

GACHEV RAMPANT, ROZANOV COUCHANT OR RUSSIA'S TWO PHYSIOLOGISTS OF CULTURE

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GEORGII Gachev was a linear intellectual descendant of Vasilii Rozanov and borrowed from him freely. Though born some eighty years apart, both are late-imperial figures whose views reflect the “apocalyptic” (1917) and “entropic” (1991) ending of their respective societies. They share the classic features of a Russian thinker, being non-academic, unsystematic, literary, and self-referential. The *ego* they study is more Freud than Fichte.

FOR the last four decades of his life Gachev was engaged in a vast culturological project, the purpose of which was to anthologize and sequentially describe what he called the “national images of the world” (национальные образы мира). “Just as each person is a triple unity of body, soul and mind, similarly every national totality should be regarded as a Cosmo-Psyche-Logos [which] is the unity of a country’s nature, the character of its people, and their mentality.”¹ Each volume in the series constitutes an analysis of a particular national *cosmos*, *psyche*, and *logos*. In all, some twenty volumes of this one-man Encyclopedia made it into print. They deal with Russia, America, India, England, France, Germany, Italy, the Jews, Poland, Bulgaria, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Lithuania, Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Kirgizia), and the “Cosmos of Islam.” However, in the author’s lifetime only *The Russian Eros* and *The American Cosmos* were published in versions that the writer considered textually authoritative, which is why I have chosen to concentrate on these two books.

GACHEV’S texts are dense, textured, long-winded, and are saturated with archaisms, quotes from literary classics, snippets of criminal slang, and folksy sayings and proverbs. This baroque style may be described as an exaggerated, extended version of the one Solzhenitsyn employs in his polemical essays. Gachev defines the genre in which he writes as “life-meditations” (жизне-мысли). It is predicated on the presence in the text of three co-equal, empirical writerly personas: the “cogitating author” (автор мыслящий), “living man” (человек живущий), and “reflexive man” (человек рефлектирующий), who links the first two personas together. These textual presences — this trinity — are Gachev’s authorial “hypostases.”²

¹ English-language annotation for Georgii Gachev, *Amerikanskii kosmos* (Moscow: Raritet, 1997), 678.

² Author’s interview with Gachev, May 2003.

EACH life-mediation is an extended piece of existential research, “a post-Rozanov combination of intimate journal, culturological speculation, and semi-scholarly investigation.”³ Gachev himself describes his works as “a mixture of Proust (or Rozanov) