from his thoughts. So he lived this way, as an artist, worshiping art as a holy shrine [*pokloniaias' khudozhestvu, kak sviatyne*; perhaps a more precise translation

²⁰ Zinaida Gippius, "Ob Aleksandre Dobroliubove," in *Vospominaniia o serebrianom veke*, ed. Vadim Kreid (Moscow: Izd-vo Respublika, 1993), 19. See also Kobrinskii, "Zhil na svete . . .," 431-2; Etkind, *Khlyst*, 265; Ivanova, "Aleksandr Dobroliubov," 202-3; N. V. Bannikov, "Antologiiia poezii 'Serebrianogo veka': Aleksandr Dobroliubov," *Russkaia rech'*, Mar-Apr 1996 (no. 2): 19; and Azadovskii, "Put' Aleksandra Dobroliubova," 127-8.

²¹ Z. G. Mints, "Neskol'ko dopolnitel'nykh zamechaniia k probleme 'simvol v kul'ture'," in her *Poetika russkogo simvolizma*, Blok i russkii simvolizm (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 2004), 43.

would be “venerating art like a holy relic” -TT]. For example, he held then that in the future there would be no science. People would come to the sea and compose a song about the sea; they would come to the mountains and compose a song about the mountains. In place of science, there would be a very detailed song . . . And along with this worship of art, he told himself that, if there is only this life, then nothing is forbidden, and he permitted himself everything.²²

It is worth noting that both Vladimir Gippius and Briusov emphasize the religious hue of Dobroliubov’s early aestheticism by describing the poet’s approach to life and aesthetics as a form of “worship” or “veneration”.²³ Moreover, Briusov’s recollection shows the early emergence of song as a key part of Dobroliubov’s artistic persona. The distillation of experience and knowledge into song becomes one of the key elements in *From the Invisible Book*, and is the subject of the further discussion below.

In the winter of 1897, Dobroliubov abandoned his studies in the philological faculty of St. Petersburg University and traveled around Finland and Karelia.²⁴ In July 1898 he came to Moscow, where he met with Briusov. It was clear that something had changed in the younger poet: the arch-Symbolist was evidently no more. Now, dressed as a peasant, Dobroliubov appeared somehow “more Russian,” with a small beard and a burning gaze that at times seemed fixed on another world altogether.²⁵ Alarmed by the sudden and drastic change in her son, Maria

²² Bryusov, *Diary*, 64.

²³ Briusov, *Dnevnik*, 43; V. Gippius, “Aleksandr Dobroliubov,” 165. See notes 22 and 13 in this chapter.

²⁴ Azadovskii, “Put’ Aleksandra Dobroliubova,” 128; Kobrinskii, “‘Zhil na svete...’,” 437-38.

²⁵ Bryusov, *Diary*, 62.

Genrikhovna had him institutionalized for a brief period at the end of the summer, diagnosed with “religious paranoia.”²⁶

Dobroliubov’s spiritual crisis led him to the remote Solovetsky monastery, situated on an island in the White Sea, where he spent much of the next year. After leaving the monastery, he traveled again to the provinces and lived among various peasant communities. In 1900, the volume *Collected Verses* appeared, the publication of which was the inaugural effort of Briusov’s Scorpio publishing venture. The book received critical attention from Zinaida Gippius, who argued in the pages of *World of Art* that it was pointless to consider whether or not Dobroliubov’s writing was art: “We are merely looking carefully into the soul of a man, weak, who resembles all people.” His misstep, she argued, was not literary, but religious: he left society in favor of isolation and asceticism, when true holiness was found “not in isolation, but in unification.”²⁷

As mentioned above, Jonathan Stone has recently used the publication of *Collected Verses* as a case study in his institutional history of Russian Symbolism. His focus is primarily on Briusov and the efforts at fashioning suitable readers for Symbolism by furnishing them with suitable Symbolist material to read. Stone expands on the understanding of the Symbolist “book” as a genre unto itself, emphasizing its role as an artifact of material culture. He is especially interested in *Collected Verses* as a physical reality: “How the physical book itself was made is an essential component of Russian Symbolism. It sheds light on the reorientation of the market forces that impacted modernism’s institutionalization and scripted its interaction with the public,” he argues. “In their quest for legitimacy and a place in the shifting literary landscape of

²⁶ See Kobrinskii, “‘Zhil na svete...’,” 441; Bryusov, *Diary*, 98.

²⁷ Z. N. Gippius, “Kritika liubvi. Dekadenty-poety,” in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 7 (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 2003), 33; first in *Mir iskusstva* (1901, no. 1).

the late nineteenth century, Russian modernists came to appreciate the power of the book as a physical object in articulating their artistic tenets to a reader as artfully fashioned as the books themselves.”²⁸ This approach has particular value for the present study. As I will argue, it is precisely an understanding of the book as a powerful material instrument that motivates Dobroliubov’s return to literature with *From the Invisible Book*.

In the summer of 1900, Dobroliubov was arrested for persuading two Cossacks to renounce their military service, and spent most of the next year imprisoned. He was finally tried in 1901 and sentenced to an additional six months, although evidence of his earlier institutionalization for “religious paranoia” mitigated the sentence and he was released on Maria Genrikhovna’s recognizance. Again arrested in 1902, this time for the desecration of icons, he spent several more months in an asylum.²⁹

Upon release in 1903, Dobroliubov resumed his chosen path. Despite ostensibly having left educated society and literature behind, he continued to make appearances in both life and on the printed page. As Zinaida Gippius would later remark, Dobroliubov’s departure was “only a submersion into the Russian sea, from which short, temporary resurfacings are common.”³⁰ He would occasionally turn up in Moscow or St. Petersburg to meet with those he knew from his former life, and he sent letters to his former associates in the literary world, encouraging them to forsake empty art and embrace life on the spiritual path (and not infrequently asking for material aid for his own journey).³¹ In what would become something of a famous visit in the literary world, he visited Lev Tolstoy at Iasnaia Poliana in early September 1903, impressing the elder

²⁸ Stone, *The Institutions of Russian Modernism*, 102.

²⁹ See Kobrinskii, “‘Zhil na svete...’,” 441–42; and Azadovskii, “Put’ Aleksandra Dobroliubova,” 131–32.

³⁰ Z. Gippius, “Ob Aleksandre Dobroliubove,” 19.

³¹ Azadovskii, “Put’ Aleksandra Dobroliubova,” 138–40.

writer with his simple, Christian way of life.³² Dmitrii Merezhkovskii describes a visit from Dobroliubov the following winter, in which he felt that he was in the presence of a living saint, of the likes of Francis of Assisi.³³ In his memoirs, Andrei Belyi describes several encounters with the author of *From the Invisible Book* in the latter half of the decade. He tells of Briusov's annoyance at Dobroliubov's refusal to keep a gift for himself, and relates how surprised he was upon their first meeting, when he mistook the peaceful, self-possessed Dobroliubov for a household laborer who displayed "not a shadow of Holy Foolery!"³⁴

The Roadmap: *From the Invisible Book*

Dobroliubov assumed a more active role in the 1905 publication of *From the Invisible Book* than he had in publishing *Collected Verses*.³⁵ The 202-page book comprises six sections of uneven length: "About the Former" ("O prezhnem"), "From the Invisible Book," "Altar of Earth," "Works and Days" ("Dela i dni"), "From Investigations" ("Iz issledovaniia"), and "Final Words" ("Poslednie slova"). The text itself is made up of a variety of genres, including verse, prose, letters, parables, and sermons. This patchwork of text types bears some similarity with the composition of *Natura naturans. Natura naturata*, although the heavy-handed literary devices found in the first collection—epigraphs referencing paintings, musical directions, poems consisting only of suspension points—are not present.

³² L. N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90 tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1937), 55:427. See accounts of this meeting in D. Merezhkovskii, "Religiia i revoliutsiia," in Merezhkovskii, Z. Gippius, and D. Filosofov, *Tsar' i revoliutsiia*, first Russian edition, ed. M. A. Kolerov (Moscow: OGI, 1999), 180; and in Briusov, *Dnevnik*, 133. Briusov relates that the two disagreed on the literal resurrection; Dobroliubov, according to Briusov, remarked later that Tolstoy was "weak" in this area.

³³ Merezhkovskii, "Religiia i revoliutsiia," 181–3.

³⁴ Andrei Belyi, *Nachalo veka* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), 400.

³⁵ Grossman, "Aleksandr Dobroliubov and the Invisible Book," xiii–xiv; Kobrinskii, introduction to notes in *Rannie simvolisty*, 618–20.

The critical response to *From the Invisible Book* among Dobroliubov's contemporaries was not generally positive. Critics found the book too enigmatic, not relevant, or too absorbed in its author's supposed Holy Foolery.³⁶ Even sympathetic readers found the text inextricably bound up with the author's life.³⁷ Tolstoy—who held a copy of *From the Invisible Book* in his library at Iasnaia Poliana (a fact he nonetheless forgot on several occasions)—dismissed the text as “mythology, like [that] about Adam.” Moreover, the elder writer complained, Dobroliubov's words “have meaning for the enlightened, but [...] for us, the unenlightened, do not.”³⁸

Modern critics and scholars have largely echoed earlier readers in considering *From the Invisible Book* and its author's biography together, while giving the text relatively little critical attention in its own right. Among the chief problems presented by the text itself is one of genre. With its eclectic composition, the book continues the blurring of genre lines with which Dobroliubov began his literary career. On what terms, then, is the text best approached? What are its sources and models? A number of plausible answers have been posited: it has been seen as a work of art, a religious text, a piece of cultural criticism, a literary-historical fact. Grossman, for instance, highlights three key aspects of the text:

The book was intended as a compendium of Dobroliubov's teachings, evolved over the wandering years. At the same time it was a polemic with contemporaries and with the teaching which they took seriously. Finally it was written as a “history of the soul” of the

³⁶ Kobrinskii details the critical reception of the book in the introduction to the notes, *Rannie simvolisty*, 620–21.

³⁷ See, for example, Kobrinskii's discussion of Boris Kremnev's review in the modernist-aligned journal *Questions of Life (Voprosy zhizni)*, in *Rannie simvolisty*, 620–21. Kremnev's review appeared in *Voprosy zhizni*, no. 6 (1905).

³⁸ Tolstoy is reported to have made these remarks in response to a reading from *From the Invisible Book* in the spring of 1908, which occurred following a visit from two Dobroliubovians; see D. P. Makovitskii, *Iasnopolianskiye zapiski*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Nauka, 1979), 90–92.

manner recently made popular among the Symbolists by the poetry collections of Valerii Briusov and Konstantin Bal'mont.³⁹

Kobrinskii has likewise described the volume as a religious anthology, a collection of “hymns, prayers, parables, etc., created by Dobroliubov himself, who returned to creative work only to announce once and for all his break with all of his past, in life and in literature, and to give his followers poetic material that could strengthen them on the path.”⁴⁰

Both scholars are justified in seeing *From the Invisible Book* as a compendium of Dobroliubovian teaching; in this sense, it can even be seen as a scripture. Indeed, the book is constructed so that the reader is encouraged to understand it this way. Dobroliubov borrows the unusual composition of the text from the Judeo-Christian literary tradition—the Bible, after all, is a compendium of texts of various genres (written by various authors), arranged (and interpreted in that arrangement) so that a concordant voice emerges.⁴¹ His songs—the “spiritual bread” of the book—are themselves highly reminiscent of the psalter or prophetic oracles, usually lacking classical meter and rhyme but rich in parallelism, anaphora, and specialized ecclesiastical vocabulary (i.e., Slavonicisms, particularly compound words).

These features are also what make Dobroliubov's text effective as a polemic with contemporaries, the second aspect identified by Grossman in the discussion above. As I have already suggested, Dobroliubov organizes his book carefully so that it might engage modern

³⁹ Grossman, “Aleksandr Dobroliubov and the Invisible Book,” xiv. Grossman's overview of the book's structure and major themes provides an adequate starting point for the present study.

⁴⁰ Kobrinskii, “Zhil na svete...,” 449.

⁴¹ For a brief overview of the Bible as literature, see David Jasper, “Literary Readings of the Bible,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 21-34. The Oxford Bible Series includes detailed studies of the major forms of Biblical writing. Most relevant for the present study are Richard Coggins, *Introducing the Old Testament*, 2nd edition (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001); John A. F. Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993); S. E. Gillingham, *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible*, revised edition (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 2nd edition (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002).

readers in a language they would understand, the language of modernist culture. His aim is not only to attack the idolatry he sees in the world of high culture, but also to show the reader who is still bound up in that world that the voice of truth exists beyond even the most inspired material text. His compositional strategy and complex systems of allusion and imagery entice the educated reader to engage with the text and its sources, only to find that the true meaning exists outside the literal text, belonging instead to the Divinely-authored book of life, its full expression recorded in the “text” of lived experience.

In the book’s opening lines, Dobroliubov explains his central message in straightforward prose. Working among the peasants, he encountered their “simple, deep [...] truly heartfelt” language, capable of expressing the highest truths as well as, if not better than, contemporary learned culture. This language has the same elemental power as the oracles of the Biblical prophets: what high culture tries to express in countless words, this language can accomplish with a single utterance, “one all-encompassing thought, embracing everything like lightning from east to west” (3).⁴² This puts in stark relief the inadequacies of the language of artistic, educated culture. To an extent, Dobroliubov shares the skepticism towards language that Sofya Khagi has shown to be at work throughout the Russian poetic tradition.⁴³ However, his anxieties about language in *From the Invisible Book* have less to do with ineffability and inexpressibility as they do with what he sees as language’s propensity to become the material basis for idolatry. In the author’s view, human language is capable of expressing true beauty when it is inspired, grounded in a unifying religious experience of communion with all of creation and the Divine.

⁴² Henceforth, page references from *From the Invisible Book* are given parenthetically.

⁴³ See Sofya Khagi, *Silence and the Rest: Verbal Skepticism in Russian Poetry* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013), especially chapter ten. Dobroliubov’s version of verbal skepticism is probably closest to Tiutchev’s, in that it is rooted in a similar understanding of the word as “fallen matter.”

Such an experience, which for Dobroliubov must take place in reality, precedes any true expression of beauty. First comes the experience of the material and spiritual worlds as a unity. This knowledge manifests in a simple life of work and prayer together with one's fellow beings: "Union [*soedinen'e*], union—here is the word that I found among the people." In the apprehension of this unity, the reality of beauty is made visible: "Even without your trembling concerns, that which you call creation and art and beauty, that which you so adore [*obozhaete*], this creative spirit, fills up all the world and will engage in creation [*tvorit*] only within the temple and within life, and not within dead walls" (4). Dobroliubov is thus not opposed to all aesthetic expression, but only that which takes place within the "dead walls" of idolatrous culture, where the material of human language (or any other creative endeavor), rather than the truth it expresses, is taken to be the object of adoration.

An inspired song, on the other hand, finds its origin within the text of life: "All of these songs were born ready in full armor [*rozhdalis' gotovymi vo vseoruzh'i*] in my heart, they imprinted themselves in my heart." At first, the song exists as an oral text, shared among human beings and offered to God: "For several years I lived a life of faith and works with the one book of life and I sang all that I sang only for my very closest brothers and for God" (9).⁴⁴ It is here that Dobroliubov recognizes the problem of transmission. In his vision, song unites creation and allows it communion with the Divine, using human language to convey a message drawn from the book of life. As a purely oral text, however, the range for such a transmission is limited: one must be physically close enough to hear the song being sung. The compulsion to share these

⁴⁴ The idea that Dobroliubov's songs originated as oral texts was suggested by Belyi in his memoirs: "These songs then traveled among the people [*khodili v narode*]; at Scorpio he published an array of excerpts [...] 'From the Invisible Book'," Belyi, *Nachalo veka*, 398-9.

songs with others is what ultimately compels Dobroliubov to write *From the Invisible Book*, as he recognizes the power of the book as a physical artifact:

I never thought that I would print them or even jot them down on paper, I never imagined returning to writing. But now I return to books, and I acknowledge you, the wise ones of all times, the holy pure books of all times, of all peoples! I saw that a book is one of the most beautiful, unparalleled, miraculous-mysterious tools among the new peoples; it reaches the lowly and the trembling and the lofty and the haughty. (9)

For Dobroliubov, the value of a book as an artifact is in its ability to transmit the prophetic message independently of the author(s). He sees in the “holy pure books” of the ancient prophets a model for his own work. His songs are like the psalms or prophetic oracles, written on paper but originating wholly outside the text.

The first song included in the book, “I sing the kingdom immutable and unshakable” (“Poiu tsarstvo neizmennoe neколебимое”), is a strong example of the compositional techniques and content typical of a Dobroliubovian song:

Пою царство неизменное неколебимое
 Царя Бесконечного
 Древнего и Мудрого,
 Которого никто не принимает,
 5 Которого страшного имени никто не знает,
 Которого никто не видит,
 Которого чистого голоса не слышат даже ангелы,
 Но повинуются Его повеленьям.
 Имя Его—Один и Все,
 10 Он Сам в Себе и все во всем.
 Кто как Он всегда и везде и нигде?
 Он выше всякого времени,
 Он выше всякой любви
 И всякого слова и разума человеческого.
 15 Он—Слово Слова
 И Разум разумов.
 У Него разум,
 У Него слово,

У Него царство,
 20 У Него сила,
 У Него слава,
 У Него дело.
 Ты открыл тайнейшее имя Твое сынам человеческим
 И от руки их принимаешь венец голове Своей. (10)

[I sing a kingdom immutable {and} unshakable / Of the King Eternal / Ancient and Wise, / Whom no one can take in, / Whose terrible name no one knows, / Whom no one sees, / Whose pure voice is not heard even by the angels, / Though they obey His commands. / His Name is One and All / He is Himself in Himself and all in all. / Who like He is always both everywhere and nowhere? / He is higher than any time, / He is higher than any love / And any human word or reason. / He is the Word of the Word / And the Reason of reasons. / He has the reason, / He has the word, / He has the kingdom / He has the power, / He has the glory, / He has the deed. / You have revealed Your most mysterious name to the sons of man / And from their hand you receive the crown upon Your head.]

Lacking distinct metrical structure, the song is instead primarily organized along principles of parallelism common to both Russian folk verse and Biblical poetry.⁴⁵ Following Dobroliubov's punctuation, the song can be divided into seven sentences of varying lengths, which in turn are built from various parallel constructions. The first sentence presents a paradox: the singer apophatically acknowledges the incomprehensibility of the God whose kingdom he hails, the unseen and unheard King whose commands nonetheless compel the heavenly host. The introductory line stands alone without an obvious partner, but it contains an internal synonymous parallelism "kingdom *immutable* [and] *unshakable*." That structure is then expanded across lines 2–3: "the King *Eternal / Ancient and Wise*." In lines 4–7, the repetition of the genitive adjectival ending *-ogo*, established in the preceding distich, is magnified and complicated. The four lines together are syntactically parallel, each containing a negated verb phrase with a genitive direct object. Within this overarching scheme, lines 4 and 6 form an internal pair, with the relative pronoun *kotorogo* serving as the negated direct object: "Whom no one can take in, / Whom no

⁴⁵ See Roman Jakobson, "Grammatical Parallelism and its Russian Facet," *Language* 42, 2 (Apr.-Jun. 1966): 339-429.

one can see.” These lines alternate with another internal pair linked by *kotorogo*, this time functioning as the determiner of the negated direct object: “*Whose terrible name no one knows, / Whose pure voice is not heard even by the angels.*” The change of the subject in line 7 from “no one” to “the angels” emphasizes the ultimate incomprehensibility of God—the beings in the closest proximity to the throne of God are nonetheless unable to apprehend him directly. The song’s opening sentence ends on line 8, essentially a monostich reinforcing the unchanging order of the heavenly kingdom: the angels fulfil God’s commandments because it is their nature, not because they apprehend Him directly.

The next sentence, lines 9–10, is the heart of the song—a declaration of the all-encompassing oneness of God, it is in turn underscored by the question posed in line 11. The cataphatic answer that extends across the following three sentences begins with a reminder that the Divine surpasses all human categories of perception. We find a pair of Hebrew-style internally-parallel superlatives in lines 15–16 (“the *Word* of the *Word*,” “the *Reason* of *reasons*”), and an anaphoric list of divine attributes reminiscent of the end of the Lord’s Prayer in lines 17–22 (“*He has the wisdom*”). In the final two lines, although God reveals His name to humanity and they in turn acknowledge Him as king, that name—His absolute nature—remains still unknowable within the established logic of the song.

The song is preceded by an epigraph, attributed to the deuterocanonical Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach: “And the end of everything — He is All [*I konets vsego – On est’ Vse*]” (10). This is a slight corruption (a key aspect of Dobroliubov’s handling of quotation, as I will show in the next section) of Sirach 43:27: “We could say more but could never say enough; let the final word be: ‘He is the all’ [*Mnogoe mozhem my skazat’, i odnako zhe ne postignem Ego, i konets slov: On est’ vse*].” The epigraph foregrounds the main theme of the song—the singular, unified nature

of God: “His Name is One and All / He is Himself in Himself and all in all.” At the same time, the use of Sirach does more than just establish a reference point for the song’s themes of divine wisdom and unity; it speaks directly to the book’s central message.

A close examination of the choice of Sirach, a Hebrew wisdom text known to the world mostly through layers of translation, brings into focus Dobroliubov’s understanding of his own text and his role as writer. Unlike many Biblical books, especially those of the Hebrew Scriptures, Sirach’s book seems to be aware of itself as a text. Its author identifies himself by name and draws attention to his work: “Instruction in understanding and knowledge I have written in this book, Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach of Jerusalem, whose mind poured forth wisdom” (Sirach 50:27). This textual self-awareness is echoed in the prologue to the Greek version of the text, a translator’s note written by the grandson of the original author:

So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom, so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the law.

The translator is aware of the difficulty of transmitting spiritual truth and acknowledges the superiority of the ancient written tradition which precedes him: “For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language. Not only this book, but even the Law itself, the Prophecies, and the rest of the books differ not a little when read in the original.” Nevertheless, he feels compelled to convey the wisdom contained in the original text, so that others may use it as a model for fashioning their

own righteous lives: “I have applied my skill day and night to complete and publish the book for those living abroad who wished to gain learning and are disposed to live according to the law.”⁴⁶

Dobroliubov’s choice of Sirach as a source is all the more interesting given its historical context. At the time he began his spiritual quest, the deuterocanonical book was enjoying resurgent popularity as a textual artifact. In 1896, Agnes and Margaret Smith, twin sisters devoted to the study of Semitic manuscripts, discovered a small, tattered fragment of Hebrew text among their acquisitions from an archaeological site in Cairo. The fragment turned out to be a major find: it was from a medieval version of Sirach in Hebrew, which for centuries had been known only in Greek or Syriac translation.⁴⁷ Almost immediately more fragments were found, and the rediscovery of the Hebrew text of Sirach enjoyed widespread publicity at the turn of the twentieth century.

It cannot be argued definitively from the text of *From the Invisible Book* that Dobroliubov was aware of these discoveries, but it is certainly possible—if not likely—that he was. This contention is bolstered by clear evidence that elsewhere in the book there are references to other contemporary literary-archaeological discoveries in Egypt (even more ancient than the fragments of Sirach). They point to the author’s interest in the potential of a fragment of inspired writing to convey wisdom, even when literally pulled from the rubbish heap of human material production.

Dobroliubov’s text contains two epigraphs attributed to “newly-found fragments of the Gospel of the Egyptians”: “Then He said: ‘Do not fear that I will be killed. And do not fear the

⁴⁶ Prologue to Sirach (NRSV). The prologue, while included in many translations of Sirach from the Greek, does not appear in the 1876 Synodal version from which Dobroliubov seems to have drawn the language of the epigraph; as in the Slavonic Bible, the Synodal translation begins with the wisdom poem at Sirach 1:1.

⁴⁷ See Solomon Schechter, “A Fragment of the Original Text of Ecclesiasticus,” *Expositor* ser. 5, vol 4 (London, 1896): 1-15.

power of death. Rejoice, for I have conquered the universe. I will live' [*Togda On skazal: 'Ne boites', chto Ia pogibnu. i ne boites' sily smerti. Raduites', ibo Ia pobedil vseleennuiu. Ia budu zhit']*] (17), and "We saw everywhere the glory of His divinity and the power of His might. He gave us apostolic power. And His words lived with us. And His garments shone. And His words, which were passed among us, were like light [*My vezde videli slavu Ego bozhestvennosti i silu Ego mogushchestva. On dal nam silu apostol'skuiu. S nami zhili slovo Ego. I siiali odezhdy Ego. I slova Ego, kotorye obrashchalis' mezh nami, byli kak svet*]" (194). To the twenty-first century reader, the references to a "Gospel of the Egyptians" can be misleading. For example, Kobrinskii notes that the Gospel of the Egyptians is an "apocryphal gospel, a cosmological-soteriological tractate of mythological character," a vague description that gives little clue as to Dobroliubov's possible source.⁴⁸ Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that title is used to refer to two separate texts, one of which was among the texts discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945 and is thus clearly unrelated to the use of the title in *From the Invisible Book*.⁴⁹ The second text, however, was well known in Dobroliubov's time: Gospel of the Egyptians was the name usually associated with an ancient Greek text, a Gnostic dialogue between the Lord and Salome concerning celibacy and androgyny, which survives only in fragments quoted in the writings of Clement of Alexandria. Dobroliubov was familiar with this text, using a quotation from it in another epigraph, which he calls "a fragment preserved in the epistle of Clement, apostolic father" (132). Nothing resembling the quotations above can be found in Clement's quotations, however, and as a well-

⁴⁸ Kobrinskii, notes to *Rannie simvolisty*, 642.

⁴⁹ This is the so-called Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians, properly known as the "Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit," an arcane Gnostic account of creation. See John D. Turner, introduction to "The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit," in Marvin W. Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 247-250.

attested part of ancient Church literature they seem unlikely to be the “newly-found fragments” to which Dobroliubov refers.

It is more likely that in appropriating the title “Gospel of the Egyptians,” Dobroliubov was alluding to the discovery of numerous papyrus manuscript fragments in an ancient rubbish heap at Oxyrhynchus (present-day el-Behnesa, Egypt) by Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt.⁵⁰ Grenfell and Hunt began their excavation in 1896, with the support of the Egypt Exploration Fund. Among their first findings was a postcard-sized piece of papyrus from the second or third century CE, a fragment of a Greek text containing sayings ascribed to Jesus (logia); they published a transcription and translation of this manuscript in 1897 as *Logia Iesou: Sayings of Our Lord from an Early Greek Papyrus*. Some of the sayings were familiar—the first logion contains the exact wording of a line from the Lukan sermon on the plain: “and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote that is in thy brother’s eye.” Others, however, were entirely “new”: “Jesus saith, Except ye fast to the world, ye shall in no wise find the kingdom of God; and except ye keep the sabbath, ye shall not see the Father.”⁵¹ Here was a text from the first centuries of Christian history, possibly as old if not older than the oldest manuscripts of the canonical Gospels, laying claim to the voice of Jesus and presenting it in a new way. In their commentary, Grenfell and Hunt consider whether the logia might be from the “Gospel according to the Egyptians,” but ultimately conclude it is unrelated.⁵² However, two years later they would

⁵⁰ See Bernard P. Grenfell, “Oxyrhynchus and Its Papyri,” *Archaeological Report (Egypt Exploration Fund)* (1896-1897): 1-12. Oxyrhynchus remains one of the most significant discoveries of ancient texts; see Lincoln H. Blumell and Thomas A Wayment, eds., *Christian Oxyrhynchus* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 4-6.

⁵¹ Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, trans. and eds., *Logia Iesou: Sayings of Our Lord from an Early Greek Papyrus* (London, 1897), 10. The wording matches the end of Luke 6:42.

⁵² Grenfell and Hunt, *Logia Iesou*, 16-17. The origin of the logia would remain unknown until 1945, when a complete copy of their source—the now-famous Gospel of Thomas—was uncovered at Nag Hammadi. See Blumell and Wayment, *Christian Oxyrhynchus*, 220.

publish another text found at Oxyrhynchus—this one so fragmentary as to render it almost entirely untranslatable—and suggest that it might indeed be an excerpt from the Egyptian gospel.⁵³ While neither of Dobroliubov’s epigraphs referencing the “newly-found fragments of the Gospel of the Egyptians” seem to come from Oxyrhynchus texts, the discoveries by Grenfell and Hunt remain the most likely source for Dobroliubov’s attribution. By using them in his book, the author emphasizes the potential of the text to reach across boundaries like space and time in order to deliver the prophetic message.

The Prophetic Chorus: Allusion, Quotation, Citation, and Misattribution

The epigraphs from Sirach and the “Gospel of the Egyptians” are just a few examples of the ways in which Dobroliubov reworks images and associations borrowed from existing textual traditions, appropriating them and often redefining their basic terms in order to suit his purpose.

As Etkind observes, *From the Invisible Book*

in essence [...] is saturated with culture. There are citations, references, and epigraphs from the Buddha, the Koran, the Vedas; from Heraclitus and Epicurus; from the scriptures and the apocrypha; from Pascal, Schelling, Mill, Saint-Simone, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Solov’ev... Cultural eclecticism is one of the consequences of the return to nature: endeavoring to speak in cultured languages no longer, Dobroliubov weaves them

⁵³ Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, trans. and eds., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri: Part II* (London, 1899), 9. Interestingly, the only commentary Grenfell and Hunt provide on the meaning of this fragment is to suggest that it contains text similar to Jesus’s saying about the tree known by its fruits (Matthew 7:17-19, Luke 6:43-4)—a saying that Dobroliubov will allude to as part of the constellation of Biblical motifs discussed in the next section. For more on this fragment, see Brent Landau and Stanley E. Porter, “Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 210: A New Translation and Introduction,” in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, ed. Tony Burke and Brent Landau, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Company, 2016), 109-124.

into what he perceives as the language of nature, within which more subtle distinctions vanish.⁵⁴

Expanding on Etkind's observation, I examine how Dobroliubov makes the voices of culture part of his text. He appropriates the authorial voices of his sources, casting historical prophets and sages as his "brothers" and rephrasing them to suit his purpose. What results is a chorus of prophetic voices, created from the traditions of prophetic and wisdom writing, serving to proclaim his message and lend it authority. At the same time, the familial unity of the prophets—in which Dobroliubov himself is included—renders their individual identities ambiguous. Some quotations are precise, but others are misattributed, rearranged, rephrased, or fabricated entirely. This serves to foreground the message, rather than the individual authorship of the prophet who delivers it.

Since Azadovskii, scholars have seen *From the Invisible Book* as something essentially communal, with Dobroliubov moving away from literature (in which the individual creates and lays claim to a text) into folk culture (where an individual is only one contributor among many and is often anonymous).⁵⁵ Indeed, the voice of the author as an individual—the Aleksandr Dobroliubov known in educated society—is largely muted within the chorus of the prophets. He emerges occasionally, as in an included letter addressed to his "brother in the flesh" Georgii, whom he calls by the familiar "Georges." Even then, there are few readily apparent personal messages included in the text—letters addressed to family members and close friends speak

⁵⁴ Etkind, *Khlyst*, 269.

⁵⁵ See Azadovskii, "Put' Aleksandra Dobroliubova," 135-6. Kobrinskii extends this idea of collective creation in an interesting direction, tracing the echo of Dobroliubov's Franciscan imagery through several generations of Russian verse—i.e., within literature, with which Dobroliubov is nonetheless unable to ultimately break ("Zhil na svete...," 450-51). He is not alone in considering Dobroliubov's poetic legacy; Ekaterina Bobrinskaia discusses the poet's influence on Elena Guro (also a poet with a famous extra-literary, albeit not anti-aesthetic, side) in "Naturfilosofskie motivy v tvorchestve Eleny Guro," in *Russkii avangard: istoki i metamorfozy* (Moscow: Piataia strana, 2003), 144-7.

mostly of spiritual matters. For the most part, however, the identity of the poetic speaker throughout the text is ambiguous. Not unlike the voices of the Biblical prophets, it emerges from the anonymous chorus of folk culture and seems to have only been assigned an author conventionally, after the fact.

Dobroliubov singles out the Biblical prophets from among the other wisdom sources he appropriates. They are important to him as examples of real human beings who had intimate experiences of the Divine: “Nowhere so irrepressibly was the power of God revealed as in the blood of ancient Judaism, that ancient sect of Abram and Zoroaster. [...] Jonah, Habakkuk, Micah, Amos, Zechariah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and David conversed with Him as with a friend,” he explains in an open letter to Nadezhda and Ioanna Briusova (160). As I have argued above, exactly this sort of intimate, mystical experience of God is central to Dobroliubov’s teaching. Such an experience is also central to the Biblical prophetic tradition on which he draws.

John A. F. Sawyer has succinctly described the salient features of the mystical experiences of the Biblical prophets, providing a useful framework for understanding Dobroliubov’s text. Sawyer shows how the Biblical accounts of the prophets tend to depict a certain mystical experience of God in heaven—they see the heavenly court and hear the divine language. Hearing the voice of God, their voices are no longer their own; they lose their individual will and are compelled to share the words of God.⁵⁶ He emphasizes that the mystical experiences of the prophets are depicted in such a way that subtly points to their being “actual experience” rather than “the products of later, more sophisticated literary erudition.”⁵⁷ Moreover, Sawyer argues convincingly that this mystical experience is ultimately non-verbal, rooted in the

⁵⁶ Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets*, 4-6. Obedience to Divine Law in place of personal will is a key element in the Dobroliubov’s complex of Biblical motifs, discussed below.

⁵⁷ Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets*, 7.

silent apprehension of physical phenomena.⁵⁸ As I have already argued, Dobroliubov's message claims its origin in just such a non-verbal, lived experience; his understanding of inspired song and the mystical experience that precedes it bears a striking similarity to modern readings of prophetic oracles.

The mystical experience compels the prophet to speak and act in accordance with God's will. Prophetic utterances are delivered as mystical oracles, messenger speeches, and a variety of other textual forms including poems and hymns; at the same time, the prophetic message is conveyed by means of symbolic actions.⁵⁹ These words and deeds are then fixed in the form of written texts, including the prophetic books, the second of the three major genre divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures. Ronald L. Troxel has described the prophetic book as "a distinctive type of prophetic literature that can contain narratives, but focuses especially on prophetic oracles."⁶⁰ Troxel shows the role that the concept of writing plays within the prophetic books, especially as a means for conveying the prophetic message to an audience beyond the prophet's immediate space and time. Especially useful for the present study is his identification of an assumed "tradition of oracles whose effects outlived the prophets who uttered them. [...] It is this sort of esteem for the words of past prophets that stands behind the composition of the prophetic books."⁶¹

Dobroliubov is, of course, not the first author in the history of Russian literature to adopt the role of Biblical prophet—by the time he entered the literary world, this concept was already

⁵⁸ Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets*, 8.

⁵⁹ On oracles, messenger texts, and other prophetic literary forms see Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets*, 27-37. On symbolic behavior, see Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets*, 11-13.

⁶⁰ Ronald L. Troxel, *Prophetic Literature: From Oracles to Books* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 4.

⁶¹ Troxel, *Prophetic Literature*, 7.

something of a cliché.⁶² The Russian version of poet-as-prophet is often traced to Pushkin's 1828 lyric "The Prophet" ("Prorok"), a retelling of the prophet's commission in the sixth chapter of Isaiah. Though not Pushkin's first use of scripture as a literary model, nor the first such use of Isaiah 6 in the Russian lyric tradition, "The Prophet" nevertheless occupies a particularly important place in the history of the interaction between religious and artistic culture in Russia. It seems to be, as Pamela Davidson suggests, the first step in the transition of the idea of poet-as-prophet from something aesthetic into something spiritual.⁶³

Davidson has traced the evolution of writer-as-prophet from Pushkin and Iazykov to Dostoevsky and into the modern era; her observations have particular importance for the present study. Claims to prophetic status, she argues, were justified with appeals to the Hebrew tradition: "the status of the new prophet is confirmed on three levels: by divine selection, by an established prophet, and by public recognition."⁶⁴ The second of these is, in her view, the most flexible in the Russian context. I argue that for Dobroliubov's case, it is perhaps the most important. In *From the Invisible Book*, he builds a prophetic-poetic persona by appropriating the voices and identities of Biblical prophets (broadly understood to include more than the names associated with the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Scriptures), from Moses to Isaiah to Jesus and the apostles. He underscores the universality of his vision by joining their voices with those of various other wisdom writers, and of course with his own voice.

⁶² See, for instance, Erik Egeberg's concise treatment of the theme in "Motiv proroka v russkoi lirike (kratkii obzor)," *Poliarnyi vestnik* 11 (2008): 28-36.

⁶³ Pamela Davidson, "The Validation of the Writer's Prophetic Status in the Russian Literary Tradition: From Pushkin and Iazykov through Gogol to Dostoevsky," *The Russian Review* 62 (October 2003): 508. What exactly Pushkin did with "The Prophet" remains a topic of debate; see Samuil Shvartsband's discussion of the poem in his "Stikhotvornyi opyt A. S. Pushkina," *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 36 (Spring 2011): 321-35.

⁶⁴ Davidson, "The Validity of the Writer's Prophetic Status in the Russian Literary Tradition," 511. Davidson emphasizes that the Biblical prophetic lineage begins with Moses. On Dobroliubov's references to Moses, see the discussion of the "altar of earth" below.

Consider, for example, the poem “Farewell Song” (“Proshchal’naia pesnia”):

Прощай, мой добрый друг, прощай!
 Бог простит всякую плоть, прощай!
 Кто разрушит дружбу, которая в Боге Живом?
 Всякий раз преломляя хлеб, меня вспоминай.

Стой в истине и приду к тебе и буду с тобой,
 И придем к тебе, все будем с тобой.
 Вечеруем семьей за одним бесконечным великим столом.
 Приветствуют вас все святые земли и небес!
 Приветствуйте все друг друга лобзаньем святым!

“Забудешь ли ты меня, десница?”
 “Забуду ль я тебя, десница,
 Украшенье на правой руке моей?
 Забвенна будь моя десница!
 Стены твои всегда пред глазами моими:
 Я написал тебя на правой руке моей”.

“Забуду ль я тебя, десница,
 Прекрасный город Ерусалим?
 Я обитал в тебе как в Ерусалиме,
 Целый мир видал я в сердце твоём”.

[Farewell, my good friend, farewell! / God will forgive all flesh, farewell! / Who can set asunder friendship in the Living God? / Every time you break bread, remember me. // Stand in truth and I will come to you and be with you / And we will come to you and we will all be with you. / We feast as a family at one endless great table. / All the holy earth and heavens greet you! / All of you, greet one another with a holy kiss! // “Will you forget me, right hand?” / “Will I forget you, right hand, / Adornment on my right hand? / May my right hand be forgotten! / Your walls are always before my eyes: / I have inscribed you upon my right hand.” // “Will I forget you, right hand, most beautiful city of Jerusalem? / I resided in you as in Jerusalem, / The whole world I saw in your heart.”]

The speaker in this poem seems far removed from the one who calls his brother by an affectionate French nickname. Echoes of a number of prophetic voices are heard here: the poem contains allusions to Jesus, Paul, an anonymous psalmist, and the prophet Isaiah. The phrases “who can set asunder” and “every time you break bread” are paraphrases of the sayings of Jesus found in the synoptic Gospels: “What God has joined together, let no one separate [*Chto Bog sochetal, togo chelovek da ne razluchaet*]” (Matthew 19:6, Mark 10:9); “Then he took a loaf of

bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me’ [*I vziav khleb i blagodariv, prelomil i podal im, govoria: sie est’ telo Moe, kotoroe za vas predaetsia; sie tvorite v Moe vospominanie*]” (Luke 22:19). Dobroliubov’s “holy kiss” echoes Paul’s admonitions in the Epistles: “Greet one another with a holy kiss [*Privetstvuite drug druga lobzaniem sviatym*]” (2 Corinthians 13:12); “Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss [*Privetstvuite vsekh brat’ev lobzaniem sviatym*]” (1 Thessalonians 5:26). The poet’s line “Will I forget you, right hand, beautiful city of Jerusalem?” finds its source in the psalter: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! [*Esli ia zabudu tebia, Ierusalim —zabud’ menia desnitsa moia*]” (Psalm 137:5). The book of Isaiah provides the imagery behind the lines “Your walls are always before my eyes: / I have inscribed you upon my right hand”: “See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me [*Vot, Ia nachertal tebia na dlaniakh; steny tvoi vseгда predo Mnoiu*]” (Isaiah 49:16).

The first two verse paragraphs of “Farewell Song” feature primarily New Testament imagery (the Gospels and epistles), while the second half of the poem is dominated by imagery from the Hebrew Scriptures (the psalms, Isaiah). These four scriptural sources each provide examples of ambiguous authorship: Jesus never wrote down his own teachings, Paul is the nominal author of several canonical epistles that he almost certainly did not write (although these do not include the letters to the Corinthians and Thessalonians), the psalmist in this instance is a nameless voice from Israel’s exile in Babylon, while the book of Isaiah was authored by at least two prophets living centuries apart and reacting to considerably different circumstances (the second of them being the source of Dobroliubov’s imagery here).

The ambiguity of the speaker's identity is magnified when "Farewell Song" is considered in terms of its placement within the collection. The poem is found in the second of the collection's six sections, "From the Invisible Book." What Dobroliubov calls the "Invisible Book" here and the title of the book itself should not be taken as one and the same.⁶⁵ The former is the source of the latter; the "Invisible Book" is the mystical life-world-text, written by God and read by human beings, who are at the same time also a part of it. "Farewell Song" is preceded by an epigraph, "Where one or two are in the name of God, there are all our brothers – those living and all those who died before," a rephrasing of Matthew 18:20 (and a significant departure from it in meaning). Interestingly, this epigraph is also reminiscent of one of the logia published by Grenfell and Hunt in *Sayings of the Lord*.⁶⁶ Bearing the mysterious attribution "from the Invisible Book," the epigraph underscores the instability of the author's identity as an individual.

The creative use of epigraphs was nothing new for Dobroliubov.⁶⁷ In *From the Invisible Book*, epigraphs point to texts—oral and written, real and imaginary—that the poet sees as worthy containers for truth. As is typical for Dobroliubov, quotations and their attributions are frequently—but not always—corrupted, contributing to the sense that the individual prophet's voice is but one in a chorus. The epigraphs refer to a variety of folkloric and written sources, especially canonical and apocryphal Biblical and early Christian literature. With three epigraphs,

⁶⁵ For instance, both Azadovskii and Etkind frequently refer to the collection as "The Invisible Book [*Kniga nevidimaia*]," without the preposition "from" (*iz*) (see notes 4 and 54 in this chapter). This practice risks obscuring the line Dobroliubov drew between his own writing at the divinely-authored "Invisible Book" of life.

⁶⁶ In addition to evoking Matthew 18:20, the epigraph also bears some similarity with logion 5 of the *Logia Iesou* (12–13). See note 51 in this chapter.

⁶⁷ For a brief discussion of the use of epigraphs and dedications in Dobroliubov's first collection, see Svetlana Petrova, "Ramochnie komponenty v 'Natura naturans. Natura naturata' A. M. Dobroliubova," *Russkaia filologiya*, no. 18 (2007): 64–67.

the Revelation to John is Dobroliubov's most frequent canonical Biblical source: "And it will be allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months [*I dana budet emu vlast' deistvovat' 42 mesiatsa*]" (61);⁶⁸ "The clothing of the great wife is the righteousness of saints [*Odezhda velikoi zheni est' pravednost' sviatikh*]" (141);⁶⁹ and "Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb [*Blazhennyi zvannye na brachnuiu vecheriu Angtsa*]" (192).⁷⁰

Another source from New Testament literature is the apostle Paul:

Смерть, где твое жало!
 Ад, где твоя победа?
 Сила-же смерти грех,
 А жало греха закон. (12)⁷¹

[Death, where is your sting! / Hades, where is your victory? / The power of death is sin, / And the sting of sin is the law.]

Epigraphs referring to texts from the canonical Hebrew Scriptures tend to be from the prophetic books. The exception is the very first epigraph in the book to appear with an attribution: "Do not slander anyone even in your house, for the heavenly bird will carry your voice [*Ne zloslov' nikogo dazhe v dome tvoem, ibo ptitsa nebesnaia pereneset golos tvoi*]" (5), which is a marked rephrasing of the first part of Ecclesiastes 10:20: "Do not curse the king, even in your thoughts, or curse the rich, even in your bedroom; for a bird of the air may carry your

⁶⁸ Based on Revelation 13:5, referring to the Beast who "was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words." Dobroliubov alters only the tense of Synodal version, adding the verb future tense "*budet*."

⁶⁹ This is a paraphrase from Revelation 19:8, "To her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure—for the fine linen is the righteousness of the saints [*I dana bylo ei oblech'sia v visson chisty i svetly; visson zhe est' pravednost' sviatikh*]." See the discussion of the motif of clothing below.

⁷⁰ Revelation 19:9. Dobroliubov strays from the Synodal version only by using the long-form adjective "*zvannye*" in place of the short-form "*zvany*." See the discussion of the motif of the mystical marriage feast below.

⁷¹ The epigraph, attributed to "the writings of Paul of Tarsus," is a slight reworking of 1 Corinthians 15:55-6. Dobroliubov's text differs from the Synodal version only by switching the placement of the words "*sila*" and "*zhalo*" in the last two lines. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul argues that because Christ rose from the dead, so too will all of humankind; in the world to come, the dying physical body will give rise to the spiritual body: "As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven" (15:48-9).

voice [*Dazhe i v myслиakh tvoikh ne zlovlov' tsaria, i v spal'noi komnate tvoei ne zloslov' bogatogo; potomu chto ptitsa nebesnaia mozhet perenesti slovo tvoe*].” The quotation bears the attribution “from the proverbs of Solomon [*iz pritch Solomona*],” which would seem to evoke the Proverbs (*Kniga pritchei Solomonovykh*) rather than Ecclesiastes. However, the latter text is often conventionally ascribed to Solomon, and its tenth chapter does resemble Proverbs in both style and content, which makes Dobroliubov’s attribution vague but not incorrect. The remaining epigraphs from the Hebrew Scriptures are a paraphrase of Zephaniah 3:14–15 (attributed only to “the Old Testament prophets”), in which God sings to Israel in an unusual role-reversal, and a variation on Zechariah 9:16 (127). From non-canonical Hebrew sources come the epigraph from Sirach, discussed above, as well as a variation on the wisdom poem in Baruch 3:22–3 (145). In addition to these sources is a quotation (dubiously) ascribed to the Zohar, the mystical Kabbalistic text considered by some to contain originally oral teachings going back to the time of Moses: “Everything comes from the Word, everything returns to the Word and ascends again to Him and the Word is God [*Vse iskhodit iz Slova, vse vozvrashchaetsia v Slovo i opiat' v Nego podymaetsia i Slovo est' Bog*]” (31).⁷²

A number of the epigraphs in *From the Invisible Book* are from later Christian writers, incorporating their voices into the prophetic chorus. Two come from John Bunyan: the first piece of the cycle “Song of songs” (“*Pesn' pesnei*”) begins with an excerpt from *Pilgrim's Progress* (34), while the cycle of psalms “In the inner city” (“*Vo vnutrennom gorode*”) carries an epigraph from *The Holy War* (113).⁷³ Two quotations from Francis of Assisi join the epigraph from

⁷² I have been unable to find the source for this quotation in the Zohar or elsewhere; its language seems more Johannine than kabbalistic.

⁷³ In Kobrinskii's notes, he suggests that the title to the cycle is a reference to the Forbidden City in Beijing (646). Given the epigraph (from an allegory about a city called Mansoul) and the subject matter of the verse, this seems unlikely. See John Bunyan, *The Holy War*, Roger Sharrock and James F. Forrest, eds., Oxford English Texts (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1980).

Revelation at the beginning of “On Flesh and Spirit” (141). The epigraph at the beginning of the section “Days and Deeds” is attributed to the biblical Ezra (Esdras), but actually comes directly from Konstantin Pobedonostsev’s translation of the Thomas à Kempis work *The Imitation of Christ*: “The days of the present age are short and evil [*Malye i zlye dni nyneshnego veka*]” (100).⁷⁴ As has already been mentioned, these voices are joined by those from written religious traditions outside of Judaism and Christianity, including Hindu scriptures (151, 172), the sayings of the Buddha (23),⁷⁵ and the sayings of Mohammad (18).⁷⁶

Citations and allusions within the text of *From the Invisible Book* come from a similarly wide array of sources, centered around the Bible but branching out in many directions. Sometimes, as in “Farewell Song,” they exist as a patchwork of allusions, paraphrases, or rewordings, presented in a new arrangement and stripped of any attribution. To a reader familiar with Judeo-Christian scripture, the song sounds thoroughly biblical, but Dobroliubov leaves it to that reader to pursue the various threads of biblical language that come together to make the song. At other times, Dobroliubov names his sources—and just as with the epigraphs, these

⁷⁴ Rather than one of the books ascribed to Ezra, Dobroliubov took these words from Foma Kemiiskii, *O podrazhanii Khristu: 4 knigi Fomy Kemiiskogo*, trans. K. P. Pobedonostsev, 4th ed. (Saint Petersburg, 1890), 195; English translation here is Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. and intro. Leo Sherley-Price (New York: Dorset Press, 1952), 157. Pobedonostsev’s translation first appeared in 1869. In the 1890 edition cited here, the quotation Dobroliubov borrows and misattributes is the first line on the page.

The lives and writing of Christian mystics who sought to imitate Christ, Thomas à Kempis and Francis of Assisi in particular, play an important role in my discussion below of Dobroliubov’s image of Christ. Francis—especially as a source of imagery—is also an important figure in Chapter Three of the present study.

⁷⁵ The quote attributed to “the songs of the Buddha Gautama” does appear to be drawn from the sayings of the Buddha as recorded in the Dhammapada (verses 98-99), a Russian translation of which appeared in 1898 under the title *Put’ k istine*. See V. N. Toporov, “Dkhammapada i buddiiskaia literatura,” in *Dkhammapada. Perevod s pali* (Novosibirsk: Soglasie, 2003), 58.

⁷⁶ The quotation “from the sayings of Mohammed” probably finds its origin in the Quran rather than the hadith: “The Trumpet will (just) be sounded, when all that are in the heavens and on the earth will swoon [i.e., die -TT]” (39:68, Yusuf Ali translation).

include accurate quotations, slight corruptions, paraphrases, reinterpretations, and misattributions.

In both the epigraphs and the main text, Dobroliubov includes the titles of works only occasionally; the majority of citations mention only the author (or a genre, as in “song”). This emphasizes the privilege of the message over the means by which it is conveyed. Like the biblical prophets, Dobroliubov’s mystical experience of the Almighty compels him to deliver a message to others. The biblical literary tradition provides him with the framework for his own ideas about the power and pitfalls of text. On one hand, he sees the ability of words fixed on paper to reach across space and time, uniting human beings in a shared experience of God. Like the author of Sirach and his translator grandson, Dobroliubov evokes the authority of the canon (broadly construed) as he makes his own contribution to it. On the other hand, his approach to text reflects the anti-idolatry message of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament emphasis on the spiritual over the material. He sees that even Divinely-inspired human creation can become the object of idolatry, when its value is understood in terms of its material attributes, when it is held up as the work of human hands rather than as a container shaped by the creative Word of God.

In the remaining two sections of this chapter, I examine the imagery that Dobroliubov uses throughout his book as he attempts to create a written record of his religious experience. I first examine a constellation of motifs that appear throughout the book, conveyed using language borrowed from the Bible—in particular, from a handful of disparate narratives each involving direct contact between humanity and God. I show how Dobroliubov reinterprets the common imagery from these narratives, using it to reinforce his own message. As echoes from the prophetic chorus, the motifs signal to those already on the path that the message of joyful union

with God can be trusted. At the same time, the complex system of allusion, quotation and citation conveys a warning to the reader who seeks to understand the text only as a piece of artistic creation. In the final section, I examine the central character of the book, the figure of Jesus Christ. I demonstrate how Dobroliubov uses his literary skills to create an image of Christ as both a real human being and a literary creation, a prophetic voice.

The Sacrifice upon the Altar of Earth

As I have argued above, *From the Invisible Book* is built on a foundation of appropriated voices from a number of religious traditions, although it is Christian imagery—both Biblical and Church-historical—that predominates. As I argue in this section, these motifs are essential to understanding the significance of Dobroliubov’s modernist scripture as well as his quest to transcend aesthetics altogether. My analysis here focuses on the key constellation of Biblical motifs that appear throughout the book: birds, flowers, clothing, imprisonment, law, sacrifice, resurrection, and a mystical marriage feast. I show how Dobroliubov weaves together key narratives from both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, building from them his own message.

The clearest summation of Dobroliubov’s teaching about the dangers of artistic culture can be found in an open letter to the editors of the symbolist journal *Libra* (*Vesy*). The placement of the letter within *From the Invisible Book* underscores its importance: it lies at the heart of the section titled “Altar of Earth,” itself the midpoint of the book. “Altar of Earth” is divided into two sub-sections, “Times of Doubt” (“Vremena somnen’ia”) and “You are victorious, Galilean!” (“Ty pobedil, Galileianin!”).⁷⁷ The letter to *Libra* is the last piece in “Times of Doubt,” thus

⁷⁷ Merezhkovskii, *Smert’ bogov: Iulian Otstupnik*, in his *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Pravda, 1990), 302.

falling, in a sense, on the border between doubt and spiritual victory. Here, Dobroliubov lays out his program under eight subheadings: “Against novels,” “Against verse,” “Against science,” “Against painting and sculpture and architecture or constructive art,” “Against many words,” “Against performances or theatres,” “Against education without faith and against all dead life,” and “In defense of only music and song.”

Each section of the letter contains iterations of Dobroliubov’s overarching themes; nearly all forms of human artistic and intellectual endeavor are reproached. Novels are lies, he writes, dwelling on the vain details of imaginary lives. “Why lie,” he wonders, when “what is needed is to create a new world, a new earth.” Poets are obsessed with form, whereas they need to “forget about the clothing of verse. [. . .] only then will free unrestrainable song be accomplished [*sovershitsia pesnia svobodnaia neuderzhimaia*].” Science, the endless expounding of mechanical rationality, is incapable of arriving at any truth, let alone God: “Your dry, feelingless, many-volumed books are a shade without spirit.” Painting and the other plastic arts only weigh down the already heavily-encumbered body: “We are already so heavy, and so burdened with this body. Why further burden yourself with images?” Here Dobroliubov appeals to the prophet Hosea, who decried the excesses of an idolatrous age: “And the prophet says: ‘I will make you live in tents again, as in the days of the appointed festival.’”⁷⁸ The obsession with words has a similar effect: “Words are but clothing. [. . .] And one can so cover oneself in clothing that it becomes difficult to move.” Theater is “the school of lies [*uchilishche lzhi*],” with actors deceiving the audience, and the audience becoming hypocrites who react strongly to the false

⁷⁸ The quotation is from Hosea 12:9. Hosea decries the corrupted sacrificial cult of his day, and declares that God will return Israel to its traditional, agricultural, covenantal way of life.

emotions displayed on stage but then ignore real suffering. Without faith, “the most learned, educated, charitable person will often end up lower than the basest idol-worshipper” (86–87).

There is a strong prophetic tone to the letter to the editors of *Libra*. It opens with the image of the “altar of earth.” This motif—taken from the book of Exodus, in which the Israelites are instructed to build their sacrificial altars from earth or unhewn stone—is especially crucial for understanding Dobroliubov’s message in both the letter and in *From the Invisible Book* as a whole. In her discussion of the volume, Grossman posits that Dobroliubov’s altar of earth “is made up of all of his past life.”⁷⁹ However, a close reading of the motif as it occurs throughout the book complicates this assessment. The altar of earth turns out to be caught up in a web of other Biblical symbols, all of which point to the central themes of the text and of Dobroliubov’s teaching: the true nature of spirit and matter, the path to union of the created world with the Creator, and the human drive to share in the experience of that union with others. They come from a number of places in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, but Dobroliubov’s main sources are the theophany at Sinai (Exodus 20), the sermons on the mount and plain (Matthew 5–7, Luke 6), and the apocalyptic marriage feast of the Lamb and the creation of the new heaven and earth (Revelation 19–22). Each of these narratives presents a similar scene, a meeting between God, a prophet or prophets (Moses, Jesus and the apostles, and John of Patmos), and the people (the Israelites at the foot of Sinai, the Galilean crowds who gather to hear Jesus, the great multitude in heaven).

Dobroliubov extracts from these very different sources a set of common motifs: birds, flowers, clothing, imprisonment, law, sacrifice, resurrection, and a mystical marriage feast. These motifs serve as the thread by which he binds up his own text, representing the major

⁷⁹ Grossman, “Invisible Book,” xviii.

themes of the songs sung by the chorus of prophets. In the following pages, I examine these images and their contexts, showing how Dobroliubov uses overlapping imagery from his sources to construct a primer. The notion of sacrifice turns out to be central to this constellation of motifs in *From the Invisible Book*; in Dobroliubov's hands, a worthy sacrifice is a symbol of life lived on the righteous path.

It would be difficult to understand Dobroliubov's appropriation of Biblical sacrifice without first considering what sacrifice itself means. The significance of sacrifice in both religion and culture at large is a gargantuan topic, and the brief theoretical discussion that follows is merely presented as a starting point for my examination of the theme in *From the Invisible Book*. I will first look to the most influential twentieth-century theorist of sacrifice, René Girard, and then to later approaches to sacrifice derived from close readings of Biblical texts in their historical contexts. These studies help to illuminate the themes of sacrifice as they exist in Dobroliubov's Biblical sources, themes that are incorporated into the poet's work as he appropriates the symbolic language associated with them in order to convey his message about the dangers of idolatry and the nature of pure song.

Girard sees sacrifice as the concealment of a primordial act of collective violence, rooted in mimetic conflict. Within a group, desire for the same object creates divisions among people, which eventually converge into a division between the entire group and one individual, a scapegoat. The mob killing of this scapegoat, Girard argues, is the point around which the community coalesces, resolving the crisis and in so doing forming the foundation of society itself.⁸⁰ Girard is interested—to a fault, some critics would argue—in the anti-sacrificial

⁸⁰ See René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

orientation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and especially in what he sees as the complete demythologization of sacrifice in the New Testament accounts of the death of Jesus. He sees the Gospel accounts as revolutionary in their “truth”: the crucifixion is clearly an act of collective violence against an innocent scapegoat, and its depiction as such exposes the violent reality that the mythology of sacrifice is meant to conceal for the sake of societal cohesion.⁸¹

In his study of the sacrificial program in the teaching of Jesus, Bruce Chilton points out that

the study of sacrifice, in particular, is a case in which Christianity can only be understood in terms of Judaism, but Judaism itself is in need of interpretation before comparative assessment is practicable. By the time of the Rabbis, sacrifice was explicitly taken to be a requirement purely because the god of Israel commanded it: sacrificial activity, in other words, was interpreted as a subset within the principal activity, which was obedience to the Torah.⁸²

Unsatisfied with existing theories of sacrifice, including Girard’s—upon which he nonetheless relies—Chilton aims to arrive at a “typology of sacrifice,” a framework for understanding how sacrifice functioned in the cultures that produced the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. He argues that while previous theorists have focused on death as the central event of sacrifice, it is better to see that central event as consumption:

What happens most nearly approximates a meal, and sacrificial practice—in the type and preparation of food and its consumers—is often associated with culinary practice. [...] If

⁸¹ See Sandor Goodhart and Ann W. Astell, “Substitutive Reading: An Introduction to Girardian Thinking, Its Reception in Biblical Studies, and This Volume,” in *Sacrifice, Scripture, and Substitution: Readings in Ancient Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Ann W. Astell and Sandor Goodhart (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), esp. 3-9.

⁸² Bruce Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus: His Sacrificial Program within a Cultural History of Sacrifice* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 4.

we wished generally to characterize the typology of sacrifice we have been discussing, then, we could say that sacrifice is a feast with the gods, in which life as it should be—chosen and prepared correctly—is taken in order to produce life as it ought to be.⁸³

Chilton applies this understanding of sacrifice to Jesus's occupation of the temple and the last supper, arguing that the message of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels is one of purity in obedience to the law, often presented in the context of a meal: "Eating with Jesus is the emblem both of one's fitness to sacrifice and of one's readiness for the kingdom."⁸⁴ Following the failed occupation of the temple, he posits, Jesus reevaluated the sacrificial system altogether, presenting meals in fellowship with his disciples as a replacement for the cultic sacrifice in the temple.⁸⁵

These approaches to the concept of sacrifice provide a framework for my exploration of sacrifice and its related motifs in Dobroliubov's book. *From the Invisible Book* is the product of the author's deep familiarity with religious literary traditions generally and the Jewish and Christian Biblical traditions specifically. It is built upon the notion of sacrifice as a metaphor for creation: Dobroliubov's true song is the sacrificial offering of all of creation to the Creator, the festal meal at which God and humanity communicate. In the remainder of this section, I will examine in detail the origin, context, and meaning of the constellation of motifs related to the sacrificial meal in *From the Invisible Book*. I will show how Dobroliubov appropriates the Biblical Jesus's program of purity to warn his reader of the risk of idolatry inherent in artistic expression.

⁸³ Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus*, 41.

⁸⁴ Chilton, 148.

⁸⁵ Chilton, 153.

In Exodus 20, the people of Israel begin to receive the Law with the first revelation of the Ten Commandments. The incorporeal God delivers the Decalogue to the people directly. Gathered at the base of Mount Sinai, they are afraid to hear His thunderous words and beg Moses to act as intermediary. At the end of the chapter, Moses approaches Sinai alone, where God instructs him further. He tells Moses to tell the Israelites that they have heard God speak directly from heaven, and commands them:

You shall not make gods of silver alongside me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being, [. . .] But if you make for me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stones; for if you use a chisel upon it you profane it. You shall not go up by steps to my altar, so that your nakedness may not be exposed on it.

[Не делайте предо Мною богов серебряных, или богов золотых, не делайте себе: сделай Мне жертвенник из земли и приноси на нем всесожжения твои и мирные жертвы твои, [. . .] если же будешь делать Мне жертвенник из камней, то не сооружай его из тесаных, ибо, как скоро наложишь на них тесло твое, то осквернишь их; и не всходи по ступеням к жертвеннику Моему, дабы не открылась при нем нагота твоя.] (Exodus 20:24–26)

Dobroliubov’s letter to the editorship of *Libra* opens with a paraphrase of this passage, and he links it explicitly with the other Biblical motifs:

I am only reminding you, brothers, of the ancient commandment of Brother Moses: “If you build an altar to God, build it of earth, and if you will build it of stones, if God gave you special talents—look! be especially on guard here—do not hew them, because as soon as you will lay your adz to them, you will profane them.” And this ancient word was

affirmed by yet another man: “Grow like the lilies on the banks of the valleys, as promised, never looking in any mirror.”

[Я только напоминаю вам, братья, древнюю заповедь брата Моисея: ‘Если строишь жертвенник Богу, строй его из земли, а если будешь класть из камней, если Бог дал тебе особые таланты, смотри! тут особенно берегись, не обтесывай их, потому что как скоро возложишь твое тесло на них, осквернишь их.’ И это древнейшее слово подтвердил и другой человек ‘Растите как лилии у берегов долин, как обещано, не глядясь ни в какие зеркала’.] (86)

The poet-prophet of *From the Invisible Book* interprets the Mosaic commandment as a warning to human beings who strive to please God through elaborate creative acts. His “altar of earth” is more than a symbol of an individual’s past in aggregate: it does symbolize human life itself, shaped by the Divine Hand from the earth, but it is also a sacred space, built through humble human activity out of the base materials of the created world, where communication between God and humanity takes place. As the place where humanity and divinity meet and interact, it is the birthplace of true song: “Let song come only from an abundance in the heart [*ot izbytki v serdtse*] and before the All-Seeing—upon the altar of the infinite” (88).

“Abundance in the heart” alludes to the Lukan version of Jesus’s parable of the tree known by its fruit: “The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart [*ot izbytki serdtsa*] that the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). This parable is part of the Lukan Sermon on the Plain; a similar version (without “abundance of the heart”) also appears in the Sermon on the

Mount in Matthew.⁸⁶ In both Gospel sermons, as at the theophany at Sinai, God (this time in corporeal form as Jesus) addresses the multitudes.⁸⁷ Like the Ten Commandments (the core of the Law, or covenant, revealed by God directly to the people), these sermons contain the central teachings of the New Covenant (the sayings of Jesus, spoken directly). From here, Dobroliubov draws a number of motifs connected to his “altar of earth”: fulfillment of the Law—“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17); the futility of empty wordiness—“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.” (Matthew 6:7); and trust in Providence:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. [...] And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. (Matthew 6:25–29)

These motifs occur throughout *From the Invisible Book*, often overlapping. Fulfilling the Law is a precondition for unity with God. Dobroliubov’s spiritual path is one of obedience to the commandments, a simple life lived in communal observance of the Law: “I am a faithful disciple of the Lord, / In simplicity I fulfill the commandment [*Ia verniy uchenik Gospoden’ / V prostote*

⁸⁶ Grenfell and Hunt suggest that this saying might be part of the text they consider a possible fragment of “Gospel of the Egyptians.” See note 53 in this chapter.

⁸⁷ As at the theophany at Sinai, there is a tension here between God, an intermediary prophet, and the crowd. Consider, for instance, the sermon in Luke 12, given before a multitude and made up of parables and sayings, many of which are also found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew: “Peter said, ‘Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?’” (Luke 12:41).

zapoved' ispolniaiu]" (11); "only now did I understand once and for all how beautiful and eternal are His commandments, all of them, even the smallest [*tol'ko teper' ia raz navsegda ponial, kak prekrasny i vechny zapovedi Ego, vse, dazhe maleishie]*" (51); "Whoever breaks one of the least of these His commandments will be called least in the Kingdom of God [*Kto narushit odnu iz etikh maleishikh zapovedei Ego, togo maleishego nazovet v tsarstve Bozh'em]*" (82); "First fulfill all commandments of purity and temperance. The fire of love cannot burn on an altar of impurity [*Snachala ispolni vse zapovedi chistoty i vozderzhan'ia. Ne mozhet ogon' liubvi zagoret'sia na zhertvennike nechistoty]*" (110); "Preserve me in temperance amid all refined foods, preserve me in poverty and in physical labor, in all Your commandments [*Sokhrani menia v vozderzhan'i sredi vsekh izyskannykh pishch, sokhrani menia v bednosti i v telesnom trude, vo vsekh zapovediakh Tvoikh—i malykh i velikikh]*" (144); "I even wrote all this against my will—only for the sake of fulfilling an obligation [*Vse eto ia napisal dazhe protiv voli moei—tol'ko radi togo, chtob ispolnit' obiazannost']*" (202).

Throughout Dobroliubov's text, the proscription "against many words" is closely related to the idea of both worldly art and the entire material world as clothing. This clothing—the world of flesh and matter—can be a stumbling block when worldly concerns overtake trust in Providence and bury the spirit: "beneath the poor clothes of the Wanderer the entire world was hidden [*pod bednoi odezhdoi Strannika skryvalsia tselyi mir]*" (42); "Every flower is sublimely beautiful while it does not know that it is beautiful. God grants beauty to the one who will not worry about his clothing or food [*Vsiakii tsvetok prekrasen, poka on ne znaet, chto on krasiv. Bog daet krasotu tomu, kto ne zabolitsia o odezhdakh i pishchakh svoikh]*" (79); "Thus will come the transfiguration of the world: They will not notice clothing, will not suffer torments over their clothing. And only then will your clothing also become beautiful" [*Tak nastupit*

preobrazhenie mira. Ne budut zamechat' odezhd, ne budut terzat'sia ob odezhdakh svoikh. I tol'ko togda ukrasiatsia i odezhdyy tvoi']" (133); "And I began by investigating that which you call reason. These garments were sewn together from new patches and from old pieces, but it is just clothing. Clearly I saw that reason and flesh are only the tools of the spirit [*I ia nachal issledovat' to, chto vy nazyvaete razumom. Eti odezhdyy byli sshity iz novykh zaplat i iz starykh kuskov, no eto tol'ko odezhdyy. Iasno uvidel ia, chto i razum i plot' tol'ko orudiia*]" (173); "And I saw the corruptible clothing of the spirit. Why do you not begin to weave an immortal garment? Humanity, your first clothing is the flesh, all the visible world [*I ia uvidel tlennyye odezhdyy. Zachem vy ne nachinaete tkat' bessmertnoe odeian'e? Pervaia odezhdya tvoia, chelovek, eto plot', ves' vidimyy mir*]" (183).⁸⁸

These images point to the third Biblical source of Dobroliubov's motifs: the end of the Book of Revelation. Paraphrasing Revelation 19:8, a description of the marriage feast of the Bride and the Lamb (the union of Church and God), he writes: "The righteousness of all the saints is only the clothing of His Bride" (175).⁸⁹ Turning to the original text of Revelation, we again find God, a multitude of people, and a prophet. However, this familiar arrangement is significantly transformed in the context of apocalypse. Now, the multitude sings praises directly before the throne of God. The prophet, here only an observer, is told to write: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb [*na brachnuiu vecheriu Agntsa*]." (Revelation 19:9). He hears an angel call all the birds of the sky to "gather for the great supper of God" (19:17), where they feast on the flesh of kings and slaves alike. Eventually, the Bride,

⁸⁸ See the discussion of garments in chapter 3.

⁸⁹ Another paraphrase of the verse appears earlier in the book as an epigraph to the cycle "On the flesh and the spirit" ("O ploti i dukhe"): "The clothing of the great woman [*velikoi zheny*] is the righteousness of the saints" (141). The original verse in Revelation reads: "to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints" (19:8).

clothed in the deeds of the righteous, is revealed as the new Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God in union with His people.

The mystical feast is itself another key motif in *From the Invisible Book*, reflecting the unity of God and human being through bidirectional communication—the interaction between God and creation represented by sacrifice. In “Song of the Marriage” (“Pesnia braka”), Dobroliubov’s Groom celebrates such a union, construed in distinctly literary terms:

Rejoice! I, I rejoice for you. Not only do you drink from the true cup of My blood, but I accept the fish, which you carry up on your altar of earth. Not only do you read in My scripture, but I open your book, I read it—all-joyful ever-joyful for My eyes—forever.
[Радуйтесь! Я, Я радуюсь о вас. Не только вы пьете из чаши истинной крови Моей, но я принимаю рыбу, которую приносишь ты на твой жертвенник из земли. Не только ты читаешь в писаньи Моем, но я открываю книгу твою, вечно читаю ее— всерадостную, вечнорадостную для очей Моих.] (33)

This feast is the earthly reality of God manifest in community/communion: “Who can destroy friendship that is in the Living God? / Every time you break bread [*prelomliaia khleb*], remember me” (16); “We all sit at the all-wordly infinite table. And He gives bread and salt to the whole world, even dogs eat the crumbs from His table, spiritual bread and material bread [*telesnyi khleb*] are open to all. Just work” (81).

As I have suggested, the constellation of motifs that Dobroliubov crafts from the narratives in Exodus, the Gospels, and Revelation serve as a metaphor for the expression of beauty through inspired song. The altar of earth is a life lived in simplicity and community; through silent prayer and spontaneous joyful song, God’s creation celebrates its unity and offers of itself to the Creator. When a pure offering is made, the world is transfigured; the altar of earth

(*zhertvennik*, a sacrificial altar) becomes the great table (*velikii stol*, the holy table, the liturgical altar in Orthodox Christianity) at which the mystical feast takes place. Through the voices of his prophetic chorus, Dobroliubov also warns of the danger that comes when idols of silver and gold—human creativity in and of itself—are worshipped while the lawful sacrifice on the altar of earth is neglected.

The Word Made Flesh: Dobroliubov's Image of Christ

Given the centrality of the Gospel narratives for Dobroliubov's system, it is not surprising that a Christ figure seems particularly important within the prophetic choir of *From the Invisible Book*. As I have already suggested, Dobroliubov's Christ is not the fleshed out, detailed anthropological study found in what Jefferson Gattrall calls the nineteenth-century realist "Jesus novel."⁹⁰ While, like the authors of Jesus novels, Dobroliubov draws upon a variety of sources from canonical and apocryphal scripture and centuries of spiritual writing, his aim is not to present a "realistic" or historical figure. Rather, Christ for Dobroliubov is a model, the perfected pattern of God's creation. He sees in the figure of Christ a great teacher, but more importantly, a wanderer and prophet who shares the message of divine communion.

Dobroliubov's image of Christ is of the man who went into the wilderness and lived among the wild beasts and relied on providence for sustenance. He is the preacher-prophet who traveled throughout Galilee and Judea and commanded his followers to abandon what is familiar and to follow him, to bring his message to all the nations, to tell of the need for and possibility of brotherly love and communion with God.

⁹⁰ See Jefferson Gattrall, "The Color of His Hair, 19th Century Literary Portraits of the Historical Jesus," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 109–130.

Dobroliubov's approach to Christ is mediated by the tradition of Christ-imitators that begins with the apostle Paul: "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:20–23). Among those whom Dobroliubov takes as examples of Christ-like living in the spirit of Paul are Francis of Assisi and Thomas à Kempis. As discussed above, both Francis and Thomas are featured in the epigraphs of *From the Invisible Book*. Franciscan imagery is especially present throughout the text; it is Francis who shows Dobroliubov that all of creation is united as brothers and sisters. Francis's familial origin as a cloth merchant further underscores the Dobroliubovian emphasis on clothing as a metaphor for materiality.

As has already been observed in the context of the prophetic chorus and the constellation of sacrificial motifs, the text of *From the Invisible Book* contains numerous direct references and allusions to Christ. In the aforementioned open letters to the Briusovs, Dobroliubov praised the tradition of prophecy that has its perfection in the textual lineage of Christianity:

Despite the many veils of Old Testament cruelty and cult, despite the horrible misconceptions, I prefer the Bible to all the best books of all the peoples. For all of the prophets vanished from sight into the One Higher Life and understood that He is One and is truly Alive. But without any veil the truth shone only in the person of Jesus and his apostles. (160)

Often, Dobroliubov's references to Christ invoke the image of the wanderer [*strannik*], presenting Jesus as the itinerant preacher, a guide along the path. The third poem in the section "From the Invisible Book" thus begins:

Учитель Невидимый, Сын Бога Живого
 Из мира наружной тьмы в мир невидимый Твой уведи
 К чистым рекам, водам живым Твоим. (12)

[Invisible Teacher, Son of the Living God, / Lead us out of the external world of darkness
 to Your invisible world, / To the pure rivers, Your living waters.]

Here, Dobroliubov again evokes Revelation, in which John of Patmos's final vision is of
 such a river: "And [the angel] showed me a pure river of water of life, bright as crystal, flowing
 from the throne of God and of the Lamb [*I pokazal mne chistuiu reku vody zhizni, svetluiu, kak
 kristall, iskhodiashchuiu ot prestola Boga i Agntsa*]" (22:1).

The river of life is an image which often repeats in Dobroliubov's text in connection with
 Christ. An especially clear example can be found in the seventh poem of the cycle "Song of
 Songs." The poem, "To the tune of 'Shall we meet you'" ("Na napev 'Vstretimsia li my s
 toboiu'"), is based on the Baptist hymnist Robert Lowry's 1864 "Shall We Gather at the River,"
 which anticipates the gathering of the resurrected righteous before the throne of God.
 Dobroliubov's version includes much of the text of the original but differs by the addition of
 several new stanzas. The first describes the river, on the banks of which flowers grow and in
 which the reflections of the stars tremble. It is along this river that "Souls are raised up towards
 the heavenly land." In the fourth stanza, the poet depicts Christ on the road to Golgotha, an
 element entirely absent in Lowry's hymn:

По тернию Он шел и кровью
 Означен был малейший шаг Его.
 Где пала кровь, цветы с любовью
 И с верой возросли в Него. (43)

[He walked upon thorns and blood / Indicated his slightest step. / Where the blood fell,
 flowers grew / With love and with faith in Him.]

In the following stanza, the faithful gather up these “crimson roses,” hearing on the wind “the voice of the Father of endless worlds” (43).⁹¹

As mentioned in the previous section, Dobroliubov frequently conceives of communion with God as a mystical marriage, drawing in particular on the imagery of the Lamb (i.e., Christ) and His Bride in Revelation. In Revelation, the Bride of the Lamb is “the holy city, the New Jerusalem” (Revelation 21:2), the resurrected Church. It is the Bride who calls the faithful to drink of the water of life that flows from the throne of God (Revelation 22:17). In “Song of the marriage,” first discussed above, the speaker is newly betrothed to the Son of God: “On that day he and I left the city for his groves and meadows and valleys” (32). When the speaker, “like a blind man,” responds to the words of the Son, he worries that he will not be able to love anyone after experiencing transcendental divine beauty. The Son explains that His beauty is the existence of His friends—those who love him—and that “My life is in the eyes of My friends” (32). In language echoing Paul’s conversion, the speaker’s eyes are thus opened.

In another prose piece, “The Wedding at Cana of Galilee” (“Brak v Kane Galileiskoi”), many of these same motifs are found. Imagery from the Wedding at Cana appears throughout the text. In this passage, the speaker is a member of a household in which a wedding feast is being held. Passing through the town, the Christ figure arrives at the house: “He came to us as a wanderer” (41). He invites the guests to abandon their gathering “in a cottage made by hands [rukotvornaia izba]” and to travel with him to “My temple not made by hands [nerukotvornyi khram Moi]”—that is, in nature.⁹² There, they partake in a feast, and in turn invite him to the

⁹¹ A translation of Lowry’s hymn was included in the 1902 evangelical hymnal *Gusli*, compiled by Ivan Prokhanov. See Heather J. Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution 1905–1929* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 98. It seems likely that this translation was his source.

⁹² The adjective *nerukotvornyi*, a calque of the Greek *acheiropoietos*, usually refers to icons of Christ of miraculous origin, such as the Mandylion.

wedding party. This mutual communion expands to include the whole world: “But underneath the poor clothing of the Wanderer the entire world was hidden, and we didn’t entertain Him, but He opened His chest and gave us His heart and His flesh, He gave us His soul and spirit and His wine” (42). Here, Dobroliubov draws not only on the story of the Wedding at Cana found in John’s gospel, but also evokes Pushkin’s “The Prophet”:

И он мне грудь рассек мечом,
И сердце трепетное вынул

[And with a sword he cleft my breast, / And took the heart with terror turning]⁹³

Many of the allusions to Christ in *From the Invisible Book* are subtle. This is the case with several phrases drawn from the gospels, especially Luke. As one of Dobroliubov’s chief Gospel sources, echoes of Luke are found throughout the collection; here, they will be examined as they appear in “Resurrection Psalm” (“Voskresnyi psalom”) (194–8), the last verse selection from the book. One of the two poems in the collection with an epigraph attributed to the Gospel of the Egyptians, “Resurrection Psalm” comprises thirty-eight couplets of free verse, retelling the post-resurrection accounts found in the gospels of John and Luke.⁹⁴ Many of the above-mentioned allusions to Christ are found in this poem: the figure of the Wanderer; teaching that is not immediately recognized (i.e., invisible); resurrection; and mystical marriage with the divine (also present here is the image of the sacrificial altar of earth, discussed above). After Mary Magdalene recognizes the risen Christ, he gives her the promise of resurrection: “Rejoice and live and do not die, beloved!” (195). He also promises her that if she and others follow his path, they will join with him in a mystical marriage:

⁹³ A. S. Pushkin, “Prorok,” in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenie*; translation by Babette Deutsch and Avrahm Yarmolinsky.

⁹⁴ In Kobrinskii’s notes to this poem in Minskii and Dobroliubov, *Rannie simvolisty*, he remarks that the subject matter is based on the chapters 20 and 21 of John’s gospel (647). This is true to a certain extent; however, Dobroliubov also draws heavily on Luke, especially chapters 23 and 24.

“Когда я взойду на вершину гор,
Тогда бесконечной любовью сочетаешься со Мной.

“Чем выше будете восходить, друзья Мои,
Тем ближе будут сходиться наши пути.

“Нет тесноты на пути Его,
Там совершается тайна бесконечного брака.” (195)⁹⁵

[“When I go up to the summit of the mountains, / Then you will enter in union with me {contract in marriage with me} in endless love. // “The higher you ascend, My friends, / The closer our paths will come together. // There is no narrowness on His path, / There the mystery of eternal marriage is carried out.”]

The next section of the poem retells the Gospel story of the road to Emmaus—an account found only in Luke. On the evening of the same day as the resurrection, two pilgrims are traveling: “And in another form He, having drawn near, went along with them” (195).

Dobroliubov’s language here (*priblizivshis’ k nim*) is borrowed directly from the Synodal translation of Luke 24:15. Dobroliubov uses this particular verb throughout the collection, almost always in reference to the spiritual path.⁹⁶ Without noting the Lukan connection to the risen Christ found in “Resurrection Psalm” the poet’s word choice might otherwise be dismissed as mere economy.

A similar trope, though perhaps more obvious, is found a bit later in the poem. Just as in Luke’s gospel, the men on the road to Emmaus are unable to recognize Christ in the form of the Wanderer. It is his breaking of bread which opens their eyes to the unseen truth:

И за ужином первый разломил хлеб на всех

⁹⁵ The quotation marks here are original to the text, indicating direct speech.

⁹⁶ For illustrative examples of this use of this verb in *Iz knigi nevidimoi*, see “Dva otryvka. Pervyi otryvok” (“Two excerpts. First excerpt”), 50; “Gospodi, gde sila Tvoia i vesna Tvoia” (“O Lord, where is Your power and Your spring”), 92; “V moiu naruzhnuiu komnatu” (“In my external room”), 104; “Psalom – pervyi den’ zakliuchen’ia” (“A psalm – the first day of imprisonment”), 117; “Eto bylo mnogo let tomu” (“It was many years ago”), 122; “O pervykh voskresen’iakh” (“On the first resurrections”), 138; “Izmenen’e tela v dukhe” (“Transformation of body to spirit”), 143.

И открылись глаза их светом любви
И они узнали Его, но Его уже не было. (195)

[And at supper He first broke bread for all / And their eyes were opened by the light of love / And they recognized Him, but He was already gone.]

Towards the poem's end, it is the breaking of bread which again reveals the identity of the host of the "mysterious feast" laid out for the disciples. The table upon which the feast takes place is in fact the transfigured altar, at which God is revealed to the faithful:

Жертвенник ангельский горел на земле,
Этого огня не касалась рука человека.

На жертвенник был предложен таинственный ужин
– И хлеб и соль и вино и плоть и кровь и рыба.

И никто из них не смел спросить Его: 'кто ты?'
И опять узнал был Он в преломлении хлеба.

[An angelic altar burned upon the earth, / The fire not touched by the hands of men. // On the altar was laid out a mysterious supper / — Bread and salt and wine and flesh and blood and fish. // And none of them dared ask him "Who are you?" / And again He was recognized in the breaking of bread.] (197)

Dobroliubov's mystical feast is thus the meeting place of God and humanity, where human beings imitate Christ and offer their lives to celebrate and proclaim the oneness of and with God.

The figure of Christ exists within *From the Invisible Book* in order to show the reader the true path of life. Christ's example as a selfless servant is the model for a would-be disciple following Dobroliubov's own path—in the spirit of the *khlysty*, Dobroliubov in a sense lays claim to the identity of Christ. The traditional Christian rejection of the sacrificial cult becomes Dobroliubov's rejection of what he sees as idolatrous artistic culture. As an alternative, he, like Christ, proposes a new program of pure sacrifice in accordance with the Divine commandments.

In this chapter, I have aimed to expand the scholarly understanding of Dobroliubov's work by uncovering the structure of his final book. I have argued that the poet uses the

conventions of Biblical literature—especially prophetic literature—as he makes his case against the very culture he is contributing to. His sophisticated understanding of contemporary culture is highlighted in his ability to combine folkloric and Biblical elements in his verse, especially through the deft use of syntactic parallels. Through an explication and analysis of the book's central themes and motifs, I further identify a central constellation of Biblical motifs which the poet takes up and repurposes as he constructs his text demonstrates his awareness of the chain of memory which comprises religious culture. Dobroliubov's Christ is a wandering prophet-teacher, a self-emptying humble servant, and the perfect sacrifice—as well as the perfect model for human beings who desire communion with God. He exists within the text the way that Dobroliubov's personality existed within the contemporary literary culture, forever beckoning the would-be follower to forsake the world and embark on the path toward religious reality. This quest would be taken up, in part at least, by Dobroliubov's closest follower in the literary world, Leonid Semenov.

Chapter 3

The Solitary Disciple: The Case of Leonid Semenov

On an early spring morning in 1907, the Symbolist poet and Social Democrat activist Leonid Dmitrievich Semenov (1880–1917) was making his way on foot from the train station at the provincial town of Luga to the Monastery of St. John the Theologian, situated some twenty kilometers away on a peninsula in Cheremenets Lake. Semenov took his time on the walk, with frequent breaks to relish in the sensation of being alone with nature. He had spent much of the previous year imprisoned for political agitation among peasant communities in the Kursk governorate. His release in December 1906 was accompanied by a devastating blow: his beloved friend Maria Mikhailovna Dobroliubova (1880–1906) died suddenly and under mysterious circumstances just before he was set free; news of her death met him on the road as he made his way to St. Petersburg. Dobroliubova, the sister of Aleksandr Dobroliubov, had been a teacher, wartime nurse, and Socialist-Revolutionary activist well regarded among the St. Petersburg intelligentsia. He arrived home the day after her funeral and spent the next several months endeavoring to reintegrate himself into a drastically changed life. He felt compelled to follow the example set by his dear “Sister Masha,” as he called Dobroliubova, but struggled to understand for himself what exactly that would entail. Formerly a confirmed atheist, Semenov was troubled by the belief in God that was so central to Sister Masha’s world, in spite of her radical politics.

Semenov was on his way to Cheremenets to meet with Father Grigorii Spiridonovich Petrov (1866–1925), the liberal St. Petersburg journalist (and newly-elected member of the Second Duma, affiliated with the Constitutional Democrats), who had been exiled to the

monastery by church officials unhappy with his political activity.¹ Petrov had worked with Sister Masha at the school she organized for peasant children in 1903. She had been fond of the radical priest and had taken Semenov to see him. Semenov felt that this visit was a necessary step in his attempt to understand the meaning of her life and death.²

Pausing on his way to the monastery to take in the natural world surrounding him, Semenov experienced a profound spiritual awakening, which he would later recall in the unfinished memoir *A Sinner to Sinners* [*Greshnyi greshnym*] (1914–17, published posthumously). As he watched the squirrels playing in the trees, the anguished poet-turned-revolutionary realized that the questions which had been troubling him—to which he was unable to find answers among other people, in books, or even in his own thoughts—were suddenly answered completely by the natural world. As he watched the lingering ice floes floating on Cheremenets Lake, a peace descended upon him:

And Sister Masha was here, too. There she flashed by in the trees, [...] here she sat down beside me like a sister, conciliatory, calm, as though cleansed of her pain and redeemed and rejoicing now in all that is, if I would only resolve myself... The struggle did not go on for long. It is hard, hard for you, Paul, to kick against the goads [*Trudno, trudno tebe, Pavel, idti protiv rozhna*], rang out a voice in me from the Acts of the Apostles, and I suddenly understood it. Leave—leave everything. “Take up my yoke upon you, and my burden, for my yoke is a blessing and my burden is light [*Voz'mite igo Moe na sebia i*

¹ Despite his prolific publicistic output and his popularity as a public figure in revolutionary Russia, there is remarkably scant scholarship on the life and work of Father Petrov, particularly in English. A notable exception is Jennifer Hedda's chapter, “In the Footsteps of Christ: The Work of Father Grigorii Petrov,” in *His Kingdom Come: Orthodox Pastorship and Social Activism in Revolutionary Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

² Dobroliubova's connection to Father Petrov was significant enough to receive mention in a contemporary account of his exile and election to the Duma. See A. V. Ru-ov, *Sviashchennik G. S. Petrov, chlen gosudarstvennoi dumy. Biografiia i istoriia ssylki v monastyr* (Moscow, 1907), 6.

bremia Moe, ibo igo Moe blago i bremia Moe legko].” Become lowly [*stat’ nishchim*], like I had been when they beat me in the guardhouse. Forget everything, forget all of your wisdom, all the learning—take it all off [*sovlech’sia vsego*]. If you are not carefree like a child, it is not possible to enter the Heavenly Kingdom. Look at the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field, they neither reap nor sow.... This is what He is calling me to do. And He Himself, or maybe it was just His Angel, was suddenly there beside me in a peaceful breath, All-forgiving, All-reconciling, Unseen, Unheard—but clearly felt—All-powerful. I could not oppose it any longer. I believed the call. I resolved myself....³

As he retells it in *A Sinner to Sinners*, Semenov’s experience on the road to Cheremenets evokes the confluence of a number of sometimes-contradictory currents in his biography. The account references his life as a student and Symbolist writer, his period of revolutionary activism following the state-sponsored violence he saw firsthand on Bloody Sunday, and his experiences in prison, especially the violence he suffered personally at the hands of the guards at the jail in Rylsk in the second half of 1906. It also marks the outset of a new path, one that would continue for the remainder of his life. In his resolve to “leave everything,” Semenov followed in the footsteps of Aleksandr Dobroliubov in seeking out a simple life of manual labor together with the peasants, a life grounded in devotion to—and reliance on the providence of—God. This quest also led him into a deep, spiritual friendship with Lev Tolstoy, half-a-century his senior, and into frequent conflict with the tsarist authorities. After the outbreak of the First World War, Semenov turned to the Orthodox Church, and began a smallholding on land inherited from his grandfather

³ Leonid Semenov, *Greshnyi greshnym*, in his *Stikhotvoreniia. Proza.*, ed. V. S. Baevskii (Moscow: Nauka, 2007), 295. Semenov’s Biblical citations—based on Acts 9:5, Matthew 11:29, and Matthew 6:28—are in all likelihood inexact on purpose, reflecting the approach to the use of Biblical source material found in Dobroliubov’s *From the Invisible Book*. NB: For the remainder of this chapter, primary citations from *Stikhotvoreniia. Proza.* will be given parenthetically in the text.

near the family estate at Gremiachka. He was preparing to receive holy orders in late 1917 when he was murdered by a local gang of peasants.

Semenov continued to publish sporadically between 1907 and 1909, with essays, stories, and verse appearing in the journal *Way of Labor (Trudovoi put')*—successor to *Journal for All (Zhurnal dlia vsekh)*, shuttered at the end of 1906 for political reasons—and the almanac of the Petersburg publishing house Briar (*Shipovnik*). His new way of life dominates much of the later writing, including the handful of papers that survived the fatal attack on his home in by a local peasant gang in 1917. These papers were only published within the past fifty years, and include the memoir *A Sinner to Sinners*. In both verse and prose he explores the circumstances that led to his conversion: the student years of youthful atheism and its accompanying licentiousness and aestheticism, the experience of Bloody Sunday and his involvement with the revolutionary movement, the spiritual bond with Sister Masha, his time in prison, and the mysterious circumstances leading to Dobroliubova's death on the eve of his release. In the latter half of the 1900s, Semenov strives to find language capable of articulating his newfound spiritual and aesthetic values. This quest inevitably leads the poet—in the footsteps of Aleksandr Dobroliubov—across the threshold of aesthetics itself.

Semenov's biography is of particular importance for my approach, just as Dobroliubov's was for interpreting *From the Invisible Book* in the previous chapter. My examination of Semenov's case thus begins with his early biography and emergence in educated, literary society at the start of the twentieth century, as it was recorded by others and recalled by the poet himself in *A Sinner to Sinners*. This first phase of the writer's life reaches its culmination in 1905, with the publication of his book, *Collected Poems (Sobranie stikhotvoreni)*. By the time of the book's publication, Semenov's path had already taken the first in a series of stark turns. Radicalized by

the events of Bloody Sunday, he had already begun to set aside aesthetic pursuits for political activism. I am especially interested in the period from that day until the end of 1906: Semenov's radicalization, his time in prison, his friendship with Maria Dobroliubova and his reaction to her death all play a critical role in establishing the context his spiritual turn, which in turn forms the basis for my analysis of his later writing.

Next, I turn to Semenov's correspondence with Tolstoy, which serves as the primary contemporaneous evidence of the former's spiritual path—Semenov's own account in *A Sinner to Sinners* and the recollections of contemporaries are largely written well after that time. Semenov's relationship with Tolstoy is well documented in letters, diary entries, and Tolstoyan chronicles. An ever-present third figure in their relationship is Aleksandr Dobroliubov—Semenov's letters to Tolstoy show that in the years following his incarceration and Maria Dobroliubova's death, as political unrest and government repression continued across the empire, the younger writer sought to follow Dobroliubov and imitate his program of radical life-creation more than anyone else.

Semenov's exchanges with Tolstoy also provide evidence of his preoccupation in life with the key themes of his later written work. After reconstructing the terms of the relationship between the writers (insofar as is possible), I turn to Semenov's later literary output. I interpret the short stories, verse, and miscellaneous prose pieces that appeared in print between 1907 and 1909 within the context of the author's new way of life. I argue that Semenov's major themes reflect his Dobroliubovian life-creation experiment; moreover, as the correspondence with Tolstoy makes clear, these texts were written at least partly in an attempt to bring Semenov's own recension of the Dobroliubovian message—the exhortation to abandon culture and to “step into the book of life”—to members of his former literary circles.

Although Semenov uses the written word to further the message of *From the Invisible Book*, his work largely lacks the esoteric, mythological tone found in Dobroliubov's text. He develops a central set of images and themes that recur throughout the later verse and prose, but his figurative language is straightforward in comparison with Dobroliubov's labyrinthine systems of symbols, citations, paraphrases, and self-references. Part of the reason for this is the direction in which Semenov takes the elder poet's attack on educated society. In *From the Invisible Book*, Dobroliubov decries educated society's worship of the works of its own hands: art, literature, philosophy, science. Semenov shares the view that vain attachment to material culture separates individuals from one another and from God, but he sees social and political ramifications for participating in this culture that Dobroliubov largely leaves unaddressed. Semenov, taking a page from Tolstoy, explicitly confronts social problems as he makes a personal attempt to live in accordance with the divine will. He aims to show his reader how participation in "the game" contributes to a political and social system that actively carries out violence against its lowliest constituents, a system that can arbitrarily determine and re-determine who is lowly and who is not.

As noted above, the quest that Semenov embarked on in early 1907—endeavoring to arrange his life in accordance with the will of God—meant a radical personal transformation. His primary model for this project is Dobroliubov, and the period between 1907 and 1910 finds Semenov closely associated with both the poet-prophet of *From the Invisible Book* and the burgeoning sect that arose around him, centered in the Samara governorate. At the same time, he developed a largely epistolary, spiritual relationship with Lev Tolstoy, and was in regular contact with adherents of the Tolstoyan movement. Nonetheless, it is difficult to make a case for Semenov as either a "Dobroliubovian" or "Tolstoyan"—this in spite of the fact that he later

would use the term “Tolstoyan” to describe himself during this period in *Sinner to Sinners*.

Semenov’s path is his own—it *must* be his own, given his understanding of the individual—even when it coincides with those closest to him spiritually.

I rely on the fragmentary memoir *A Sinner to Sinners* to provide context throughout my reading of Semenov’s work. As one of the only pieces of Semenov’s writing after 1910 to survive the attack on his home in the chaotic aftermath of the 1917 revolution, the three-part memoir serves as a crucial window into the author’s final years. The first section, “Sister Masha,” presents Semenov’s image of Dobroliubova as the living saint whose example led him out of darkness. “Renunciation of War,” the second section, tells of the author’s last years among the peasants, facing continued interference from the decaying tsarist apparatus. The last major turn in Semenov’s life path—his embrace of Orthodoxy and life as a landowner—is documented in the diary entries comprising the section “In the Name of the Father,” written in November and December 1917. Amidst the chaos of violent revolution, Semenov re-evaluates all that has come before. His earlier spiritual and life-creation quests are reinterpreted as steps along the way—necessary but ultimately insufficient—leading him to the Church, which he has come to see as Russia’s only hope.

The Man with the Mirror: Early Life and Writing, 1880–1905

Semenov’s life—much like Dobroliubov’s—has been interpreted by contemporaries and historians alike as an exercise in life-creation. “Semenov was not only a poet,” writes Baevskii, “but also a life-builder. His biography is the most remarkable of his works.”⁴ Thirty years earlier, Zara Mints likewise emphasized the importance of Semenov’s life story, which she noted “has

⁴ V. S. Baevskii, “Zhiznestroitel’ i poet,” in Leonid Semenov, *Stikhotvoreniia. Proza.*, ed. V. S. Baevskii (Moscow: Nauka, 2007), 457.

been interpreted as the practical realization of Tolstoyan ideals.”⁵ This view predates contemporary scholarship: in her 1930 essay about Semenov, “A Poem of Life (A Story of Truth)” (“Poema zhizni [rasskaz o pravde]”), Zinaida Gippius cast the poet’s biography as the vital part of his artistic production:

If “poetry” is only verse—if the quantity and quality of poems defines “the poet,” then perhaps my poet has no place among names like Tiutchev or Lermontov. But I think that a person’s poetry, aside from their verse, might also be their *life*. Not in the sense of an “interesting” life, no—but one having been formed or put together in a particular way, like a poem [*poema*], with a kind of singular intention. It may not be understood (not all poetry is understood by all), it may be liked or disliked, it may remain unknown... but nonetheless it is still poetry.⁶

Leonid Dmitrievich Semenov was born in St. Petersburg on December 2, 1880, the second of seven children in an aristocratic family known for scholarly endeavors. His paternal grandfather, the senator Petr Petrovich Semenov, was a celebrated explorer and geographer, having been among the first Europeans to explore the Tian Shan mountain range along the Chinese border.⁷ Leonid’s father, Dmitrii Petrovich, served as the chair of the statistics

⁵ Z. G. Mints, introductory article to “L. D. Semenov-Tian’-Shanskii i ego ‘Zapiski,’” in *Trudy po russkoi i slavianskoi filologii XXVIII: Literaturovedenie* (Tartu, 1977), 104.

⁶ Z. N. Gippius, “Poema zhizni (rasskaz o pravde),” in *Chto bylo i chego ne bylo. Neizvestnaia proza 1926-1930 godov* (St. Petersburg: Rostok, 2002), 515. Gippius’s essay first appeared in the Riga-based émigré newspaper *Today [Segodnia]*, no. 177 (29 June 1930): 2.

⁷ In recognition of his accomplishments, the tsar granted Petr Petrovich and his descendants, including Leonid, the right to append Tian-Shanskii to their surname in 1906.

The Semenov family in Ryazan’ rose to prominence at the end of the eighteenth century, after Petr Petrovich’s grandfather married his neighbor Maria Petrovna Bunina (sister of the poet Anna Petrovna Bunina, “the Russian Sappho”) and settled at her family’s estate at Urusovo, 140 kilometers south of Ryazan. On Petr Petrovich’s life and career, see I. V. Kozlov and A. V. Kozlova, *Petr Petrovich Semenov-Tian-Shanskii. 1827-1914* (Moscow: Nauka, 1991); and Bruce Lincoln, *Petr Petrovich Semenov-Tian-Shanskii. The Life of a Russian Geographer* (Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1980).

department of the Russian Geographical Society. While Dmitrii Petrovich's work kept them based in Petersburg, the family spent considerable time at Gremiachka, Petr Petrovich's estate in the Ryazan governorate, especially during the summer. It was at Gremiachka that Semenov first came face-to-face with the Russian peasantry, and it was there that he would later choose to build his life among them.⁸

Semenov was educated at the Katharinenschule, affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. Catherine on Vasilyevsky Island. It was there, as a teenage gymnasium student, that he made his first concerted effort to shape his life in opposition to the expectations of others:

With all my soul's power I suddenly sensed that all that I was being prepared for by the people around me, my parents and tutors, what they taught and what they themselves lived, this was no longer what a person was called to, and was altogether not the truth.

And the first resolution of my will, not wishing to be in discord with my internal sense of truth and falsehood, was to quit the gymnasium... (251)

He felt schooling was rooted in hypocrisy—the adults in his life would disparage the gymnasium, with its “classicism and conventionalism,” yet they insisted on perpetuating the system. At first, he was unsure about what the alternative could be: “I did not really know what to do in place of studies in the gymnasium, or in general what to do in place of what everyone else was doing, but I found a way out for myself by imagining my vocation for music and for art in general” (251). For a year, he fought with his parents and the Katharinenschule administration over his desire to transfer to a conservatory, even apparently making an attempt at suicide when

⁸ Another regular summer resident at Gremiachka was Leonid's only paternal aunt, Ol'ga Petrovna (1863-1906), known for her work as an ethnographer of the local peasants. Her best-known work, compiled from her notes and published after her death, is O. P. Semenova, *Zhizn "Ivana": Ocherki iz byta krest'ian odnoi iz chernozemnykh gubernii* (St. Petersburg, 1914), reprinted by the Ryazan State Pedagogical University in 1995.

his parents refused.⁹ In the end, the family came to an agreement: Semenov would finish his gymnasium education, and in return, he would be free to take up music or whatever other pursuit he wanted. His interest in music would soon wane, but art would remain the means by which he attempted to find “a way out” of the conventional life for which he was being prepared.

In 1899, Semenov graduated from the Katharinenschule and matriculated at the natural sciences faculty of St. Petersburg University. In 1900 he transferred to the historical-philological faculty, where he joined a circle of student-poets and befriended his classmate Aleksandr Blok. Over the course of the next several years, he made a name for himself as a writer, with poetry, a play, and essays appearing in student publications and in the Merezhkovskys’ journal *The New Way* (*Novyi put’*). He was admired by his fellow students, according to Evgenii Pavlovich Ivanov, who notes in his reminiscences of Blok that Semenov “was popular at the university, not only as a poet but as a progressive fellow [*peredovoi tovarishch*], and he was even picked for the faculty student leadership.”¹⁰

According to Gippius, Semenov did not enjoy talking about his own work and did not seem to have many friends among the other young writers who worked with her for *The New Way*. When she asked him about his friends, he laughed and mentioned his grandfather, Petr Petrovich. The problem seemed to be his guarded nature, which could come off as aloofness:

Slender, well proportioned, very handsome (“even to the point of unpleasantness,” Poliksena Solov’eva said about him), with refined manners—at first he gave the

⁹ See Baevskii, “Zhiznestroitel’ i poet,” 448. In his memoir, Semenov describes this episode in clinical, if not somewhat evasive language: “I fell ill and at one point was near death, in part due to the fact that, having grown hopeless with my own power and ability to be true to the decision I had made, I ceased to see the sense in my own life” (251, my italics).

¹⁰ E. P. Ivanov, “Vospominaniia ob Aleksandre Bloke,” in Iu. Lotman, ed., *Blokovskii sbornik. Trudy nauchnoi konferentsii posviashchennoi zhizni i tvorchestva A. A. Bloka*, *Blokovskii sbornik I* (Tartu: Tartuskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1964), 376.

impression of a “white-lining” student [*student ‘belopodkladochnika’*], an effete son of nobility. Through further acquaintance, he turned out to be a self-possessed, moderately cheerful, intelligent conversation partner [...] He was reserved—a particularly reserved reserve [*skryten – osoboi skrytoi skrytnost’iu*] that did not stand out but was only unconsciously sensed from at times. It is likely because of this, because he never spoke “heart-to-heart,” that many people found him “not pleasant [*ne simpaticnyi*].”¹¹

Moreover, as well-regarded as Semenov may have been among his fellow students, he also had a reputation as something of a well-mannered bully.¹²

Andrei Belyi included such an impression in his 1930 memoir *Beginning of the Century* [*Nachalo veka*], a section of which is devoted to Semenov. The two poets met on the evening of Belyi’s father’s funeral in the spring of 1903, as Semenov was carrying out an errand on behalf of the Merezhkovskys. For the next two weeks, they took daily walks to and around Novodevichy monastery. While Belyi clearly found Semenov to be an interesting companion, he later recalled being irritated by Semenov’s “egotism, [his] desire to become my leader, the organizer of [my] political opinions.”¹³

As a student, Semenov was a monarchist who put his faith in an idealized harmony between the tsar and the people. He actively opposed the burgeoning socialist movement at the university, and he recalled hating radicals and revolutionaries “from the heights of my extensive reading of Kant and other philosophers” (257). The university years found him striving to find

¹¹ Gippius, “Poema zhizni,” 516.

¹² See Baevskii, “Zhiznestroitel’ i poet,” 451.

¹³ Belyi, *Nachalo veka*, 278-9. Semenov’s side of their subsequent correspondence, which gives insight into the nature of their conversations, has been published with analysis by A. V. Lavrov in his “Leonid Semenov - korrespondent Andreia Belogo,” in M. Bezrodnyi, ed., *Rossiiia i zapad. Sbornik stat’ei v chesti 70-letii K. M. Azadovskogo* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2011), 226-47.

his voice as a writer. As closely associated as Semenov was with the Merezhkovskys, his letters to Belyi show that he was skeptical of literary schools and camps—especially those of the so-called first generation of Symbolists.¹⁴ He sought to use his art as a means for transcending the prison of the individual ego. In his 1903 letters to Belyi, Semenov calls Bal'mont “an eternal prisoner [*vechnyi uznik*]” who has no way to exit “his sublime, mysterious, now bright, now gloomy castle [*tainstvennogo to svetlogo, to mrachnogo zamka*].” He cautions Belyi: “Don't lock yourself up in this castle of the ‘I’ [*v etom zamke ‘Ia’*], like Bal'mont, like Briusov, like Baudelaire and Verlaine before them, like until recently Merezhkovskii.”¹⁵

In the letters to Belyi, it is clear that the seemingly inescapable prison of the human ego—the “castle of the ‘I’”—was an important concept for Semenov even before his literal confinement made imprisonment one of his central images. In *A Sinner to Sinners*, he traces its origin to the period of youthful rebellion against the gymnasium:

In this struggle, my first more or less independent collision with other people based on the consciousness of my solitude [*na pochve soznaniia svoei odinokosti*] and on the absence of support I found from other people, arose yet another, deeper dissatisfaction with life and with myself. I saw myself locked in my own castle. I wanted to rush off to other people but could not. There was no path to get from one to another, and there were no keys to step out into freedom, into the open, and merge there in love with others.

(251–2)

For Semenov, as for many early modernists, the questions posed in Tyutchev's “Silentium!” seemed like a challenge:

¹⁴ See Lavrov, “Leonid Semenov,” 237.

¹⁵ Qtd. in A. V. Lavrov, “Leonid Semenov,” 232-3.

Как сердцу высказать себя?
 Другому как понять тебя?
 Поймет ли он, чем ты живешь?

[How can a heart expression find? / How should another know your mind? / Will he discern what quickens you?]¹⁶

The solution, he hoped, would be found in art, as aesthetic expression opened up an otherwise inaccessible world where true unity with others might be possible.

An early example of Semenov's interest in this idea is found in the poem "*Terza rima* [*Tertsiny*],"¹⁷ which appeared in a student publication in 1903. The poem, evoking not only Dante but also Pushkin's "The Prophet," opens with the lines

В темницу смрадную был брошен я судьбой,
 Мой ум был угнетен оковами сомненья,
 Душа была мрачна, сжималась грудь тоской.

И вдруг явилось мне чудесное виденье:
 Прекрасный некий муж предстал передо мной,
 С челом, отмеченным печатью вдохновенья. (60)

[Into a stinking dungeon I was thrown by fate, / My mind oppressed by fetters of doubt, / My soul dark, my heart strained by grief. // And suddenly there appeared to me a miraculous sight: / A certain man, sublimely beautiful, appeared before me / His brow marked by the seal of inspiration.]

The supernatural figure takes the poetic speaker by the hand, leading him out from dungeon to heaven "in the creative breath of the divine dream [*v dykhan'i tvorcheskom bozhestvennoi mechty*]." The indescribable wonders he beholds before the throne of God—elided by a line of suspension points—render the speaker blind and deaf. He returns to a world with which he can no longer interact, now more of a prisoner in himself than ever. Nonetheless, the last stanza makes clear his faith in another transcendent moment to come:

¹⁶ F. I. Tiutchev, "Silentium!" in *Polnoe Sobranie stikhotvorenii* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1987), 105. Translation by Vladimir Nabokov.

¹⁷ The title is ironic: as Baevskii notes, the *terza rima* structure is broken after the second stanza. This underscores the idea of an artistic emancipation from confinement.

Но мужа дивного целительной десницы
 Прикосновеньем вдруг мой окрылится дух --
 И, внемля, видит рай в стенах моей темницы. (61)

[But the restorative right hand of the miraculous man / With a touch will suddenly give wings to my spirit / And, harkening, it will see paradise in the walls of my dungeon.]

Semenov's burgeoning talent as a poet earned him some recognition by peers—especially fellow student-poets—culminating in the publication of his *Collected Poems* by the Sodruzhestvo circle in 1905. The verse included in the collection is marked by mythological undertones and an almost mystical relationship with divine femininity, reminiscent of his classmate Blok, whom he greatly admired.¹⁸ The collection, consisting of poems written between 1901 and 1905, received generally favorable reviews—including from Blok, who explicated the mythological structure underlying Semenov's work.¹⁹ An especially thorough example is found in the programmatic ballad “The Castle [*Zamok*].” Dated 1905, it is apparently a late addition to the collection:

Спешите, юные, спешите!
 Царевна в замке ледяном.
 Скорее двери отворите,
 царевна близко за окном.

Вошли и ищут в коридорах,
 к царевне в комнаты бегут,
 То слышат голос, слышат шорох;
 царевны нет! – ее зовут.

Бегут, блуждают в подземелье,
 царевна здесь! – Она в цепях.
 В пыли находят ожерелье...
 наверх бегут, их гонит страх.

Идут по залам, залы – пусты.
 Взирают, молча, в зеркала.

¹⁸ The influence of Blok was noted in a contemporary review of *Collected Verses*; see Baevskii, “Zhiznestroitel' i poet,” 469. It would later be remembered as a key feature of Semenov's verse by both Belyi and Gippius, among others: see Belyi, *Nachalo veka*, 278; Gippius, “Poema zhizni,” 515.

¹⁹ See Baevskii, “Zhiznestroitel' i poet,” 465. Blok's review appeared in *Voprosy zhizni*, no. 8 (1905).

На шум шагов, как стон стоустый,
им молвят своды: умерла!

Но им не верят, ищут, бродят.
Царевны нет! – года бегут...
И вот как тени в замке ходят.
Царевны старцы не найдут.

И слышен плач их: отворите,
одни мы в замке ледяном!
Спешите, старые, спешите,
царевна близко за окном! (35)

[Hurry, you young ones, hurry! / The princess is in the icy castle. / Quickly, open the doors, / the princess is near, beyond the window. // They came in and searched the corridors, / they ran to the rooms, toward the princess / Now they hear a voice, hear a rustle; / the princess is not here! they call her. // They run, wandering through the dungeon, / The princess is here!—She’s in chains. / In the dust they find her necklace... / they run back up, driven out by fear. // They go through the halls—empty. / They gaze, silently, in the mirrors. / In the clatter of footfalls, like the moaning of a hundred voices, / the vaulted ceiling tells them: she’s dead! // But they don’t believe, they roam, searching. / The princess is not here! — for years they run... / And lo, like shades in the castle they roam. / The elders will never find the princess. // And their cry is heard: open up, / we are alone in the icy castle! / Hurry, elders, hurry, / The princess is near, beyond the window!]

As Baevskii observes, Semenov’s fundamental myth, like Blok’s in *Verses about the Beautiful Lady*, can be described as “the endless mystical striving of one initiated in mystical secrets toward a mystical feminine essence, toward nature, toward the foundation of the world.” He convincingly argues that “The Castle” is Semenov’s myth of this transcendental quest, frequently realized in the image of a knight fighting against evil, “incarnated in considerable fullness and palpability.”²⁰ I would add that this is another early example of the theme of imprisonment in the poet’s work—the castle is indeed a prison for both the princess (at least to the extent that she even exists within the narrative) and her would-be rescuers, who search for her in oblivion, unable to distinguish reflection from reality. This image, encountered only occasionally in Semenov’s early writing, will become one of his most central in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday.

²⁰ Baevskii, “Zhiznestroitel’ i poet,” 465-6.

It was through politics that Semenov next attempted to find an exit from his castle-prison. Late in the morning on Sunday, January 9, 1905—Bloody Sunday—he stepped out into the streets of St. Petersburg, “drawn most of all, of course, by curiosity.”²¹ At the time he was still a monarchist, but had been nurturing doubts about the position of the common people in society:

Not long before, in the summer of 1904, in the village on my grandfather’s estate, I helped him distribute aid to the wives of reserve soldiers who had been called to war. I saw their sorrow and need and tears. All day I went around among them, writing down reports about them and listening to their stories, and this affair [...] left me with a sad sense of regret. (257)

According to Belyi, Semenov—still that time a monarchist—joined the crowd in order to witness the tsar receiving the people’s petition.²² Instead, he saw violence carried out by the state against innocents:

I wandered among the dazed workers and saw their blood and heard their cry for vengeance, and I was even nearly killed myself by the Police Bridge on Nevsky. Now my feelings of guilt before the people [...] seemed to me to be a way out of my situation. (257)

In many ways, Semenov’s experience of Bloody Sunday mirrored that of Russian society at large. A diverse group of urban intellectuals, university students, provincial liberals, and an ever-growing number of workers were shocked by the violence meted out to an already-suffering people at the hands of the tsar’s troops. They increasingly felt compelled to support the growing

²¹ For an overview of the march by striking workers led by Fr. Gapon and the subsequent massacre, see Ascher, *1905*, vol. 1, 74-91.

²² Belyi, *Nachalo veka*, 279.

number of striking workers.²³ Over the course of the next several months, outrage at the government's actions drew normally-quarreling opposition groups closer together and brought increased popular support to the revolutionary political parties—including, notably albeit briefly, from Fr. Gapon, the priest who had led the striking workers in their march. Gapon first aligned himself with the Social Democrats (SDs), the Marxist-oriented party that had already split internally into the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions, and then with the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), who sought an egalitarian, communal, and fairly anarchic future in which the peasant populations—already accustomed to communal living—would serve as a model for broader collectivization.²⁴

Like many within and outside of modernist circles, Semenov's transformation from aristocratic conservative to radical activist after Bloody Sunday was swift.²⁵ That spring, as *Collected Poems* reached the reading public, its author had already been roaming the streets of St. Petersburg for months, wearing a black pea-coat and carrying a revolver in his pocket, speaking of little else other than revolution, bombs, and assassinations.²⁶ Semenov would later recall his foray into revolution as a game, “an attempt somehow just to create variation in my

²³ See Ascher, *1905*, vol 1., 91–6.

²⁴ On the SD and SR parties, see Ascher, *1905*, vol. 1, 36–40; on Gapon's realignment see *idem.*, 98–9.

²⁵ For example, in a 1907 lecture-turned-essay, Belyi cast radical politics in a religious vein, arguing that “the Social-Democratic program is the only precise program that seeks to justify the moral strivings of humankind that give birth to socialism through the firm basis of economic science. It preaches numbers, prophesizes by statistics” (“Sotsial-demokratiiia i religiiia,” *Pereval* (1907, no. 5): 27. See also A. V. Lavrov, *Andrei Belyi v 1900-e gody* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 1995), especially chapter 4. On Symbolist responses to the events of January 1905 more generally, see Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism*, 264–9.

²⁶ See Baevskii, “Zhiznestroitel' i poet,” 477. Both Gippius and Belyi recall Semenov during this early revolutionary period in their 1930 memoirs, Belyi describing the revolver and Gippius the pea-coat. See Belyi, *Nachalo veka*, 279–28; Gippius, “Poema zhizni,” 518. However, Gippius's timeline is problematic: she remembers a visit from the radicalized poet following his release from prison, but this must be an error. Semenov's first arrest took place no earlier than December 1905, and Merezhkovskii and Gippius left for France several months before his release in May 1906. Belyi recalls a visit from an agitated Semenov while staying with the Merezhkovskys; as they were his hosts in in early 1905, it is likely that this is when Gippius encountered the transformed Semenov, well before his arrest and imprisonment.

boring and senseless stationary existence.” In this sense, he understood it to be similar to his earlier infatuations with music and then literature, and we find in his recollections of this period a familiar extended metaphor:

I was “the man with the mirror,” as I called myself once in a story I wrote—a person who is pursued everywhere by his mirror. In it, he sees everything that he does and is pleased by everything that he does, although he does vile things. He undertakes all that he does on account of this self-admiration, on account of the game, because he does not know anything aside from himself—as he wants himself to seem to others—and he does not know a way out from his castle, constrained by these mirrors...²⁷ (258)

He was unable to find the means to escape his prison through this particular variation of “the game,” based as it was on egoism and falsehood. However, this period as a revolutionary would, in the end, help him find the road he had so long imagined:

But there was a way out, and there was one who kept vigil over me, there was an Eternally Awake one above all of us, One who knows our needs before we ask Him, and who does not desire the death of sinners, even one like me... It was then that I met a person who was destined to bring me out of the darkness and onto the path to Light, to Him. That person was Sister Masha. (258)

Breaking Free: Activism and Imprisonment, 1905–1906

In June, Semenov attended a student-led demonstration against the war with Japan, in which the Russian navy had recently suffered a humiliating defeat at Tsushima. It was there, in the Pavlovsk Vauxhall near Tsarskoe Selo, that he first met Maria Dobroliubova. She had

²⁷ As Baevskii notes, this story has not survived.

recently returned to the capital from the front, where she volunteered as a nurse. They crossed paths several times, and by late summer, they began a correspondence that developed into a close friendship. Although they eventually joined different radical parties—she the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), he the Social Democrats (SDs)—they remained close, their friendship already having gone well beyond the revolutionary politics that brought them together. However, political activity would lead to their separation in late 1905: Semenov left for the Kursk governorate to promote the SD cause among the peasants, while Dobroliubova headed to the Tula governorate, where she was to serve as a teacher and famine relief worker.²⁸

Semenov got straight to work upon his arrival in the Kursk governorate, where, like in other agricultural regions, the poor harvest of 1905 and the general political unrest radiating from the cities—and the potential for political power provided by the formation of the State Duma—led to frequent disturbances among the peasants, which increased in intensity as the new year progressed.²⁹ “I plunged into the unfamiliar, snow-covered villages and settlements, organized gatherings, gave speeches and then hid on strangers’ farms and mills from the squadron of constables who were pursuing me,” he writes in *A Sinner to Sinners*.³⁰ However, he was unable to avoid the constables for long: he was arrested sometime between December 1905 and January 1906 as an “enemy of the people,” and spent the next five months in the prison in the town of Stary Oskol.

²⁸ See Semenov, *Greshnyi greshnym*, 262-7; Baevskii, “Zhiznestroitel’ i poet,” 476-7.

²⁹ On the peasant disturbances in 1906, see Ascher, *1905*, vol. 2, 111-128.

³⁰ Semenov, *Greshnyi greshnym*, 267. NB: Baevskii’s claim that Semenov went to the Kaluga governorate (“Zhiznestroitel’ i poet,” 477) must be a typographical error.

Initially, he dreamed of making an escape, but his plans fell through quickly. This first period of incarceration would turn out to be a time for Semenov to get to know himself, as well as the people he so longed to serve.

Finally, little by little, I began to look at myself and calm down. Being in prison turned out to be not nearly as bad as it had seemed to be earlier. At any rate, it was here for the first time that I received the freedom to be by myself and to come to terms with all that I had lived through and seen. (266)

Separated from those he loved and deprived of his physical freedom, Semenov began to envision an escape from the interior prison he had so long sensed.

Among his sources of comfort was the inscription Dobroliubova wrote in a notebook that she gave him as a parting gift: “Think about the present. Tomorrow will take care of itself. The concerns from each day are enough.”³¹ While at first he pined for her, he came to see (or so he recalls a decade later) that the light he sensed in her was also in others, that it was accessible even when she was not with him: “And this is already pure love, the consciousness of total unity of people with one another, without meetings, without searching for them, without needing them” (268). Semenov’s reflections led him to reconsider his relationship with his family, from whom he had grown estranged; in his heart, he now sensed the potential for true connections with them. He also turned his attention to his jailers, whom he came to truly pity:

[They] turned out altogether not to be the fearsome enemies that I had imagined earlier.

On the contrary, in them I saw first and foremost—truly saw—the whole terrible,

³¹ Qtd. in Semenov, *Greshnyi greshnym*, 268.

shameful life of the earth, life for the sake of an insignificant piece of bread, without any spark of joy, of Light.³² (268)

The most important relationships Semenov developed during this first period of incarceration were with his fellow inmates, who were mostly peasants arrested for participating in pogroms. As an aristocrat and political prisoner, he stood out among them. He enjoyed a level of respect from the prison administration that was unusual for an inmate, and his fellow prisoners took notice. The literate among them began to send him notes scribbled on cigarette paper, expressing their approval and then asking questions and favors. At first, these notes dealt with practical prison matters, but then turned to less immediate concerns: “Is it true that the earth is round and that it goes around the sun, and what are the moon and the stars? Is it true like they say that after a person dies their spirit leaves and there’s nothing left but mold, like cut grass?” (270). Endeavoring to find a common language with the peasants, Semenov—still a self-professed atheist—turned to the Bible, which he began reading and citing in his responses.

This was the first time that Semenov had close, prolonged, and free contact with peasants; circumstances were certainly different in early 1906 than they had been two years earlier, when he helped his grandfather deliver aid to the deployed soldiers’ families. This close contact with the inmates in Stary Oskol turned out to be a critical step towards breaking free of the prison of ego:

Having wound up under the same conditions as they were, finding myself locked up with them behind four walls and dependent just like they were on the enigmatic and hostile orders of the prison administration in whose hands lay our fate, for the first time in my

³² Here he includes a poem, “O, moi brat, moi zapugannyi brat...,” written during this period, in which the poetic speaker adopts the mask of an elder sibling comforting a frightened junior.

life I was able to immerse myself into the concerns and thoughts of other people, people around me, and in them I lost myself and forgot about my own. This was such a joyful, rapturous time, the time of my first resurrection. (269)

Semenov was freed in early May; invigorated by his new sense of connection with others, he immediately returned to St. Petersburg. There awaited him not only party work, but also his beloved Sister Masha, who had recently returned from the provinces herself. They spent the next month in close company, their bond growing increasingly strong—and, as Semenov recalls it, spiritual:

I could not feel my legs or the earth under me when I walked near her, and I was ready with every breath to anticipate her slightest thought and slightest movement, and at that time I was free, reaping the joy of being with her and seeing her, and she knew and sensed this, and I saw that she knew it and that she saw it in me. And just as we would meet, I was also ready at any minute to part with her, not seeking for myself anything from her—already we were not serving ourselves, but Someone Else, although I did not know Him... (272)

In June, they decided to return to their respective political activities in the provinces, and they left St. Petersburg together for Moscow. At Dobroliubova's suggestion, they lingered for several days in the suburb of Petrovsko-Razumovskoe before finally parting ways.

Upon arrival in Kursk, Semenov was given a counterfeit passport and returned to his work on behalf of the party. In *A Sinner to Sinners*, he recalls feeling a nagging sense of doubt in this work, based as it was in a lie (i.e., the passport). In July, against the advice of his fellow activists, he headed to the countryside to warn the peasants of the village Liubimovka about an impending military crackdown. On this trip, he visited the cottage of the Tolstoyan martyr

Evdokim Nikitich Drozhzhin, who had died in a penal battalion in 1894 after refusing conscription. After paying homage to Drozhzhin, Semenov spent a night in a lean-to in the forest. Shortly thereafter, as he made his way back to Kursk, he was arrested (but not before he was able to rid himself of the counterfeit passport) and taken to the merchant town of Rylsk, where he was held at the local police station.³³

“I was not scared by the arrest and even felt glad. At least now there was an end to the lie,” Semenov writes in *A Sinner to Sinners*. His cellmate at the police station was a “drunk, feeble-minded itinerant,” who explained that God had appeared in a dream and instructed him to take up the life of a wanderer. This figure made quite an impression on Semenov, who began thinking of making an escape, on foot if need be, to get to Sister Masha: “Already there was nothing [for me] to do in Kursk” (278). He took notice of the lax attitude of the guards—it was a holiday—and seized the opportunity. “The sky is so clear right now,” he said to the lone guard who accompanied him on a walk in the courtyard. When the guard looked up, Semenov ran through the open gates.

Hearing the police give chase behind him, with the midday summer sun bearing down, he immediately regretted his decision to escape:

If I could make it to the hills I would be safe; I would hide there and make my way on foot, like that wanderer, I would reach her. But then suddenly, in horror, everything

³³ Baevskii suggests that Semenov was returning to Kursk from Stary Oskol (“Leonid Semenov: Khronologicheskaiia kanva,” 557), but this is certainly an error, likely due to Semenov mentioning that he wanted to relive “the Stary Oskol days.” Drozhzhin lived in Tolsty Lug, a village 100 kilometers southwest of Kursk in the Sudzha district, while Stary Oskol is 150 kilometers southeast of Kursk. This explains why Semenov was taken to Rylsk, much closer to the Sudzha district than to Stary Oskol. Further evidence that this was the case is to be found in the archives of the Kursk gendarme division: Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv kurskoi oblasti (GAKO), f. 1642, op. 1, d. 347 (“Delo po obvinenii studenta Peterburgskogo universiteta L. D. Semenova v vedenii agitatsii sredi krest’ian s. Liubimovki za zakhvat pomeshchich’ikh zemel’ i unichtozhenie politsii,” containing material dated between July 17, 1906 and November 13, 1912). The village of Liubimovka, mentioned in the opis’, is located just across the Snagost’ River from Tolsty Lug.

froze: and then what? Once again I did not know—I knew nothing. What purpose would I have to be with her? What would I bring to her? (278)

Lacking adequate cover and losing his motivation, Semenov hid in a ditch, but soon gave up and made himself visible. “You say you are for the people, yet you pulled the rug out from under a policeman [*gorodovogo podvel*]!” exclaimed the guard from whom ran, “I’ll kill you. I won’t leave a dry spot. I’ll squash you like a fly” (279).

The policemen took Semenov back to the station, where they beat him severely, kicking him and spitting in his face. He was thrown into a cramped, fetid cell, where he spent a terrifying night only half-conscious, questioning everything: “Did they really beat me, beat this body—and what is this I? What do I need? Neither the revolution, nor to run off to Sister Masha. After all, I had rejected all of that myself—there in the ditch when I gave myself up to the policeman.” The only comforting thought was kenosis: “To become lowly, unknown, to reject everything, to take it all off, to kiss everyone’s feet and to cry, and always cry as I am crying now. This is sweet” (280).

Semenov was later transferred to the prison in Rylsk and held in close custody due to the escape attempt. The crisis that began in the police cell continued there. He lost track of time and the border between dreams and reality. He vacillated between the feeling of kenotic freedom and resentment:

Sometimes I prayed, calling out to someone, to the Unknown, to Sister Masha, stretching out my hands and crying on my knees in the corner about myself, about everyone.

Sometimes revolutionary feelings of fighting and protest would suddenly rise up in me, the desire to escape, to fight to the end. [...] Then suddenly everything fell away. I grasped at the Gospel. Become a pauper of the earth. Blessed are the poor in spirit. I am

gentle and humble in heart [*ia krotok i smiren serdtsem*]. Take up my yoke upon you, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light [*voz'mite igo Moe na sebia, ibo igo Moe blago i bremiia Moe legko*].³⁴ (281)

He submitted a formal complaint concerning the beating while in Rylsk. The complaint was taken up by the prosecutor, but Semenov soon asked for it to be withdrawn. Instead, he tried to make a personal appeal to the police supervisor who had been the first to strike him. Encountering the latter in the prison yard, Semenov asked him to admit that the beating had taken place. He was ignored. As he returned to his cell, a guard taunted him: “The tsar ordered us to beat people like you!” In response, Semenov uttered a string of profanity. For this—what he would later call his “final revolutionary act”—he was charged with *lèse-majesté*, carrying a potential sentence of twelve years of hard labor in addition to the seven years of administrative exile in Siberia to which he had already been sentenced.³⁵

In August, as Semenov awaited trial, Dobroliubova visited him in Rylsk. This was a significant detour for her: she was returning to St. Petersburg from the Tula governorate, where it was no longer tenable for her to stay. Although she had been given prior approval for three visits, they were permitted only two, for half an hour each day. They talked of revolutionary matters, but Semenov was increasingly uninterested in that endeavor. Moreover, he noticed that something was wrong with Sister Masha:

I could tell how much her composure was costing her [...] The whole time during our visits she held my hand in hers—and I could tell that only here and now was she calm,

³⁴ Semenov again uses phrases from Matthew 11:28-29. See note 3 in this chapter.

³⁵ Semenov, *Greshnyi greshnym*, 280. The twelve-year figure comes from Semenov himself. Elsewhere in the text, he refers to three charges, although he does not specify what the other two were—the answer is likely to be found in GAKO, f. 1642, op. 1, d. 347 (see note 33 in this chapter). Article 103 of the 1903 criminal code prescribes for *lèse-majesté* a maximum sentence of eight years, so it seems likely that twelve years includes the other charges, if it is not a simple lapse in memory. See *Novoe ugovnoe ulozhenie* (St. Petersburg, 1903), 44.

perhaps only for my sake, so as not to worry me, just as I was [calm] for her sake. But elsewhere she was probably terribly agitated... I could already sense in her some sort of change. (282)

On the third day, she gave him flowers and some parting words through the prison gate. It was the last time they would see each other.

Semenov wrote Dobroliubova several letters in the late summer of 1906. Hoping to bolster her spirits, he discussed his desire to leave everything behind, like her older brother had: “It had been so good for me to be free, in the countryside eating thin gruel, among the forests and the rye, that maybe this was the path: to leave behind all cares, all education [*vsiiu obrazovannost’*]” (282). Dobroliubova’s response was brief: “I cannot—I am not able—to talk and to write... But I still walk with you and talk, talk... Write, write to me, for your letters always make me happy. Write about yourself.”³⁶ Their correspondence tapered off shortly thereafter. By the early fall, Semenov had convinced himself that Sister Masha was dead, spurred on by a dream in which he witnessed her marriage to another man.

It turned out that she had also been arrested and jailed.³⁷ “Dear L. D., I want to be at liberty, to be free, you and I would both be able to take a breath in freedom together [*nam by oboim s vami vmeste svobodoi dokhnut’*],” she wrote in a note that he received sometime in September.³⁸ Upon her release in October, she returned to St. Petersburg and resumed her correspondence with Semenov again. He grew increasingly alarmed by the tenor of her letters,

³⁶ Qtd. in Semenov, *Stikhotvoreniia. Proza*, 283.

³⁷ See K. M. Azadovskii, “Aleksandr Blok i Mariia Dobroliubova,” in *Al. Blok i russkaia revoliutsiia*, ed. Z. G. Mints, 32.

³⁸ Qtd. in Semenov, *Stikhotvoreniia. Proza*, 284.

which he felt were full of despair, suffering, and fear. He dreamed of making another escape, in order to rescue Sister Masha from her misery and live together with her in freedom.

In November 1906, Semenov was transferred to Kursk for trial. The outcome was far more positive than he anticipated: a suspended month-long sentence for *lèse-majesté* and an acquittal on the other two charges. He was nonetheless returned to the prison in Rylsk, as he still faced the six-year sentence of administrative exile in the Tomsk governorate. He wrote to his family and asked for intervention in that matter, all the while continuing to plan an escape if need be. On December 12, he was summoned to the prison office and informed that he was to be released. He arrived in Kursk that evening, planning to spend several days there before heading back to St. Petersburg. However, he soon found out that night from his hosts that Mariia Dobroliubova had died.³⁹ He quickly returned to the capital, arriving the day after her funeral.

In the days that followed, Semenov visited with Dobroliubova's friends and family. He went to her apartment and was astounded by how he still felt her presence. He saw her every time he closed his eyes, but recognized that this was just an image, a memory, something other than Sister Masha herself. He likewise came to see that her earthly, fleshly existence was also not actually her: "After all, it was not her flesh that I loved, and when we saw each other in the flesh, was it really with her flesh that I spoke?" (293). Sister Masha's true being, he felt, was her love. Drawing on Solov'ev and Tolstoy, he came to see this love as an essence existing before and after her physical life on earth:

Sister Masha, already not living in the flesh, was now with me everywhere, not her flesh and not her image in my memory, but she herself. Her essence came to me in life and

³⁹ Writing sometime during or after 1914, Semenov says that he initially chose not to hurry back to St. Petersburg (286). While this may be true, it is not the sense he gave E. P. Ivanov in conversation in December 1906: "If I had come back earlier, she would not have died! But they held me because of my family. They delayed. The court would have let me go long ago" (qtd. in E. P. Ivanov, "Zapisi ob Aleksandre Bloke," 415).

appeared in my memory in the guise [*kak oblik*] under which she lived on the earth, and she filled my entire being, just as she had when we saw one another in the flesh, filled it with love and joy and the desire to live in love and union with everyone. (293)⁴⁰

In the months following Dobroliubova's death, Semenov attempted to continue with his life as it had been before his incarceration. He attended literary events and began publishing new poetry in the inaugural issues of *Way of Labor* (*Trudovoi put'*).

“Your brother Leonid”: Tolstoy, Semenov, and the Dobroliubovs, 1907–1910

The year 1907 also marked the beginning of Semenov's three-year relationship with Lev Tolstoy. Semenov first visited Iasnaia Poliana on June 22. This initial meeting between the twenty-six year old Semenov and seventy-nine year old Tolstoy escaped the attention of Dushan Makovitskii, Tolstoy's personal physician and the keeper of the estate diary. Tolstoy himself noted the visit in his notebook, remarking only that Semenov was “friend of Dobroliubov.”⁴¹ Writing nearly a decade later in *A Sinner to Sinners*, Semenov recalls how he arrived at Iasnaia Polyana in order to confess his sinfulness to Tolstoy, hoping to find in him a fellow child of God. It was to be the inaugural step of his new spiritual path: “I had not been ready for this when I was with sister Masha [...] the year before, but now I sat for the first time in life purified and washed clean, rejoicing in the [baptismal] font [*ochishchennyi i omytyi, raduias' kupeli*]⁴² (296). He

⁴⁰ Semenov frames this conception of love with quotations from Solov'ev's poem “Poor friend, your path has wearied you... [Bednyi drug, istomil tebia put'...]” and Tolstoy's “Recollections of Childhood” (“Vospominaniia detstva”). Baevskii suggests that he was likely quoting Solov'ev from memory, noting that the punctuation differs from the published poem. I would add that the same is true for the Tolstoy quotation, which has altered punctuation and a minor change in word order. This may be due to quoting from memory or transcription, or it may reflect the pattern of deliberately inexact quotation typical of Dobroliubov's writing, emphasizing the content of the message over its external form (see note 3 in this chapter).

⁴¹ Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 56:90.

⁴² A similar—although more romanticized—account of this meeting is relayed by Semenov's close friend A. V. Rumanov: see V. S. Baevskii, “Zhiznestroitel' i poet,” 486-7.

waited outside the house, hoping to catch the elder writer on the way to his morning constitutional. When Tolstoy came outside and asked what he wanted, however, Semenov floundered and was only able to utter, “I am a revolutionary” (296). This was perhaps not the best way to approach spiritual communion with Tolstoy, who offered only a reproach and turned to walk away. Semenov tried to explain himself but was overcome by tears. He describes how, without recourse to words, Tolstoy then “understood everything,” and the two were united in the joy of mutual recognition before God: “Is there a joy greater than that felt by a person seeking God, upon seeing another making a way to Him, like a lamb lost and then found? And this was the joy I gave to him as a gift that day” (297).

Semenov’s first letter to Tolstoy is dated the following day. He began by acknowledging the awkward nature of their meeting, offering an apology—not for introducing himself a revolutionary, but for failing to explain: “As I rode in the train car, I suddenly realized how much pride there can be in humility, that is, in how—afraid of disturbing you—I did not stay longer and did not explain myself fully.” He defended the revolutionaries (who include Sister Masha, after all), having seen among them a true, selfless love for humanity, albeit love “dressed in the wrong garments of thoughts, theories, and words.”⁴³ Continuing in this vein, Semenov identified the mediation of human reason as the chief obstacle in the true expression of love: “I think that for now we need to set aside any arguments about reason, that is, even those that you take for granted, and instead occupy ourselves with the cultivation of the unmediated feeling of love and of the inner voice (of sincerity).” In this quest, he tells Tolstoy, “the example of Sasha Dobroliubov for me is a true consolation” (218).

⁴³ As discussed in the previous chapter, the “word as clothing” is a central theme in Dobroliubov’s *Iz knigi nevidimoi*.

This is Semenov's earliest recorded mention of Dobroliubov, who must have been a significant presence in his conversation with Tolstoy at Iasnaia Poliana. Semenov's words indicate a familiarity with the criticisms of Tolstoy and Tolstoyanism in *From the Invisible Book*, where Dobroliubov faulted Tolstoy with a reliance on human reason to the exclusion of mystical experience, seeking freedom for the sake of reason rather than for spirit:

But some search for freedom not for the Spirit of God, not even for the human spirit, but only for one of its tools—for reason. But this tool is lower than even our intuition [sozertsanie], like a spade is weaker than a pickaxe [kak lopata slabee kir'gi] [...] Yet spirit is even greater than intuition.⁴⁴

Especially notable is Semenov's use of "garments"; it was in a section of his book addressed to Tolstoy and his followers that Dobroliubov wrote:

And I saw the corruptible clothing of the spirit. Why do you not begin to weave an immortal garment? Humanity, your first clothing is the flesh, all the visible world. [...] Your other clothing is reason. They do not know that there is a higher reason of love. Their dry thoughts are like dead stones.⁴⁵

Four days later, Semenov sent Tolstoy a second letter, briefer and more conciliatory in tone. This follow-up letter reaffirms that Dobroliubov had been central to their conversation at Iasnaia Poliana. Semenov wrote that he has decided not to visit Dobroliubov and was therefore unable to fulfill Tolstoy's request. Moreover, he expressed reservations about drawing too near to Dobroliubov at the beginning of his own spiritual journey. This was in response to something Tolstoy had said during their visit:

⁴⁴ Dobroliubov, *Iz knigi nevidimoi*, 157. *Kir'ga* is a dialectal variant of the standard *kirka* (pickaxe).

⁴⁵ Dobroliubov, *Iz knigi nevidimoi*, 183-4.

On the road I thought much about your words and decided that next to him [Dobroliubov] it would be easy to grow haughty, as he is already too holy and high, whereas I want to take small steps at first to strengthen and test myself. I have played enough in my life—because our entire life, that of the educated and wealthy classes, even when they go “to the people,” is often a game against emptiness [*ot pustoty*], a way to somehow fill in one’s emptiness—and after all, such a small path towards true life has opened up for me, and I am afraid to let it cloud over. (219)

He closed by noting that he gave their discussion of the revolutionaries further thought, and was now more in agreement with Tolstoy than he had been earlier (i.e., less than a week prior).

In his response, Tolstoy invited Semenov to think of him as a loving elder brother and encouraged him to stay on the path—but counseled him not to despair should he falter or fail to sense progress:

[This path] is the only true one [...] However, I fear for you with your complicated past, this desire to see the same obvious and quickly ripening fruits of one’s efforts that we can see in worldly affairs. Spiritual fruits slowly but unceasingly mature and give a quiet joy entirely unlike anything worldly. [...] It is unlikely that you will maintain this position that you have chosen. But do not despair if you do not maintain it. This position is too sharply opposed to the habits of your past.⁴⁶

To this, Semenov replied that he was guided by the “commandment” given to him by Maria Dobroliubova: “Think about the present, do not worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will take care of itself.” The question of the meaning of life consumed him like never before,

⁴⁶ Tolstoy to Semenov, Iasnaia Poliana, July 7, 1907, in Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 77:153.

appearing before me in all its duality and unified wholeness, that is, as both *personal* (narrow – mine) and universal—but *not separately*, as before, when one part of it was turned into philosophy—that is, into arguments or games of understanding and logic, and the other [part] not into life, but into an *accommodation* for life [*ne v zhizn', a v prisposoblenie k zhizni*]—that is, not into the creation of life [*ne v tvorchestvo zhizni*], but the use of it such as it would turn up in ready-made and often unwholesome (as it was understood) material and social conditions. How everything has changed. (222–3)

It is evident from this first exchange that by the middle of 1907, both Dobroliubov siblings were key influences on Semenov's new, spiritually-oriented path. Aleksandr's text echoed in what we can reconstruct of his conversations with Tolstoy, while the role he would ascribe to Sister Masha in *A Sinner to Sinners*, that of a saintly spiritual guide and intermediary, was clearly already taking form in his mind by the summer following her death. "When I don't have the strength, clarity, the mental acuity [*dushevnaia ostrota*] to turn to The One [*k Tomu Samomu*], then I remember and, as it were, turn to Masha, so that she would lead me to Him," he wrote (223).

In his response later that summer, Tolstoy expressed skepticism about Semenov's "mystical relationship" with the deceased Dobroliubova. He encouraged the young writer-turned-seeker to direct his efforts instead towards "the consciousness of unity with everything, with God," in which "the meaningfulness of everything personal must disappear—both one's own personality, as well as any other—living or dead." His closing evidences the fondness he felt towards Semenov: "I have come to love you more than I want to love any person."⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Tolstoi to Semenov, Iasnaia Poliana, August 8, 1907, in Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 77:175.

Tolstoy's fondness for Semenov clearly extended beyond their correspondence. As Makovitskii's diary shows, Semenov was still a topic of conversation at Iasnaia Poliana for several days after visiting in late September, on his way to Petersburg: in conversation with the painter Ilya Repin, Tolstoy remarked that Semenov began as a "decadent" but had become "more than an intelligent person—a Christian."⁴⁸ Tolstoy had entrusted Semenov with a menial task to carry out in the capital involving a blind peasant. The latter's handling of the matter seemed to further ingratiate him with the elder writer: "I consider him a very serious and sincere person," Tolstoy wrote to friend of the Semenov family several days after the task was completed.⁴⁹

Semenov spent the fall and winter of 1907–8 in St. Petersburg, where he had his first apparent run-in with the authorities since his release from imprisonment the previous December. As he explained to Tolstoy in an end-of-the-year letter, at issue was his objection to military service and particularly his refusal to submit to the requirements for formally declaring that objection:

Having received the answer [from the military office] that I was required to give written notice of my refusal, I decided not to do it. I reasoned in my soul that I do not have to crawl and seek out suffering for an idea, in these matters it is better to trust in fate, in the flow of events and the will of God which is hidden in them. My issue is my own, in my soul, and it cannot concern regiments and notices and bureaucratic paperwork [*deloproizvodstvo*] of that kind. If they demand me, I will declare all that I think and how I believe. (225)

⁴⁸ Makovitskii, *U Tolstogo*, 514-6. Baevskii and Romanova note the impact of this visit as well.

⁴⁹ Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* 77:214.

His expired passport had been revoked by the police, and “according to their laws [*po svoim zakonom*]” he could not be issued a new one until the problem with the military office was resolved. Semenov had told officials that he “did not need a passport, let the person who needs the passport worry about it.” His refusal to participate in the bureaucratic system, he told Tolstoy, left him in administrative limbo: his status with the military office “now depends on when they will begin to inquire why I am living without a passport” (225).

Semenov was more interested in finding a new way to structure his life in accordance with his newfound spirituality than he was in the status of his official documents, as his letters to Tolstoy show:

It is time to exchange life *permanently* for a new one—and as regards my relations and friends, those who love me, I have already done everything to prepare them for this step, these past months here in Petersburg [...] I put an end to my literary, revolutionary, and other connections, I was able to see almost everyone and to talk with everyone peacefully and with love. At that time, I was writing a book for my friends in which I thought to say to them that which I could not say in words—I read a lot, and strongly fortified myself in [this] whole new worldview, despite the frequent struggle, despite many doubts and torments. But therein lies the question. The issue, of course, is not only in the new internal direction of life, but also in the external, because new content demands new forms. (226)

He faced a crossroads and sought the elder writer’s advice: Should he live in his family’s village Gremiachka, where he had spent the previous summer and was already known by the inhabitants? Should he stay with a relatively rich peasant friend or with a poor widowed mother? Should he bother living in a communal setting, like Dobroliubov? In response, Tolstoy advised

him not to worry about the external, but rather to “use all of your strength on the internal. Seek the kingdom of God and his truth, and the rest will be added, i.e., life will come together as it needs to be in accordance with the internal effort.”⁵⁰

In March 1908, Semenov wrote to say that his earlier doubts had evaporated. He assured Tolstoy that he was striving to discern God’s will not through the “external argumentation about classes, about socialism, about the course of history or even about the historical course of religious movements in Russia,” but rather through an internal sense of “culpability for educated society and for all that it does.” Living in the capital among that society, he found it challenging to perceive the consciousness of God’s will: “there is no spiritual world for me here.” Moreover, he wrote that he feared falling into the trap of “religious fantasies and argumentation in place of unmediated knowledge and striving towards God and towards love,” which often precede the downfall of the spiritually-minded members of the intelligentsia. At the heart of problem was a lack of suitable labor: “In a word, it’s simply horrifying how the members of the intelligentsia do not notice that nearly all their spiritual agonies, deficiencies and errors come precisely from the violation of this first commandment of the Lord—work by the sweat of your face!” (229).⁵¹

The solution he chose was to head to Gremiachka, where the simple life he sought “already is, always was and will be.” He decided to wait until spring, so as not to alarm anyone in his life with his decision. It would be easier, he reasoned, to take up the path discreetly when

⁵⁰ Tolstoy to Semenov, Iasnaia Poliana, January 2, 1908, in Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 78:10. Tolstoy’s advice is a paraphrase of Matthew 6:33, “But strive first for the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well [*Ishchite zhe prezhde Tsarstva Bozhiia i pravdy Ego, i eto vse prilozhitsia vam*].” This verse draws to a close the section of the Sermon on the Mount dealing with reliance on Providence, which served as the source for a number of Dobroliubov’s central motifs in *From the Invisible Book*. See the discussion below and in Chapter Two.

⁵¹ The “first commandment” is a Dobroliubov-style corruption of Genesis 3:19, “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread [*v pote litsa tvoego budesh’ est’ khleb*]” and reflects the shared Tolstoyan-Dobroliubovian emphasis on manual labor as a prerequisite for the spiritual path

everyone began heading to their country homes. In the meantime, he continued work on his book. He told Tolstoy that he had yet to decide whether to publish the writing. He confessed that the work was “very imperfect,” and that he found it difficult to write in a way that the elder writer would approve of:

Different words, different images and turns of phrase break loose—and I always write in great conflict with language [*pishu vseгда s bol'shoiu bor'boiu s iazykom*]*—*but I think that thus it might be of use to someone. Just as there are people who write in Greek, in Chinese, so are there people who are accustomed to thinking with my turns of phrase and imagery, and to whom, for example, your language is foreign and not understood. (230)

Echoing Dobroliubov in *From the Invisible Book*, Semenov expressed hope that his writing might reach those still lost in the “decadent-political” wilderness. Using the language of the literary society he sought to leave behind, his book might show others a way out onto the “bright road” that he, Tolstoy, and others followed. In closing his March letter, Semenov responded directly to Tolstoy’s advice:

I think that changing the conditions of life in order to find easier ones is misguided, of course, but when the change is the consequence of and the bidding of the internal spirit of love, without thought of the external, then this is the will of God. When I did not know you, I would sometimes judge you in my thoughts (as do many members of the intelligentsia) for the fact that you continued to live in your previous conditions. [...]

Reflecting after my meeting with you, [...] I was absolutely convinced that God gives to each a particular path and it is difficult for us human beings to make judgements about this, and that it does not follow to imitate one another in external forms and deeds. (231)

In April Semenov visited Tolstoy at Iasnaia Poliana for the second time, as he made his way to Gremiachka on foot. His four-day stay received considerable attention from Makovitskii, who recorded several conversations between the two writers on capital punishment, the abolition of private property, the spiritual development of children.⁵² Tolstoy seemed particularly interested in Semenov's connection with Dobroliubov, bringing up the author of *From the Invisible Book* at least twice during the visit. While playing chess after dinner on the second night of his stay, in response to Tolstoy's query, Semenov told Dobroliubov's "most fascinating" story "with rapture and without any superfluous words." They then spoke in private about the differences between Dobroliubov and Tolstoy himself. Makovitskii recalled the explanation Semenov gave him personally: "He, Leonid Dmitrievich, considers Dobroliubov to be more clear-sighted, more self-disciplined [...], more gone from the world [*bol'she ushedshim ot mira*] than L[ev] N[ikolaevich]. He simply holds Dobroliubov higher."⁵³ On the third night, Tolstoy asked Semenov to read aloud a sketch he had written in 1865, based on a dream in which "the Russian people are fated to free the world from property." He asked that Semenov share the dream with Dobroliubov. They two then spoke again in private; Makovitskii again noted that the topic of conversation was Dobroliubov—in particular, his advice to Tolstoy to abandon writing and to leave his aristocratic life behind.⁵⁴ Tolstoy reportedly told Semenov that the advice was "severe, but what is needed is compassion": he understood it, but his age and familial obligations made it impossible.⁵⁵

⁵² See Makovitskii, *U Tolstogo*, vol. 3, 60-3.

⁵³ Makovitskii, 60.

⁵⁴ Makovitskii *U Tolstogo*, vol. 3, 60, 62. "Everything speaks to me about him," Makovitskii writes as an aside when Dobroliubov's name is brought up again on the third night of Semenov's visit.

⁵⁵ Makovitskii, 63. Tolstoy had received similar advice, which Makovitskii attributes ultimately to Dobroliubov, from Mitrofan Semenovich Dudchenko in a late March letter; see Tolstoy to Dudchenko in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 78:114-5.

In a letter written from Gremiachka several weeks later, Semenov acknowledged Tolstoy's immense burden as a public religious dissenter:

People are still in large part stagnating in idolatry, they relate to Christ, and even to each person and to you yourself idolatrously. God commissioned you to fight this idolatry, and it seems that for the first time from the heights of earthly glory, such that your voice was heard in all the ends of the earth, we heard a discussion about a christianity in which Christ is not called Lord, at least not in the sense that He has been up to now, and a pure and unmediated learning about God was proclaimed. (232)

He reasoned that if God were to lead the elder writer to take the step “which several friends close to you in faith await”—referring presumably to Dobroliubov and Mitrofan Dudchenko—the bright light of his public life might grow too bright, blinding others. Semenov saw that Tolstoy suffered in his “prison [*temnitsa*]” not for himself but for others, “for the sins of the world,” and trusted that this was in accordance with divine will (232). In response, Tolstoy scolded Semenov for greatly exaggerating the former's importance—in fact, he wrote, he awaited the day when he would be exposed like Andersen's naked emperor, “and everyone will understand that they saw in me good that was not there, and did not see the bad that poking them in the eye [*que crève les yeux*].”⁵⁶

At the time of Semenov's visit in April, Tolstoy had been researching the rapid expansion of the death penalty under Stolypin, gathering material for what would eventually become the article “I Cannot Be Silent,” (“*Ne mogu molchat*”). As Makovitskii notes, the death penalty was

⁵⁶ Tolstoy to Semenov, Iasnaia Poliana, May 10, 1908, in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* 78, 137. In his May 3 letter, Semenov brought up the question of livelihood: he felt that working as a day laborer in the village was the most appropriate means of earning a living, and he asked for Tolstoy's advice. In his reply, Tolstoy agreed about the worthiness of day labor, but de-emphasized the importance of the question, instead emphasizing Semenov's interior life: “I rejoice, greatly rejoice for the spiritual condition I can sense in your letter. I can only wish one thing, that you maintain yourself in it until death” (137).

the topic of discussion on the first night of Semenov's stay, with the young writer speaking "uninterruptedly, loudly, imposingly" for over an hour.⁵⁷ Later that month, Semenov sent Tolstoy some writing, fragments of what would later become "On the Threshold of Inevitability," including a story about a group of five convicts awaiting execution. Tolstoy praised the latter part and recommended that Semenov publish it.⁵⁸

This exchange took place more or less contemporaneously with the appearance of Leonid Andreev's *The Seven Who Were Hanged* (*Rasskaz o semi peveshennikh*). Dedicated to Tolstoy, Andreev's novella is a psychological exploration of the aftermath of an assassination attempt, told first from the perspective of the would-be victim, a government minister, and then from the points of view of the five would-be assassins as they face trial and execution. At the time of the story's publication, the use of military field courts to impose and carry out death sentences on civilians was reaching its peak. Nikolai Gusev recalled Tolstoy reading from the book and pronouncing it "dreadful [*otvratitel'no*]."⁵⁹ According to Makovitskii, Tolstoy declared that Semenov's writing about the death penalty was superior to Andreev's story and to his own 1906 novella about the execution of a revolutionary, "The Divine and the Human" ("Bozheskoe i chelovecheskoe").⁶⁰

For his part, Semenov seemed embarrassed by the attention, and worried that being involved in writing and publishing would lead him astray: "For a long time I was terribly vexed by your praise for my story and your mention [of it], passed along by someone in the paper. [...]"

⁵⁷ Makovitskii, *U Tolstogo*, vol. 3, 60.

⁵⁸ Tolstoi to Semenov, Iasnaia Poliana, May 10, 1908, in Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 80:138.

⁵⁹ N. N. Gusev, *Dva goda s L. N. Tolstym*, in *Dva goda s L. N. Tolstym. Iz Iasnoi Poliany v Cherdyn'. Otryvochnye vospominaniia. Lev Tolstoi – chelovek*, Seriiia literaturnykh pamiatnikov (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1973), 162.

⁶⁰ Makovitskii, *U Tolstogo*, vol. 3, 95–6.

Again the temptation *to write* is awakened,” he wrote to Tolstoy in early June (234).⁶¹ Tolstoy in turn apologized for leading the younger (ex-)writer into temptation, but nonetheless asked for permission to edit the piece extensively and arrange for it to be published; it was sent to the editors of *Herald of Europe (Vestnik Evropy)* at the end of the month, where it would appear as the short story “Penalty of Death” (“Smertnaia kazn”).⁶² In late July, Semenov wrote to say that talk of the forthcoming publication had reached his grandfather, who was convalescing at his estate that summer following a stroke. Semenov reported that in general it was difficult to interact with the ailing Pyotr Petrovich, although the latter turned out to be very interested in his grandson’s relationship with Tolstoy. Starting by discussing Tolstoy, grandfather and grandson then discussed the death penalty and endeavored to find common ground on the topic (236).

In mid-August, Semenov made his penultimate visit to Iasnaia Poliana. According to Makovitskii, he arrived “looking like a peasant”⁶³ and talking about sectarianism. His presence at times frustrated Sofia Andreevna’s attempts to safeguard her husband’s recovery from a blood clot in the leg and a bronchial infection: Semenov reportedly remarked that Tolstoy “always wanted to wind up in prison, and now he is in it, he cannot even get enough air and he is even chained to his bed [*prikovan k krovati*, i.e., bedridden].”⁶⁴ Over the course of the visit, Semenov and Tolstoy spoke frequently, discussing writing, sectarianism, and Nietzsche. Tolstoy continued to encourage Semenov to focus on his inner life, and he expressed concern about Semenov’s tendency to adopt extreme positions. Semenov departed after five days, intending to return

⁶¹ At the time, Semenov was working in a mine, in circumstances that seemed to overwhelm him.

⁶² The story appeared with an introductory letter from Tolstoy in *Vestnik Evropy*, no. 8 (1908): 599-612.

⁶³ Makovitskii, *U Tolstogo*, vol. 3, 168.

⁶⁴ See Makovitskii, 170.

several months later with Dobroliubov.⁶⁵ That meeting of the three men was not to take place—Semenov and Tolstoy would have no apparent contact for almost a year.

On June 3, 1909, Semenov sent a letter to Tolstoy from Syzran', on the banks of the Volga, 150 kilometers west of Samara. Addressing the elder writer informally for the first time—"Peace to you [*tebe*], brother Lev Nikolaevich"—he began by apologizing for the pieces that appeared in *Shipovnik*, which presumably included material about which Tolstoy had earlier expressed disapproval.⁶⁶ He stressed that he had not been involved in the publication, but he still felt responsible for its existence—which he referred to as a sin. He confessed that even writing letters was difficult—hence his nearly year-long silence: "Something old enters into me when I touch the pen. Indeed, there was so much falsehood in that for me in my previous life!" (238).

Semenov explained that he had indeed spent much of the past year with the Dobroliubovians in Samara, as well in Poltava and Kiev, where he carried out errands on behalf of several followers of Dobroliubov who were imprisoned for refusing military service. Having recently returned to Samara from Kiev, he met with Dobroliubov and then decided to return to the Riazan' governorate on foot: "God revealed a commandment to me not to take external means [*ne brat' naruzhnykh sredstv*] that I have not earned with my own hands, and I have no such [means] here." In his more-or-less native province, he hoped to make some amends—"for there I was a participant in so many of the sins of the slave-owning class"—and planned to ask for his inheritance in order to give it away to the needy. He asked Tolstoy to destroy the letter after reading it: "It is difficult for me when I find out that it is read not by you alone." He added that it was possible he might someday return to writing, "as a means of communication with

⁶⁵ Makovitskii, 172-3.

⁶⁶ See the discussion above of Semenov's March 3 letter and Tolstoy's involvement in the editing and publishing of the "Fragments" that would become "Penalty of Death" (see note 96 in this chapter).

educated society,” but that this would require a sophisticated “perception of the pure Will of God” he had yet to develop (238).

Given that the Semenov’s letter was not destroyed, it is possible that it was never actually read. In late October, Tolstoy noted in his diary that he had “found” a letter from Semenov and written a response; Makovitskii recalled that Tolstoy had been excited about this letter and read it out loud before destroying it in accordance with the author’s wishes.⁶⁷ In his reply, Tolstoy gave no indication of having had prior knowledge of Semenov’s whereabouts: “I often remembered you and could not find out from anyone where you were or what you [were doing].” He wished Semenov success in the quest he himself had been unable to carry out—“to free yourself from those criminal circumstances in which we find ourselves upon awakening”—and he professed his sincere love for the former poet: “I want to say that I love you with the particular love of the consciousness of unity in god, with that which unfortunately I can love only a few.”⁶⁸

It seems likely that the letter to which Tolstoy responded was sent as a prelude to Semenov’s next and final visit to Iasnaia Poliana. He arrived on October 27, dressed in peasant clothing complete with bast shoes, accompanied by a “spiritual brother,” a young peasant named Mikhail.⁶⁹ Baevskii and Romanova suggest that they came in response to Tolstoy’s letter of October 26, but this cannot be the case if Makovitskii was correct in his recollection that Semenov and his companion spent six days travelling by foot from Gremiachka.⁷⁰ On the first

⁶⁷ See Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 57:160; and Makovitskii, *U Tolstogo*, vol. 4, 88.

⁶⁸ Tolstoy to Semenov, Iasnaia Poliana, October 26, 1909, in Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 80:160.

⁶⁹ See Makovitskii, *U Tolstogo*, vol. 4, 88-9.

⁷⁰ Baevskii and Romanova, “Lev Tolstoy i Leonid Semenov (Po neopublikovannym materialam),” *Izvestia RAN. Ser. lit. i iaz.* 64, no. 5 (2004): 47. Likewise, Baevskii and Romanova’s speculation about a crisis in the relationship between the two men seems under-supported by the evidence they provide, namely that the June 3 letter went unanswered and undestroyed.

night of the visit, Tolstoy sat with Semenov and Mikhail for over an hour in their first-floor room, where they had eaten dinner (rather than in the second-floor hall with the family and other guests). Tolstoy felt both joy and fear for Semenov, who was intensely sincere but also lacking in “clarity” and “simplicity”: “I am glad for him and love him,” he wrote in his diary over the course of the visit, “He touches me with his serious religiosity. I sense that he prays nearly every minute.”⁷¹ Semenov remained a topic of conversation at Iasnaia Poliana after his departure on November 1: Sofia Andreevna predicted that he would stray from his path, while Tolstoy insisted that he would only grow stronger—although he voiced skepticism about Semenov’s focus on external forms: his insistence on calling everyone “brother,” using the informal “you,” and so on.⁷²

On November 15, Semenov sent Tolstoy a letter that gives some insight into the nature of their conversations two weeks earlier.⁷³ He began by explaining his tendency to withdraw when meeting with people, fearing that he will say something hasty or thoughtless, rather than “only that which flows out from pure love for them and from prayer to God” (239). The bulk of the letter is devoted to “all of that in which, in some measure, you and I part ways”: the communal-spiritual value of song, the mystical content of the scriptures, and writing as a means to communicate spiritual truth. The continued influence of Dobroliubov, his book, and his teaching are evident here.⁷⁴ If Semenov and Dobroliubov indeed had a falling-out earlier in 1909, as

⁷¹ Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 57:161, 163.

⁷² See Makovitskii, *U Tolstogo*, vol. 4, 92.

⁷³ This is possibly the same letter that Semenov was writing to Tolstoy “about what was unsaid” while still at Iasnaia Poliana (see Makovitskii, *U Tolstogo*, vol. 4, 91).

⁷⁴ See Chapter Two for my discussion of communal song, the scriptural tradition, and writing in Dobroliubov’s work.

Baevskii and Romanova maintain, it seems that conflict had yet to lead Semenov from the path.⁷⁵ Throughout the letter, Semenov made frequent use of an ambiguous “we,” which Baevskii and Romanova note is conspicuously counterposed to the singular, informal “you” he uses to address Tolstoy.⁷⁶ Semenov’s “we” includes the practitioners of communal song, those who find hidden meanings in holy books and those who endeavor to express the inexpressible.

In defense of communal singing, Semenov wrote that it was a means for carrying out the work that Tolstoy himself did engaged in through “the enumeration of thoughts”:

But thoughts, no matter how well laid out, are not remembered by heart, while that which comes together in the voice in song remains in the memory practically forever—and is this method of preserving them and calling them to mind [...] really worse than the bookish [method] (connected for that matter with slavery and the market) [?] (239)

He argued that these songs were parables, symbolic representations of “that which takes place in us, in people, and in God.” As linguistic creations they were superior to forms of artistic creation based on invention [*vydumka*], lies and deception, such as fictional stories. Here he explicitly included Tolstoy’s work:

I recall how torturous it was for me to explain to a certain peasant in prison about your novel *Resurrection*—that it is a true story and not a true story [*on – byl’ i ne byl’*]—and how much falsehood and cunning was needed to do it! He agonized over this, and everything lost meaning for him when he heard that there was no Nekhliudov.⁷⁷ (239)

He acknowledged Tolstoy’s concerns about the potential for communal singing to become ritualized, but maintained that the proper spiritual and material context was necessary for the

⁷⁵ See Baevskii and Romanova, “Lev Tolstoi i Leonid Semenov,” 41.

⁷⁶ Baevskii and Romanova, “Lev Tolstoi i Leonid Semenov,” 47.

⁷⁷ According to Makovitskii, Tolstoy would relate this story several weeks later (*U Tolstogo*, vol. 4, 122).

practice to be truly understood: “Much strictness with the self, humility, and most importantly simplicity are needed to become participants in this singing, not just connoisseurs [*tse niteli ami*] or listeners, in order to understand all that there is in it” (240).

Semenov admitted that there was much in the Bible that he did not understand. Only after changing the circumstances of his life to be more like those of Jesus, “when I began to fulfill his commandments,”⁷⁸ was the meaning of the scriptures revealed to him: “And it is not superstition in us when we consider the gospel story of the events occurring after Jesus’s execution to be almost entirely true and full of a deep, living meaning, albeit not external. But how to talk about this?” He asked Tolstoy to temper his criticism of the Bible, which he and his spiritual brethren considered “a living and beautiful book” (240).

Semenov mentioned that he might send some writing to Tolstoy, and in the meantime suggested that the elder writer read “Leaves.” He also wrote of wanting to give Tolstoy some of Dobroliubova’s letters and diaries, saying that one day it might be necessary for him—for “us,” again speaking in the first-person plural—to return to writing, and that he wanted Tolstoy’s opinion in case this occurred after Tolstoy was no longer on the earth. He explained his views on writing, stressing that he did not condemn Tolstoy’s (non-artistic) work, but clearly aligning himself with the author of *From the Invisible Book*:

But it seems we ourselves are searching for new, more precise words about That by which we live and by which we know you live. [We] also want to obtain through the printed word a closer association [*obshchenie*] with the people who will read—and at the same time, if [we are] going to write and print, not to repeat what has been already been

⁷⁸ See Chapter Two for my discussion of Dobroliubov’s use of the imagery of “fulfilling a commandment” in *From the Invisible Book*.

said by you and by others. And all of these desires are not some invention of ours, but [they] flow out from the deepest searching and dissatisfaction of the spirit in such words as those we read and hear. [We] want you to believe us in this, and that you should believe, for example, that the book of brother Aleksandr Dobroliubov is not some kind of invention, not homiletics [*krasnorechie*], but a living and *simple* book for those of us who live like him. (241)

Tolstoy was glad to hear from the younger writer: “How joyful and beneficial is association with such people,” he remarked in his diary upon receiving the latter’s “beautiful letter.”⁷⁹ According to Makovitskii, Tolstoy remarked that Semenov’s religion “was still not pure, genuine [...]; true religion is when there is no need for any supports.” He argued that such a pure religion was natural for someone his own age, someone who no longer cared about life or death. Still, Tolstoy refused to condemn Semenov’s way: “Maybe this (songs) are needed at this stage. Beautiful people! To each his own. Disunion with those you respect is frightful. Above all it is better to be silent.”⁸⁰ In his reply to Semenov, dated November 19, Tolstoy was hardly silent: while he would not condemn Semenov’s spiritual songs, he held that “the reading of the books of wise and holy people and conversations about what is read can be more advantageously swapped for or at least alternated with singing.” Moreover, he reiterated his misgivings about the possibility of communal singing becoming an empty ritual: “I would prefer the singing of happy, secular songs to the singing of verses.” He sharply disagreed with Semenov about the mystical meaning of scripture:

⁷⁹ Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 57:174.

⁸⁰ Makovitskii, *U Tolstogo*, 108.

You write that the things you extract from these books, from the places in those books not understood by the simple mind, give you the faith and strength to live as you live. Remember that the wonders of Brahminism, Buddhism, Mohammedanism, which are also explained metaphorically, give faith and strength to those who believe them.⁸¹

True religious teaching, Tolstoy maintained, was discernable by its accessibility. Not dependent on explanation or exegesis, it was recognized as truth by all who encounter it. He closed his response by asking Semenov to tell him where to find Dobroliubov's book (apparently forgetting that he already owned it) and encouraging him to share Dobroliubova's diaries.⁸²

Semenov sent his last long letter to Tolstoy on December 28, 1909.⁸³ He began by thanking Tolstoy for the books the latter had sent (and scolding him for the portraits that appeared in the front matter). He devoted much of the letter to explaining his recent conflict with Lev Tomilov (sometimes spelled Tonilov), also called Lev the Redhead (*Ryzhii*), a Tolstoyan extremist known for travelling barefoot from community to community.⁸⁴ Tomilov had recently come to Gremiachka with a companion; Semenov was not keen for them to stay: "Their arrival and being here led me to worry that they will bring in even greater confusion [here] in the minds of the people. And here everyone lives now in truly terrifying confusion" (244). At issue seems to have been Lev the Red's interpretation of the spiritual path:

⁸¹ Tolstoy to Semenov, Iasnaia Poliana, November 19, 1909, in Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 80:204.

⁸² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 80:204. See Makovitskii, *Iasnapolianskiye zapiski*, vol. 3, 90-92.

⁸³ Semenov sent Tolstoy a shorter letter about the philosopher Plotinus, together with some of Plotinus' writing, on December 1, to which Tolstoy replied on December 4. Plotinus is the source of a lengthy epigraph in Dobroliubov's final book (*Iz knigi nevidimoi*, 138).

⁸⁴ Tomilov is first mentioned by Tolstoy in his diary in August 1908, when he arrived from the Tolstoyan community in Tashkent. In an October 1908 conversation with Nikolai Gusev, Tolstoy compared him to both Dobroliubov and Francis of Assisi, saying that "only among the Russian people is there such a radical relationship to the state [...] People live completely disregarding the state, throwing away everything" (Makovitskii, *Iasnapolianskiye zapiski*, vol. 3, 226).

I see no truly Godly business in wandering around to work where possible or not work at all and then go hungry, to wind up in prison for living without a passport and to speak loud words there, to distribute books and your portraits (!) to the people wherever possible, etc. (244)

Although he regretted making Tomilov feel unwelcome, Semenov was resolute in his chosen way of life:

I so thank God, that he showed me a place here, for only here, living and working *in one place* have I begun to see how truly each of your willful deeds is connected with all the evil of this world and leads to uncountable harmful consequences, which you then atone for through great troubles. [...] There is no need to leave the world, but what is needed is to be in it and to be as if outside of it, that is not to notice it [...] to see all of your activity within you, in the perpetual seeking of God and the clearing of space within yourself for Him—and then even through you He will create all that He needs himself. (245)

Semenov then confessed that he was troubled by the books Tolstoy had sent (and for which he expressed gratitude in the opening of the letter): “I do not need your writings, and when I received them, I did not know what do to with them.”⁸⁵ He gave them to a local priest, he explained, who frequently talked about Tolstoy but did not actually know his writing. Although he was focused on Tolstoy’s literary output, Semenov expressed skepticism towards the printed word writ large: “And I simply think that not only books, but maybe literacy itself is not needed by everyone” (246). He returned to the topic of the Bible, and especially the writing of the

⁸⁵ This was the second set of books that Tolstoy had sent to Semenov, the first apparently having been lost in the mail. See Makovitskii, *Iasnaiapolianskie zapiski*, vol. 4, 122; and Tolstoy to Semenov, Iasnaia Poliana, December 4, 1909, in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* 80:228. If both parcels were eventually delivered, it might explain the feeling Semenov expresses in the letter of being inundated with Tolstoy’s writing: “I am embarrassed in a way [*menia kak-to smushchaet*] when I receive many of your books, not needing them at all myself” (246).

prophets, which he maintained was indispensable for communicating with the people: “there we find all that is needed [...] we find it, when with love and trust and without preconception we approach those people who are called there prophets and from whom Jesus himself studied.” Even so, books were only needed by those who had yet to come to understand the truth or by those who needed support while stumbling on the path. “True elevation of the spirit,” he wrote “is reached only through silence, through labor in silence, through the taming of the flesh—through fasting and vigils, silence in long periods of solitude—and silence among close brethren, when all are enkindled by a single feeling” (246).⁸⁶

As Baevskii and Romanova observe, the more polemical Semenov was in his letters, the more agreeable and gentler Tolstoy became in his responses: “I was very glad to receive your good, long letter, dear Leonid,” he wrote in one of his last letters of 1909. Tolstoy agreed with Semenov about the way in which his books were distributed (including the problematic portraits), but denied direct responsibility: “I don’t publish my books myself, and I send them [...] when questions are asked of me to which it seems my books give answers.”⁸⁷ He stated his agreement with Semenov on the scriptures, but stressed the existence of other wisdom writing, written before and after the Bible, that also expressed (and sometimes better expressed) what was true in the scriptures. Tolstoy’s letter would go unanswered, as Semenov would not write again until the spring of 1910.

Semenov’s final two letters to Tolstoy, written in the late spring and early summer of 1910, were considerably shorter than the majority of his earlier ones. In the letter postmarked

⁸⁶ Despite the overarching tone of the letter, in closing Semenov asked Tolstoy to send two books—a children’s book about Jesus and *The Life of Father Damien*—on behalf of a local boy who was terminally ill.

⁸⁷ Tolstoy to Semenov, December 31 (30), 1909, in Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 80:265.

May 11, he told Tolstoy that he had not heard the rumors of Dobroliubov's death (apparently passed along to him in a letter from Makovitskii), but that either way it did not matter:

I whole-heartedly await a meeting with him, even if not soon—and I don't know where. But I somehow do not have any desire to find out the truth about the end of his visible life. More truthfully, there is no space within my inner person for this concern. It is all unnecessary. In everything let the higher Will, not ours, be—and we will only search for it. (247–8)

In the final letter, sent on July 15, he explained why his letters were so infrequent and short. Again he returned to the difficulties presented by the written word:

Several times I have set out to write to you, but cannot: either I am defeated by soaring thoughts, wanting to say much of that which nonetheless cannot be said, or the words that are written seem stony and cold in comparison with that which led me to write them, and their cold even steals into my heart, and writing is difficult for me. (248)

In his last words to the elder writer, he told Tolstoy that he would never forget him, asking for his forgiveness and wishing him peace.

Tolstoy's responses to Semenov's final two letters demonstrate the spiritual closeness the two writers shared. In both letters, Tolstoy addresses Semenov in the Dobroliubovian style, informally. His last letter to Semenov, dated July 18, 1910, is particularly touching. "I was very glad, dear brother Leonid, to receive your letter," he wrote. "Although we are united by the same thing, that which alone strongly unites people, it is always a joy to receive more indirect confirmation."⁸⁸ He drew a diagram illustrating their spiritual connection, in which the "endless line leading towards God" unites them both: "Here is some silliness that came into my head just

⁸⁸ Tolstoy to Semenov, Iasnaia Poliana, July 18, 1910, in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 82:76.

now, writing to you. Maybe you will understand this nonsense,” he wrote.⁸⁹ Tolstoy’s last words to Semenov underscore the importance of Dobroliubov in their relationship: in a postscript, he asked for any news of the former poet.

“All a Game”: Semenov’s Post-Incarceration Writing, 1907–1909

Semenov continued to sporadically publish verse and prose works in the years immediately following his incarceration. The major themes that we saw emerge in his correspondence with Tolstoy reflect many of those that appear in his published writing during the same period, particularly the falseness of society, its institutions, and practices. Semenov’s turn toward social issues reflects broader trends among his modernist contemporaries in the wake of the revolution of 1905, as writers strove to find new words to understand the shifting fault lines of Russian culture. For instance, in his 1908 collection *Ashes (Pepel)*, Belyi presented a version of literary populism. As Pyman writes, contrasting Belyi’s populism with that of Nekrasov and the nineteenth-century visual artists known as the Itinerants (*Peredvizhiki*), at work in the collection “is an attempt to merge with the folk-element rather than to lament the sufferings of the people or to instruct their ignorance.”⁹⁰ For Semenov, issues of society and state were not merely pressing topics of the day: imprisonment alongside peasants and proletarian revolutionaries had brought the poet into closer communion with the masses than his actual revolutionary activity could have. His experience of the everyday, arbitrary violence of the autocratic system also served as the focal point of his attempt at religious expression. In this section, I elucidate the key themes of Semenov’s writing in the latter half of the 1900s: the hypocrisy of social institutions (including both Church and state), the unwitting complicity of

⁸⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 82:76.

⁹⁰ Pyman, *History of Russian Symbolism*, 255.

urbane elites in state-sanctioned violence, and the radical transformation inaugurated by his imprisonment and treatment at the hands of the authorities. The theme of imprisonment and its related motifs, in particular, serves as the most visible meeting place between Semenov's artistic output and Dobroliubovian ideas. Moreover, particularly in the poet's final published works, prison acts as the setting for Semenov's attempt at communicating his spiritual transformation to others.

The falseness of society emerges early in Semenov's post-prison writing, and is present in virtually all of the poems published from 1907 onward. In "The Rites [*Obednia*]," Semenov presents Orthodox clerics as the central figures in a nightmare of hypocrisy:

Совершали злое дело,
Убивали чье-то тело,
Выпивали чью-то кровь.
Страсти грезилась и муки,
Воздымались к небу руки,
Пели скорбно про любовь,
Так униженно просяще,
Заунывно и слезяще,
Точно вправду убивали
Там Того, кого назвали
Сыном Божиим они. (64)

[They carried out the evil deed, / Killing someone's body, / Drinking someone's blood. / They dreamed of passion and of torture, / Lifting up their hands to heaven, / They sang mournfully of love, / So humble their entreating, / Doleful and tearful, / Precisely, truly killing / The one there whom they called / The Son of God.]

The religious skepticism continues in the poem "Sleep, my dear little child" ("*Spi, moi rodimen'kii*"), in which the poet expresses doubt about those who ask God for earthly things—and perhaps about the very idea of divine providence, standing in stark contrast to Semenov's later attitudes.

In "The Mazurka," in which the speaker describes his participation a lively ball, Semenov extends his critical gaze towards society itself. The poem is made up of twenty-four lines of

trochaic tetrameter, emphasizing the lively, musical atmosphere of the ball.⁹¹ The opening sentence, describing the ball, spans sixteen lines. After its conclusion, the party-goers are faced with reality as they disperse. Their merriment has come at a cost.

Страшно, страшно: из паркета
Точно люди поднялись.
Были все они худые,
Лица в ранах гвоздяных,
Точно люди в зале злые
Каблуками били их. (65)

[Terrible, terrible: from the floorboards / It was as if people were emerging / All of them emaciated, / Faces with nail-like wounds, / As if the wicked people in the hall / Had beaten them with their heels.]

Blinded by the finery and frivolity surrounding them, the ball-goers have been inflicting violence, pain, and misery on others without even knowing. This poem marks the emergence of one of Semenov's principal themes after his spiritual awakening on the way to Cheremenets, the often-unwitting participation of all of society in evil acts.

The same theme appears in "The Ballet." Like "The Mazurka," "The Ballet" is written in trochaic tetrameter; graphically, it is divided into quatrains, giving the text a more measured feel than its predecessor. The setting of the "The Mazurka" was contemporary, with the speaker using the first-person plural and the terrible scene illuminated by electric light. In contrast, "The Ballet" has a mysterious, fairy-tale setting—it is a vision in moonlight, as indicated by the opening stanzas:

Светорунные волокна
Месяц поднял над рекой...
В королевском замке окна
Полны сказочной игрой:

⁹¹ On the significance of the mazurka within the symbolic system of the aristocratic ball culture of the preceding century, see Iu. M. Lotman, *Besedy o russkoi kul'ture: byt i traditsiia russkogo dvorianstva XVIII – nachalo XIX veka* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 2011), 96–8.

Там тоской музыки струнной
 Заливаются смычки.
 Ходят пары в неге лунной
 Все, как призраки, легки. (66)⁹²

[Bright-fleeced fibers / Above the river raised the moon... / In the royal castle the windows / Are filled with fairy-tale play: // There in sorrow-stringed music / The bows break out. / The pairs go about in moon-lit bliss / Like ghosts, all light.]

All of high society is present at this ball—the ladies with “Laughter on their innocent faces / And all in white gloves [*Smekh na litsakh ikh nevinnykh / I v perchatkakh belykh vse*],” and their white-gloved chevaliers, “Counts, knights, and peers — / The best flower of all the country. [*Grafy, rytsari i pery – luchshii tsvet so vsei strany*].” The king watches from his “ancient throne,” warmly welcoming the guests. The picture is ideal until the stroke of midnight:

Но лишь полночь, с первым звоном,
 То обычай старины –
 Все, вальсируя с поклоном,
 Снять перчатки с рук должны.

“Ужас! Ужас!” – вдруг в смущеньи
 Молвят гости. Молкнет смех...
 В замке шепот и смятенье,
 Страх и дрожь на лицах всех.

[Only at midnight, at the first bell, / That tradition from the olden days — / Everyone, waltzing with a bow, / Must remove the gloves from their hands. // “The horror! The horror!” — suddenly in confusion / Uttered the guests. The laughter died... / In the castle whispers and disarray, / Fear and trembling on all their faces.]

Upon removing their gloves, the attendees discover that their hands are all stained with “indelible spots of scarlet blood [*nesmymaevye piatna aloi krovi*].” Not even the king himself remains unmarked:

И король содвинул брови,
 Грозен вид у старика, –

⁹² Here and in subsequent quotations, I have maintained the indentation of Semenov’s original publications, as replicated in *Stikhotvoreniia. Proza*.

В чьей же, чьей же это крови
Королевская рука?!.. (67)

[And the king knit his brows, / The old man's face was fearsome, — / Whose, whose is this blood / Upon the royal hand?!..]

The attendees are only momentarily bothered by their discovery, and they soon return to their moon-lit dance. In the final stanza, the entire scene evaporates, leaving just the empty castle and the pale moon.

In “The Ballet,” Semenov uses the fairy-tale, mythical setting, reminiscent of his earlier work, to expand on the societal critique he began in “The Mazurka.” The third-person speaker adds a layer of distance between the reader and the sins that stain the hands of the party-goers; no longer the familiar “Tanya, Zhenia, Misha, Gleb” who mindlessly trample others while going about their merrymaking, the dancers in “The Ballet” are impersonal tokens of the highest society, identified only by title: “lady,” “knight,” “page.” The moonlit festivities here are more ritualized than in former poem. The victims are only present as a trace, a symbol—only when the guests see the bloody spots do they realize something horrible has happened, and even then they claim ignorance and carry on with the dance. Overseeing this cycle of forgetting and remembering and forgetting again is the king himself, whose outrage at finding his own hands bloodied exemplifies the ignorance with which the whole ghostly court conducts its rites.

Another major theme emerging in Semenov's writing during this period is imprisonment. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this theme was already present in his work well before 1907, in the poems “*Terza rima*” and “The Castle.” In those poems, imprisonment is connected to the poet's idea of the “man with the mirror,” who is imprisoned within the mirrored walls of the castle of his ego. After his time in the prisons at Sary Oskol and Rylsk, the theme becomes integral to Semenov's poetics, and its traces are to be found in many of the works published at the end of the 1900s. The two earliest post-incarceration examples of the theme are the short

story and poem both bearing the title “The Curse,” which appeared together in the third issue of *Way of Labor*.

The seven-stanza poem tells of the speaker’s abuse and abasement at the hands of others:

Они цветы мои сорвали, --
 Я нес им песни и цветы, --
 Они цветы мои сорвали
 И растоптали все мечты.

Сорвали белые одежды,
 И тело нежное мое
 За песнь, за счастье, за надежды,
 За волю к жизни в ранах все. (66)

[They tore off my flowers,— / I brought them songs and flowers,— / They tore off my flowers / And trampled my dreams. // They tore off the white garments, / And my tender body / For a song, for happiness, for hope, / For the will to live is all in wounds.]

After he is beaten, the speaker is bound and driven naked into the damp fields, where he has no means to dress his wounds. However, the injustice he suffers does not go unpunished, and in physical death he is transformed, becoming an apparition that haunts his tormentors.

Read on its own, “The Curse” seems to have more to do with cruelty suffered at the hands of others than it does with imprisonment per se; the assailants bind the speaker’s hands, but he is not otherwise confined, and the reader is given no context for the event—the assailants are simply “they.” The poem should be considered in context, however; in its original publication on the pages of *Way of Labor*, “The Curse” was immediately followed by the short story of the same name.

The short story “The Curse,” divided into three sections—“Jail [*Ostrog*],” “Transport [*Etap*],” and “Prison [*Tiur’ma*]”—is semi-autobiographical, told from the perspective of an educated, upper-class political prisoner in the provinces. Resembling Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the House of the Dead*, it depicts the imperial penal system in all its contradiction and

senselessness.⁹³ Semenov's chief concern is to depict the casual inhumanity pervading the system: all people are drawn into debasement, from the policymakers and their social-political enablers to the ground-level enforcers, the inmates, and the families of everyone involved. Against this dehumanizing backdrop, the narrator perceives the arbitrariness of social differences:

In prison you quickly stop understanding the differences between people: why is one in prison and another at liberty? Why is the sentry Budakov a guard while he steals from the inmates' alms, while Grebyonkin, who stole three chickens from his neighbor and is now attempting to pass his poor mother a little piece of soap, is a convicted criminal? (136)

Many of the details of that Semenov would later include in *A Sinner to Sinners* appear throughout the story. The narrator receives requests written on cigarette paper from his newfound peasant peers, and he responds with revolutionary messages cloaked in Biblical language. When his mother comes for a three-day visit, she is arbitrarily denied the third visit by the prison administration, even though it had already been approved (as mentioned in the previous section, in the unpublished memoir this episode happens to Dobroliubova, not Semenov's mother). In the story's opening passage, he dreams of his true love Serafima—a figure clearly based on Dobroliubova—marrying another man. In the memoir, this episode is presented as a premonition of her impending death. Later, the narrator receives letters from Serafima explaining her whereabouts—like her real-life model, she had been briefly arrested, and he notes that the tone of her letters grows increasingly morose. In the closing passage, visiting her grave, the narrator announces that Serafima died on the very day he was freed.

⁹³ On the major works of Russian "prison literature" in the nineteenth century, see Leonard A. Polakiewicz, "Chekhov's *The Island of Sakhalin* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from a Dead House* as Penological Studies," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 397–421. For a recent study of prison literature generally, see Doran Larson, "Toward a Prison Poetics," *College Literature* 37, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 143–166.

It is a beating suffered at the hands of provincial police that links “The Curse” with the poem by the same name. The narrator tells his story in the second section, “Transport,” as the various political prisoners aboard a transport train swap stories of the inhumane treatment they have received and the executions they have witnessed. Again, the scene closely mirrors Semenov’s account in *A Sinner to Sinners*: the narrator escapes from a provincial police office, and is then quickly caught while hiding in a ditch. Once back at the police station, he is beaten, spat upon, cursed at, and then thrown into a tiny cell reeking of vomit. He attempts to appeal to their humanity using language: “I spoke to them, and spoke to them more. I thought I could break through their bestial wall with a word” (149). His appeals to the guards only seem to make them angrier, and he spends a night in torment, with only thoughts of—and prayers to—his beloved Serafima as a comfort. As the narrator concludes his tale with a scene before the prison administrator, who laughs at his complaint of mistreatment, he is struck by how words fail to capture the reality of the experience. He is interrupted in the telling of the story by a fellow convict, an “Old SR [*staraia eserka*]” on her way to serve five years in the remote Arkhangelsk governorate, who boasts of her own brutalization at the hands of Cossack guards in Odessa. Ultimately, the narrator’s beating is just one of many tales circulating in the cacophonous environment of the prison system.

As close as the beating scene in “The Curse” is to the one in *A Sinner to Sinners*, Semenov’s treatment of the event and its aftermath in early 1907 lacks the deeply spiritual, transformational aspects of the later account. The building blocks of the mystical experience are there: the narrator’s only comfort in the cell is the thought of Serafima. He remembers their last meeting, before he set off for the provinces. She was pressing her cheek to a birch tree, stroking its bark:

Oh, of course, of course!—she said, sobbing—I feel it so clearly, so clearly... How could there be any kind of doubt here? Everything, everything is singular, is one. And not only humanity—all of the animals will be with us. They will understand us, of course! They will understand our speech, and we theirs, for they have souls. All are brothers.

Everything is singular. (149)

However, this unitive mystical experience belongs to Serafima, and remains merely an idea for the narrator rather than a reality. Moreover, new anxieties come along with thoughts of—and prayers to—Serafima: her dream of unity and connection clashes with the cruel acts that human beings—including himself—carry out. Within the prison system, with its casual disregard for the value of life, it is evident just how isolated the human ego can be. He worries that Serafima will find out about all of this—and he learns towards the story’s end that she did. As the narrator imagines the fear and suffering Serafima must have witnessed in her last days, he is still unable to embrace her vision of oneness for himself. Her memory clashes with reality, and he cannot keep himself from calling out for vengeance: “A curse, a curse on you, executioners and murderers!” (168).

Semenov returned to the theme of the beating in the prose sketch “The Policemen,” which appeared in the ninth issue of *Way of Labor*. In the short story “The Curse,” although the beating is a central event in the narrator’s own life, it fails to reach its full expression when he is interrupted in the telling of it by the old SR. In “The Policemen,” it is the central event. The story opens with the narrator, a political prisoner in a provincial jail, watching the local police-guards as they go about their “dull, pitiless, pitch-dark” life—a life worse than that of an animal, he maintains, as it lacks any purpose or content. They mindlessly occupy their posts, run errands to exchange grease-stained record books, complain about being made to run errands, round up

drunks only to release them again, and talk about their wives as they drift off to sleep at night. In turn, the guards take an interest in the narrator. He tells them why he has been arrested and thereby gains their respect; in turn, he pities their naïve wishes for his speedy release. They recognize him as a member of the “educated classes [*iz obrazovannykh*],” and seem to be embarrassed at having to serve as his jailers: “And how strange it was that they had to shave my head and lock me in a cage, as though I would want to do them harm, as though I were a wild beast—and there was no animosity between us” (171).

In “The Policemen,” the escape from jail is a spontaneous event. This contrasts with the autobiographical account in *A Sinner to Sinners*, in which Semenov tells of being placed in a cell with the “feeble-minded itinerant” who serves as the inspiration for his decision to run.⁹⁴ The decision itself involved some forethought, as evidenced by his sotto-voce apology to the guard. These details are absent in “The Policemen”:

I looked up at the sky: above us was a clear, bright sky.

— How nice! — I said, and the policeman also raised his head.

It was all a matter of one second. I was already beyond the courtyard gates.

Behind me rang out cries: catch him! get him! get him! beat him!—What am I to them?

What is my freedom to them? It was so good to run. I ran. (171)

One line later, the narrator is already caught and beaten, outnumbered ten to one. He is thrown into a disgusting cell full of filth and fleas. Despite the circumstances, he feels compelled to enlighten his tormentors: “All of my being, it seemed, went into one thought—to awake them

⁹⁴ In “The Curse,” the narrator’s story aboard the train also features a mystical third figure who serves as a comfort during the escape, if not its direct inspiration: as he hides among the nettles, the narrator thinks of a sectarian-revolutionary peasant he met several days earlier, who spoke of socialism with a “fire, a boundless will.” He imagines those speeches going out across the land like seeds in the wind, giving rise to thick and even groundcover (148).

from this bestial state. [...] It is shameful for me to repeat what I said [to them], because it was just glass beads [*biser*, which could be translated here as “pearls,” i.e., that which is cast before swine], beads of rosy dreams.”⁹⁵ His words are met only with further abuse from the guards, who threaten him and spit in his face. The experience is all-encompassing and transformative: “Never before in my life had anything so suddenly brought to a stop all of my thoughts, upended my whole being. And at the same time, how laughable, how petty this officer seemed who thought to scare me with cries and volume like a dog!” The experience of degradation at the hands of fellow human beings puts him in communion with all of those who have been tortured and beaten. He thinks of others—his mother and Serafima (evoking the Dobroliubova-like figure from the short story “The Curse”), and he finds in his soul “an unspoken height, a kind of joy, such that neither physical pain nor abuse were fearsome.” Hiding his face and muffling his cries, he weeps for his youth, for its “trampled flowers” and for “the crude legs which trampled them, all of humanity, unhappy, dark and suffering, all the saints, executed and tortured”—here evoking the imagery of the poem “The Curse.”

Overwhelmed by “a thousand thoughts and torturous questions,” the narrator is comforted by lines from the gospels that quietly echo in his head. The next day, as he listens to the guards discuss their abuse of a mentally ill woman in increasingly debauched terms, he feels compelled to reproach them but is ultimately unable to hate them: “But whom, whom to hate?—the very last, most frightening question stood in my soul. [...] No, I did not have even a minute of hatred towards them, towards those living people” (172–4).

⁹⁵ This is an allusion to Matthew 7:6, “Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine,” particularly in its Old Church Slavonic translation “*Ne dadite sviataia psom, ne pometaite biser*”’ *vashikh pred sviniiami*]” and the derivative proverb “*Ne mechite bisera pered svin’iami*”; in the RSV, the equivalent for “pearls” is the modern “*zhemchuga*.”

The closing scene of “The Policemen” presents an apocalyptic vision, which stands in contrast to the memoir-like realism that characterizes the narration until then. Its place outside of ordinary time and space is immediately clear:

Many millennia passed by. As before, the stars smiled mysteriously and cleverly in the sky and from there sent to earth their fine, silken arrows. The lindens, entangling them in divination, were silent as before in the old garden, and as before we sat by the window, wide open to the warm, dark night, and all was as it had been before. We sat, pressed in close to one another, and now we were so full of such an inescapable fullness that there were no words, because all was one and we were different [*vse bylo odno i my byli inye*]. Now thousands of centuries were awakened in us, and each spoke his own, and each of his words and each bit of suffering was connected and was justified in the oneness. (174)

The shade of a departed feminine figure—presumably Serafima—visits those assembled and reveals the dark underside of existence, the reality of which she herself could not endure: “No, you were not able to live so. [...] You died, and suddenly your death appeared before us, mysterious and frightful!” (175). In the apocalyptic setting, however, her death is shown to be a transformation, and she returns in a glorified form. The terror and ignorance of before are replaced with understanding and an expression of universal renewal: “And every grain of sand, every soul rejoiced, because all was resurrected. Thus all the prophecies were fulfilled!” (175).

Another key manifestation of the prison theme in Semenov’s later work concerns capital punishment. Executions appeared in the 1906 prison narrative “The Curse,” but the significance of capital punishment became more acute over the course of the next several years as the government’s reaction to revolutionary activity became increasingly harsh and arbitrary. The story “Penalty of Death,” the origin of which was discussed briefly in the previous section,

appeared in the August 1908 issue of *Herald of Europe*, with Tolstoy's letter recommending it for publication serving as a foreword.⁹⁶ At its heart is what V. A. Sapogov called "horror in the face of the automatism and commonness of the executions carried out each day."⁹⁷ Semenov emphasizes the wide-reaching damage wrought by the system of state-sanctioned violence by moving the narrative focus from person to person—the rational, level-headed engineer and the other condemned men, the attorneys and court officials, a local politician, the mother of a convicted gymnasium student, the governor-general, the guard tasked with waking the prisoners on the night of their execution, the priest and doctor who attend to them before and after. The fraught final hours of the condemned men, the moral qualms of those in charge of carrying out the executions, the upended lives of survivors—an immense amount of suffering is rendered trivial by the senseless and mechanical system. Despite his rational resignation to death, the engineer (who receives more attention than any other character) is haunted by a dream in his final days, a vision of "humanity as one giant monstrous organism," growing out for no reason, replacing spent cells with new ones. The phrase bookending the story underscores the sense that this glimpse into a day of institutionalized killing represents nothing unusual: "Everything around was as it always was [*Vse bylo takzhe krugom, kak vseгда*]" (176, 186).

It is in connection with the prison theme that Dobroliubovian elements are most clearly observed in Semenov's work, and it is to those elements that our discussion now turns. The lyrical "Prison Songs," appearing in the sixth issue of *Way of Labor*, feature Franciscan images

⁹⁶ In addition to the discussion of Tolstoy's role in the editing and publication of "Penalty of Death" in the preceding section of the present chapter, see Baevskii, notes to Semenov, *Stikhotvoreniia. Proza.*, 534–5; and V. A. Sapogov, "Lev Tolstoi i Leonid Semenov (ob odnom korrespondente L N Tolstogo)," *Uchenye zapiski Kostromskoi gos. pedagog. in-t im. N. A. Nekrasova*, no. 20 (1970): 123–5.

⁹⁷ Sapogov, "Lev Tolstoi i Leonid Semenov," 125.

of “brother Sun,” who visits the speaker in a time of darkness and fear. The sun’s visit to the speaker’s window allows him to transcend the isolation of confinement:

Солнце, пламенное солнце,
Ты один мне здесь родной,
Приведи их всех к оконцу,
Солнце, брат мой золотой,
Я со всеми побеседую,
У оконца посижу,
И лучам твоим поведаю,
Как всех крепко я люблю. (69–70)

[Sun, flaming sun, / You alone here are related to me by birth, / Bring them all to my window, / Son, golden brother of mine, / I will converse with everyone, / I will sit by my little window, / And tell your rays / How strongly I love everyone.]

Here Semenov evokes Dobroliubov’s treatment of the imprisonment theme in *From the Invisible Book*, as in the song “In prison” (“V zakliuchen’i”):

Тюрьмы вы мои печальные,
В вас живёт и красно солнышко,
Ходит в вас и красно солнышко⁹⁸

[You, my sorrowful prisons / In you lives the beautiful sun / The beautiful sun walks in you]

In his prose piece “Here in prison” (“Zdes’ v zakliuchen’i”), Dobroliubov indicates that the mystical meaning of the sun—the expression of the oneness of life—can be perceived no matter what the circumstances:

Here in prison I absolutely cannot see how the days of the earth pass. My window is often open all day—especially if I am working, often I stand by the grate, but when you go out for a walk, only then do you see the sun and light and the rays.

“How the sun [*solnyshko*] shines!”—I involuntarily exclaimed once, going out into the yard on an overcast day. The warden looked at me like I was insane. A thick haze

⁹⁸ Dobroliubov, *Iz knigi nevidimoi*, 20. In addition to its Franciscan imagery of communion with nature despite oppressive surroundings, Dobroliubov’s song evokes Lermontov’s 1837 poem “The Prisoner” (“Uzник”).

stood over the city. [...] Brothers, we will rejoice in everything, because everything is alive. We are alive, but the mighty sun [*solntse*] which is greater than us, is it not also alive? and days and minute and every place—all is alive.⁹⁹

In the fragmentary “Lines from the series ‘Freedom’,” his first published foray into free verse, Semenov employs a Dobroliubovian skepticism towards societal convention. The speaker questions his own apathy towards life and laments the falseness of the art, culture, and society surrounding him, where everything is a lie: “Everything is a game. / Conversations, gossip, doubts, answers” (74). The fifth poem starts similarly, evolving into a criticism of discursive knowledge:

Все игра.
Кто начал мыслить и живет по мыслям,
Тот уже не свободен,
Им владеет ход его мыслей, —
Логика.
Но разве логика это он? (74)

[All is a game. / One who has begun to think and lives according to thoughts, / That one is already not free, / He is led by the course of his thoughts, - / Logic. / But is this logic truly he?]

The speaker, despite his claims to indifference, seeks truth and freedom from this illusive existence. The falsehood of society and culture extends to even well-intentioned interactions with others. Trapped in the prison of the ego, communication seems impossible. The way out, Semenov’s speaker posits, is through silence:

Я иду к человеку,
Но лучше молчать.
Будут споры, обманы,
Борьба самолюбий.
Это зовется у нас разговорами.
Но лучше молчать,
Будет взор устремленный с вопросом

⁹⁹ Dobroliubov, *Iz knigi nevidimoi*, 105.

И, может быть, с просьбой. —
 Но лучше молчать.
 В молчаньи, быть может,
 Не мы, а кто-нибудь третий
 За нас ответит.
 И это будет просто.
 Но лучше молчать. (75)

[I go to a person, / But it is better to be silent. / There will be quarrels, deceptions, / The struggle of vanities. / This we call conversation. / But it is better to be silent, / There will be a striving gaze with questions, / And perhaps a request, / But it is better to be silent. / In silence, perhaps, / Not we but some third body / Answers for us. / And it will be simple. / But it is better to be silent.]

In these fragments, Semenov returns to an image first explored well before his incarceration, that of the human ego as its own prison:

Мы все заключены по замкам
 И видим друг друга только в окна —
 Даже не видим, а только угадываем,
 Я ищу тебя и вижу твои глаза, ресницы и смех.
 Но где ты? (76)

[We are imprisoned in castles / And see one another only in the windows — / We do not even see, but only guess, / I search for you and see your eyes, eyelashes and laughter. / But where are you?]

In the first months of 1909, the Petersburg publisher Briar, led by Leonid Andreev, released the eighth volume of its *Literary-Artistic Almanac*, which opened with two prose works by Semenov: “On the Threshold of Inevitability” and “Leaves.”¹⁰⁰ These were the pieces that Semenov told Tolstoy he had been working on during the winter of 1907–8, the “book” he hoped would help convince others to take up the path. Apparently published without the author’s involvement, the contributions to the almanac would be the last of Semenov’s writing to appear

¹⁰⁰ In the timeline of Semenov’s life compiled for the *Literaturnye Pamiatniki* edition of the author’s work, Baevskii dates the publication of the almanac “before June 3, 1909,” presumably relying on Semenov’s mention of it in his June 3 letter to Tolstoy (“Leonid Semenov: Khronologicheskaiia kanva,” in Semenov, *Stikhotvoreniia. Proza*, 558). Given that both Gippius and Filosofov wrote about the almanac in early March, it seems safe to revise this date to “before March”: see notes 110 and 112 in this chapter.

in print during his lifetime. In these two pieces, the themes that dominated Semenov's work in his post-imprisonment period come together and find their clearest expression: society as a game or monstrous organism, the elemental energy of revolution, the casual cruelty inflicted on the people by the state (which carries out its deeds through individual actions, compounding the damage to individuals), the search for the proper means of expression and the ultimate futility of the written word.

“On the Threshold of Inevitability” comprises an introduction with epigraph, two songs, and five sections of fragmentary narrative prose. In the introduction, subtitled “In place of a forward,” the author encourages readers “not to fear the harshness [*rezkost'*] of the thoughts and images expressed here, but to try to apply them to themselves, to their personal experiences,” so that “they will find in themselves that tree which gave life to these pale leaves, here on the paper already yellowed and dried, but nonetheless dear to the author” (187). This is followed by an epigraph from the prophet Amos, describing God's judgement upon the people in the form of an insatiable hunger, “not a famine of bread or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11). This “hunger of God” in turn serves as the central image in both songs. In the first song, the speaker longs for the hunger that will “give birth to God” or make Him take notice of humanity's suffering:

Но люди кругом сыты,
 Сыты своей маленькой будничной правдой и не замечают
 Что этой правдой они ведь поедают друг друга
 Или есть Бог или нет Его!
 Господи, Господи, яви нам свое лицо! (187–8)

[But the people around are full / Full on their little everyday truth and they do not notice /
 That by this truth they are after all consuming one another / Either God is or He is not! /
 Lord, Lord, reveal unto us your face!]

In the second song, the speaker celebrates a hunger that consumes everything: “All wealth, all poverty / All books, all wisdom, all life.” It finds a person no matter where they are, pursuing

them down into the depths of their “innermost ‘I’.” The Divine will is for everything to burn with this hunger, “insatiable and avaricious” (188).

The five dream-like fragments of “On the Threshold of Inevitability” are linked together by the theme of death (and its relationship to life). Like much of Semenov’s later writing, there are strong autobiographical elements in the narrative, but individual personalities are also blurred. Figures drawn from Semenov’s life—his aunt Ol’ga Petrovna, friends from childhood and his student days, and of course Maria Dobroliubova—blend together with stories of executions taken from the newspapers.

The first fragment begins with a cry—“So many deaths!”—as the narrator tells how he is visited by the dead. His dead relatives and childhood friends tell him “the story of their life, their suffering and their unassuaged desire.” Apparitions of the deceased crowd his room, spilling out into the hall. He tells them that he has nothing to say or give, as he himself is “like one of the dead among this world, where there is already nothing for me to lose.” He asks why they have come, but they only peer into his most private spaces, “into the very innermost depths of me,” asking about his secrets and reading their own in him. “Their life is lived out, but they are still chained to it, to its secret” and they wander the earth as long as the puzzle remains “only thought of but still unsolved by anyone [*tol’ko zagadana, no eshche nikem ne razgadana*]” (190). They roam the earth in search of a solution, like those pursued in the opening songs by the incomprehensible hunger for the Divine word. Later in the fragment, as he watches coffins being unloaded from a train car at a suburban cemetery, the narrator echoes the engineer’s nightmare from “Penalty of Death,” as he entertains a vision of all bodies, and the lives inhabiting them by extension, as fingernails to be clipped and discarded:

And I remembered all the thousands, all the millions of victims that they brought.

Sacrifices of nails to nails! For every day now we read in the papers that dozens of people are executed and murdered, as it should be, for the glory of nails. And why not do this?

After all, this is also all just nails—this is just the clipping of nails. We are so used to it.

(190–1)

The ghosts of those killed and executed speak to him, saying that the worst part of their last moments was the sudden feeling of indifference towards everything: “And, it would seem, why not die? Why not laugh at the noose in front of the hangman, or spit in his face, in his eye, so as to get a slap from him? What is execution? What is death?” This is the same sense of indifference the narrator experienced as a prisoner, a horror “flitting between the inmates like a serpent”: “We hurried to silence it, we began to sing songs, we cried out... And it was so shameful, so terrifying. Who are we? what are we? why are we in prison? why everything?” (191). Such an awareness, of course, might as easily be applied to human existence itself.

In the second fragment, the narrator is visited by his “other ‘I,’” who speaks about artifice and occupation. Echoing the author’s first exchanges with Tolstoy, he explains that the educated classes no longer need to worry about their basic needs, and instead think of ways to distract themselves from the evil they perpetrate upon the masses:

Having free time and growing bored from it—because the consciousness of every human being fears emptiness—they thought up various amusements for themselves. Then these amusements became customs, victims were delivered up to them and various justificatory

theories thought up, mainly for the purpose of calming the masses whose blood they consume. (192)¹⁰¹

The “other ‘I’” brings the narrator to a giant gaming house, where throngs are caught up in the game called “society life.” Everyone plays the game, or has someone else play for them, even though they do not understand what it is they are doing:

Here among the diamond and heart kings I heard words about the native land [*o rodine*], about love, about the state, about the good of the nation, about all humanity, about Christ and about God. Nobody really knew where these words came from, what they mean, for what? And everyone knew that they were trumps, that with them one can beat cards and take tricks. (193)

When old players die, they are quickly replaced. The whole thing is surrounded by spectators, who watch the game and join in the thousands of petty imitations of it created for their amusement. A terrifying orchestra plays over the scene, its music proclaiming: “There is the game and nothing but the game!” (194).

The second fragment also contains Semenov’s only significant artistic treatment of the events of Bloody Sunday, which so dramatically altered the course of his life. The energy of the collective activity of the game soon takes on a life of its own, as countless “separate heads and separate thoughts and feelings” come together “in one will, in one thrust—in the consciousness of the crowd. Consciousness organized itself” (194). The individual selves are lost in the collective spirit of rebellion, and the mass consciousness takes to the streets, where “a new force suddenly stood up to meet them. This was also consciousness. Its sullen and concentrated force,

¹⁰¹ See the discussion in the previous section of this chapter on Semenov’s first letter to Tolstoy, in which he remarks that attempts by educated elites to “go to the people” are often just a game played in order to fill a sense of emptiness.

wearing soldiers' bodies and uniforms." In the aftermath of their clash, dead bodies lie on the ground. The crowd disperses, with all participants now transformed from individuals into carriers of the collective will: "There were no personalities that night. But in every house, in every room, in every conversation the crowd spoke, it flashed in the eyes, it cried out, it was horrified" (195–6).

In the third fragment of "On the Threshold of Inevitability," the narrator is visited by a ghostly young woman. The narrator recognizes her as a woman executed some days prior, who laughed at the judges before her death.¹⁰² Staring into her "half-insane" eyes, he sees her entire life, expressed in dream-like flashes:

Here someone's shuffling steps flitted to the door... Mother!—no! who, then?... A lover... someone else!.. The horror! a cry!.. and at the bottom of it all—one endless, terrifying abyss. An abyss of sorrow and gloom! It was like a cold and dark solitary cell in a prison!.. and everything came to an end in blood...(196)

The narrator loses his personality in the experience, and the lines between the dead and the living are blurred: "I was already gone... Everything disappeared... Left were only our two empty, hungry gazes, looking at one another." They are interrupted by another ghost, an officer "in a frock-coat and epaulets"—the young woman's victim. Like the young woman, he shares his life story: "It was as if his memory opened up before me and I read his life in it clearly." The narrator

¹⁰² This figure is presumably inspired by the SR assassin Evstoliia Rogozinnikova, hanged in October 1907 for the murder of Aleksandr Mikhailovich Maksimovskii, the director of the imperial prison administration, in his office three days earlier. Rogozinnikova, who had previously escaped custody by feigning mental illness, was tried immediately by the district military court; she openly displayed contempt for the entire process, at first refusing to give investigators her name and then laughing during trial. She was among a number of revolutionaries to exhibit such behavior; see Anna Geifman, "Psychohistorical Approaches to 1905 Radicalism," in *The Russian Revolution of 1905: Centenary Perspectives*, ed. Anthony J. Heywood and Jonathan D. Smele (London: Routledge, 2005), 21. According to his December 1907 letter to Tolstoy, Semenov had been working on his "book" that fall (226), when Rogozinnikova's case would have been in the news.

has a vision of a snowy railway platform, on which the officer paces while waiting for his orders to be carried out—the summary execution of seditious soldiers:

In his hand a paper began to tremble... It was the list... In his head flitted: ‘I am a loyal servant... of the fatherland... His thoughts did not go any further. Then he walked along the platform, shaken up but decisive and strong. He believed that this is what was needed. Others were finishing it... He did not watch, did not like it. They lined up the pale and shaking people on the railbed.... Later they hurled the corpses from the road. The train rushed along further...(197)

The lines between perpetrator and victim are thus blurred, just as were those between the living and dead. Everyone is caught up in the cycle of violence, equally pitiful and contemptible.

The fourth fragment, the only section in which there is no first-person narrator, presents the final hours of a condemned prisoner who struggles with how to record his final thoughts; nothing he writes seems to be true. “There was some kind of elevated, lofty state of the soul, but it disappeared somewhere, broke off, and beneath it was an abyss” (198). He wonders why he is compelled to write at all, and he remembers mechanically that everything he does is for the cause: “To become an example for all. To inspire all, to elevate in them courage, energy, strength! The cause is so clear!” (199). As he wavers over how to record something true, he casts his memory back and imagination forward. He imagines how he will comport himself when they come to lead him to the gallows, how he will cry “Long live the struggle!” at the last moment. He recalls his trial, how his attorney robbed him of agency in attempting to mount a defense, how his speech decrying the judges as “representatives of the old regime” was silenced. He thinks about the young woman he met at a student demonstration, how she might read his last

words.¹⁰³ As his thoughts race, he is comforted by a “secret”: “Everything is one meaningless circle [*krugovorot*]... We are all like grains of sand in it... All automatons [*Vse avtomaty*]... Nobody knows anything... Nobody is guilty of anything...” His last words are scribbled in haste, as the sound of footsteps approaches his door: “History demands sacrifices. I die as I lived” (203).¹⁰⁴ As people talk and fantasize about his life and death, he becomes legendary. The young woman from the demonstration is so moved by his (fictitious) example that she leaves home the next morning: “She too was executed. A new chain of suffering and horror began!” (204).

In the final fragment, the narrator tells of Lidochka, a young woman hanged for taking part in political violence. “There was something frail in her, arousing some sort of sense of obligation to protect her,” he recalls. Having just read about her death sentence, he struggles to imagine her “slender, frail hands, like lily petals” shooting anything (204–5).¹⁰⁵ He is tormented by the knowledge that she was executed, and her slender neck and delicate blue-veined face haunt his dreams. On the street he meets her friend, who talks of Lidochka’s fiery will to live: “‘I want to take everything from life!’ she proclaimed several days before the arrest” (205). The narrator remembers Lidochka’s fiery passion himself, and he thinks of how her eyes burned as she shook his hand when they met one day on the street: “She was unrecognizable then. How she had changed in one year!” He hears how she comported herself in court, “gossiping about

¹⁰³ In *A Sinner to Sinners*, Semenov recalls first meeting Dobroliubova at a student demonstration against the war in 1905. However, it is not clear that this is enough evidence for Baevskii’s claim that the story contains “recollections about sister Masha Dobroliubova” (see Baevskii, “Zhiznestroitel’ i poet,” 484; and Baevskii, notes to *Stikhovoreniia. Proza.*, 536). Even though this character shares other characteristics Semenov associated with Dobroliubova—e.g., her frailty (“*ee* [...] *khrupkii oblik*,” *Greshnyi greshnym*, 259)—there are enough dissimilarities to make clear that this fictional character should not be equated with the historical Dobroliubova.

¹⁰⁴ The condemned man also adds a personal message: “To mother. Love without end. I love everyone!”

¹⁰⁵ It is not clear that any of the narrative fragments are directly connected, but there are areas of considerable overlap; for example, in both fragments four and five, a young woman who is executed is described with the adjective “frail [*khrupkii*],” a word Semenov associated with Dobroliubova (see note 103 in this chapter).

Duncan with her lawyers, and that after the death sentence was already handed down.” In jail she laughed and joked with her despondent mother, saying that she regretted nothing. The next day she was brought to see her mother after a visit to the bathhouse. This time she was unrecognizable: “She looked wan, had grown thin, and could barely get out more than a word. ‘What happened?!’ the mother exploded. But it was the last time that she would see her daughter. [...] It is said that they take them to the bath before execution” (205–6). In the closing passage, he returns to the memory of their conversation and his inability to answer her unspoken question. In keeping with the theme of the guilt shared by all members of society—so important in all of Semenov’s post-1905 writing—he casts himself as a participant in her destruction: “Lidochka, Lidochka!.. I too am your executioner [*I ia – tvoi palach*]!” (206).

“Leaves,” Semenov’s other contribution to the 1909 Briar almanac, is also a fragmentary text, although in most part it lacks the narrative structure of “On the Threshold of Inevitability.” Baevskii has identified six leitmotifs at work in the piece, which comprises fifty-two prose fragments of varying lengths: the frailty of earthly life and the mutual responsibility human beings have for one another; the contradiction between free will and the laws of cause and effect; a Tolstoyan recognition of the falsity and frivolity of society and culture; a Nietzschean dream of humanity’s future; Schopenhauerian pessimism and egoism; and a Hesychastic recognition of the limits of human language and an embrace of mystical silence as an alternative.¹⁰⁶ Baevskii’s analysis is fundamentally correct, although he curiously omits any mention of Dobroliubov in his discussion of the cycle. Instead, he associates Semenov’s rejection of culture—and especially of the written word—exclusively with Tolstoy. Tolstoy’s influence is plainly evident in “Leaves,”

¹⁰⁶ Baevskii, notes for “Listki,” in Semenov, *Stikhotvoreniia. Proza.*, 537–8.

but it is a Dobroliubovian rejection of educated culture (and, moreover, human reason) and a call for the radical reorganization of life that prevails.

Echoing the ghosts in the first fragment of “On the Threshold of Inevitability,” Semenov opens the piece with a statement of terrifying indifference: “The most frightening thing is that there is nothing frightening. The more frightening thing is that we live. Executions and murders are carried out, thousands and millions of people perish from hunger, from disease, from despair, but we live. And as if it were nothing” (207). Evoking Dobroliubov’s letter to the editors of *Libra*, Semenov bemoans that people have tried in vain to live through art,

and they think that having experienced drama, love, repentance and other higher feelings together with the author or the actor in the theatre who presents them, that they have really experienced them... And that is why they will never truly see anything real, and for all that the eternal refrain of their lives will be: “Everything is not right [*Vse eto – ne to!*]” (208)

Here Dobroliubov’s voice echoes clearly in the text, as Semenov quotes the final words of *From the Invisible Book*: “So search then! For the real thing, that about which your soul thirsts and hungers, *step into the book of life, dare to do it*” (208, my italics).¹⁰⁷

Much like Dobroliubov did in *From the Invisible Book*, Semenov uses his writing to attack literature and those who create it:

Literary doubles, literary images haunt us and do not give us the possibility to authentically experience our own lives. They bend us into submission to them, comment on our every act, not giving us the power to puzzle them out on our own, distract with

¹⁰⁷ See Dobroliubov, *Iz knigi nevidimoi*, 202.

their beauty and play, forcing us to imagine ourselves as heroes or other literary images or killing in us [that which is] original. (208)

He argues that when life becomes a reflection of literature—itsself a reflection of a reflection of life—“what results is a kind of insane game of mirrors, some kind of devilishness from which you cannot see a way out.” Writers even deceive themselves, pretending to be motivated by higher virtues: “And I ask, who among you is sincere, who among you writes out of wanting to say a word to people, out of love, out of a desire for fellowship or of faith that you can help them?! Who will say this about themselves?!” (209). The author acknowledges that his attempts to convey his experiences in language fail: “When I am writing, speaking, I no longer have the inner [i.e., spiritual] sensation. It is already gone by for me, and in its place is worry about how and to whom I will speak” (209).

Semenov stresses a reliance on divine providence, paraphrasing the lines in Matthew 6 that had served as the source for much of the imagery in Dobroliubov’s *From the Invisible Book*:

There is one path: leave all worries, because the fullness of sensations is self-forgetting, the abandoning of all concern. Look at the birds of the sky: they do not sow, they do not reap[.] Become like the lilies, then the true flowers of life will blossom in your soul and there will be freedom. (210)

External concerns, he argues, make one beholden to the “law of iron necessity,” which only causes further ensnarement in the phenomenal world. Here, Semenov clearly articulates the concept that would later be central to his story of personal transformation in *A Sinner to Sinners*, beginning with his relationship with Maria Dobroliubova and continuing through his time in prison and the period after her death, culminating in the transcendental experience on the banks of Cheremenets Lake, where his inner voice commanded him to “leave everything” and to trust

in Providence.¹⁰⁸ As discussed above, this was also a major theme in his correspondence with Tolstoy at the time “Leaves” was being written. Semenov was then preoccupied with the question of how best to live. As he told Tolstoy, he felt compelled to make a radical change, to leave the structures of the world that had shaped his life until then. He had hoped to find the best way to live in accordance with Divine will, “because new content demands new forms” (226).

In “Leaves,” Semenov explains his understanding of what it means to embrace a “fearless trust in the inner voice” and to leave behind external concerns. Like Dobroliubov had in *From the Invisible Book*, Semenov employs the language of his intended audience, even as he ultimately argues against it—the Nietzschean motif as identified by Baevskii reflects such an attempt to speak in the language to which readers of modernist literature were accustomed:

Until the time that we trust [the inner voice], we will calculate everything, adapt and conform to life, but not experiencing life itself and its freedom. We will ride on the tail of life. [But] we can truly be not its slaves and not the playthings of its laws, but its creators and even creators of its new laws. We are called to be such. (210, italics are original)

For Semenov, the laying aside of external concerns is understood broadly and literally:

I consider an external concern to be not only concerns about your body, about your appearance, about your tomorrow—what and how you will feed yourself, what you will wear and where you will be—but also any concern about the consequences of your present action and any concern about what you will say tomorrow and what you will be doing, even if this concern comes from a source of love. (211)¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ For Semenov, the commandment to leave external cares to divine will is associated with both of the Dobroliubov siblings. See note 3 in this chapter.

¹⁰⁹ As his letter to Tolstoy concerning Lev Tomilov shows, Semenov was still developing his understanding of the way in which life might be arranged so as not to worry about external concerns. In this chapter, see note 84 and its accompanying discussion.

He rejects literature as a profession: “I do not understand how it is possible to write so that by writing you earn your bread,” he writes, accusing those in the literary world of succumbing to market forces instead of seeking to live and proclaim truth (212). He acknowledges that a radical transformation is a frightful prospect, but ultimately dismisses such fears as “the most horrifying cowardliness,” and “the same kind of suicide as any other.” He decries as a crime “any teaching that speaks of attachment to this world” (213). He searches for the ideal, “a most perfect aspiration” that lies not in resignation to the law of necessity but is instead the rejection of the “fetters of this earth” (215). He revisits and expands upon the vision of all of humankind and the entire earth as a single, indifferent organism—the same dream that haunted the engineer in “Penalty of Death” and the narrator in “On the Threshold of Inevitability”:

Each of its cells lives and breathes, but all involuntarily. And how ridiculous to me were all these loud conversations, their speeches at conferences, in parliaments and dumas!

[...] But even their speeches are just the unconscious pouring of thoughts from one vessel to another—and their thoughts flow in their brains like juices in the veins of plants! (215)

In Semenov’s view, the attempt to apprehend and shape the circumstances of life through reason only serve to further bind one to the prison of the material world. This is true for writing, and it is the mistrust of the very nature of the written word that closes Semenov’s final contribution to contemporary literature: “To write this means not to believe in the living matter [*zhivoe delo*], in the soul, that each of your steps, your thoughts, your words is put before the Creator and will not be lost but will receive its just deserts” (216).

As his 1907–8 letters to Tolstoy from St. Petersburg make clear, Semenov had hoped that the imagery and turns of phrase in these two pieces might help reveal the spiritual path to his friends still entangled in the world of literature, culture, and politics. However, contemporary

reaction to the publication of the work was not positive. Zinaida Gippius, reviewing the almanac in *Russian Thought* (*Russkaia mysl'*) under the name Lev Pushchin, bemoaned the poor quality of the collection overall: “Beginning telegraphists and old bureaucrats write better.” She dismissed “Leaves” as a disorganized collection of “aphorisms of the sort ‘all is vanity of vanities’ and ‘life is frightening’.” Curiously, Gippius named other writers whose works were included in the almanac—“a certain Vera Iarovaia has such pearls of tastelessness and illiteracy throughout [...] The only ‘famous’ author in the collection is Gorodetskii”—but referred to Semenov only as “another author,”¹¹⁰ despite knowing him well from the days of *The New Way*.¹¹¹

In a scathing review of the almanac in the *Moscow Weekly* (*Moskovskii ezhenedel'nik*), Dmitrii Filosofov granted that unlike the other contributors, Semenov (alongside Gorodetskii) was already “more or less known to the contemporary reader.” That reputation, he argued, made Semenov’s pieces all the more alarming. “On the Threshold of Inevitability” puzzled Filosofov: “How to define this ‘threshold’ is uncertain. This is not a story or a tale [*ne povest' i ne rasskaz*]. More like moralistic-belletristic pondering [*moral'no-belletristicheskie rassuzhdeniia*]. Only one thing is for sure: this is not literature.” In explaining his dissatisfaction with the second piece—“in order to clarify Semenov’s new thing, or more accurately, to excuse it”—Filosofov first provided a fairly accurate contemporary account of Semenov’s biography. Following the publication of *Collected Verses*, he related, Semenov left Petersburg and literature, winding up in prison before falling silent for several years. In 1908, the publication of “Penalty of Death” brought Semenov back to the reading public’s attention:

¹¹⁰ Lev Pushchin [Z. N. Gippius], “Literaturnoe dnevnik. Zemlia, Shipovnik i drugoe,” *Russkaia mysl'* 1909, no. 3, 178.

¹¹¹ See note 11 in this chapter.

It was explained that he had left prison, endured much sorrow, and once and for all “took up the simple life”—he was working somewhere in a coal mine, and then set out for somewhere on the Volga, and now he goes around there from village to village, “in a peasant’s caftan with an open collar,” together with Aleksandr Dobroliubov, to whom D. S. Merezhkovskii devoted several strong pages in his collection *Not Peace, but the Sword*.

Like Gippius, Filosofov dismissed the fragmentary text of “Leaves” as an exercise in banality. Moreover, he maintained, for those who knew the author’s story, the text was “frightening.” In renouncing everything and leaving culture behind, Semenov had “carried out a deed of which only a few are capable.” Nevertheless, Filosofov argued, he failed to convey any sense of that transformation in his “leaves torn from the tree”:

I searched in them for justification for the great sacrifice he made. To whom was this sacrifice made? To which God? For the sake of what? We believe, cannot help but believe, that such sacrifices will not turn out to be fruitless, that they must transfigure a person. Finally, it seemed, that such a “simplification,” being among the people, cannot help but enrich an artist. After all, there was a genuine artist in Semenov. But no. The feat killed the art. From an endless, frankly miraculous will arose bad literature, pitiful attempts at profundity.

The suggestion that the fragments might be of use to anyone elicited grief from Filosofov, causing him to question the worthiness of spiritual quests like Semenov’s: “It is too difficult to see how deep internal and external experiences are expressed in self-satisfied rhetoric. And I am

becoming fearful. Is the feat really all for nothing? Was the great sacrifice really made in vain?"¹¹²

The End of the Road: 1910–1917

Semenov's "sacrifice" had been to follow the example of Aleksandr Dobroliubov as best he could, in a way that was vital, not just another empty societal ritual. As I have argued above, the evidence for this is largely found in Semenov's correspondence with Tolstoy. It is also visible within Semenov's later published work, but its presence is obscured without the mediation of the exchanges with Tolstoy. What survives of Semenov's unpublished writing provides few details about this clearly important aspect of his life and literary work. Not only is the period of their closest contact elided in *A Sinner to Sinners*, but Dobroliubov and his teachings are also relegated to a minor role in Semenov's recollections. In the last section of the memoir, written in the chaos of 1917, just weeks before Semenov's death, he makes a rare appearance. Now fully embracing the Orthodox Church and preparing to receive holy orders, Semenov returns once again to the value of the written word. He reflects on the reading that has guided his spiritual development, the lives of Orthodox saints and the *Philokalia*: "At one time my favorite book was still the life of Francis of Assisi and Aleksandr Dobroliubov's book... *From the Invisible Book*. They carried me away, stirred me up, excited me... but after the *Philokalia*, after Serafim, there is no desire to read them" (339). The degree to which Semenov embraced Dobroliubov's book and attempted to pattern his life after Dobroliubov's example would be difficult to discern without recourse to the correspondence with Tolstoy.

¹¹² Dmitrii Filosofov, "Literaturnaia letopis'. Literaturno-khudozhestv. al'manakhi knigoizd-va 'Shipovnik', kniga VIII," *Moskovskii ezhenedel'nik* 1909, no. 10 (March 7): 38–47. See my discussion of Merezhkovskii's encounter with Dobroliubov in Chapter Two.

In all of his writing after 1905, Semenov struggled to find the words capable of conveying his spiritual experiences in verse or prose. As he grew more resolute in his conviction that “new content demands new forms,” he strove to radically change the circumstances of his life and livelihood, he grew increasingly frustrated with limitations of human language. At the same time, he acknowledged its usefulness, just as Dobroliubov had in the introduction to *From the Invisible Book*. As he endeavored to arrange his life in such a way that he could fulfill what he understood to be the cardinal commandment—to step into the book of life, that is, to live by the sweat of the brow, not worrying about external clothing, in love and in communion with all of creation.

As I have argued, following his life as a Decadent student-poet and his submersion into the political turmoil of 1905 and its aftermath, and especially in the wake of Maria Dobroliubova’s death, Semenov undertook his own reading of her brother’s path from high culture into the spiritual life of the peasant community. This in turn guided the direction of both his literary output and his future life. Semenov’s case is particularly instructive in that as idiosyncratic as it is, he is as much a product of early modernist culture as he is a contributor to it. In some ways he is tragically typical: he entered adulthood as an artist-turned-radical amidst the tumult of the 1905 and perished as a devoutly Orthodox landowner in the violent upheaval of 1917. In his attempts to find his own path, he became known as a model Tolstoyan and model Dobroliubovian. Ultimately, however, he is neither. This was keenly perceived by Tolstoy himself. As he prepared to follow the examples of the writers-turned-seekers he helped create, four months before his death at Astapovo, the elder writer wrote to Semenov: “I am Tolstoy.....You are Semenov. How pleasant is this small, most precarious union.”¹¹³ From

¹¹³ Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 82:76.

their names, he drew two lines, destined to intersect at some unseen future point, illustrating the eventual coming together of their spiritual paths within the infinite being of God.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to show how the cases of Dobroliubov and Semenov illustrate a unique direction in early Russian modernist culture. Both writers claimed to reject artistic culture in favor of a spiritual life among the peasants, but neither was able to do so without creating literary testaments. Their work is reflective of their idiosyncratic projects of radical self-transformation, as well as the general ethos of early Russian modernism. They stand in contrast to the more frequently-studied “generals” of Russian modernism—Gippius and Merezhkovskii, Ivanov, Blok and Belyi—in the degree to which they actualized the rejection of the “material world” (i.e., artistic culture) in favor of the spiritual.

State-sponsored secularization projects in the post-Petrine era led modernists and their allies to appropriate religious culture for their own aims as they attempted to transform themselves, the Church, the state, and society. The secularization paradigm, with its emphasis on religious culture’s self-recognition and autopoiesis, underscores the conflict between individual and society (between system and environment, in Luhmann’s terms) so keenly perceived by practitioners of modernist culture in Russia. As I have argued in this study, the tension that Metner identified between individual and collective drives and the resultant potential for a religiously motivated “ideological break with culture” describes Dobroliubov’s case perhaps more closely than that of any other figure associated with the “religious renaissance” and modernist culture in Russia. To this cultural chain I would add the case of Semenov, a would-be follower—and eventually a rejector—of Symbolism, radicalism, Tolstoyan anarchism, and Dobroliubovian communal mysticism.

Taken together within the context of Russian religious culture and modernist art, the cases of Dobroliubov and Semenov illustrate a peculiar dynamic between two major social practices (to use Michael Levenson's term) of art and religion, as realms of experimentation in the age of modernism in Russia. As symbolic practices, both religious and artistic practice are grounded in language; a religiously-motivated "rejection of literature" then becomes a gesture that requires a literary manifestation. The meaning attached to this rejection is tightly bound with questioning the values of modernity itself. This, paradoxically, inspires writing that is conceived of as experimental, because its message must be radically transformative for the consciousness of a modern human being, while at the same time it is consciously fashioned from (and, necessarily, as a continuation of) the chain of memory that links the ancient past and the dawning future.

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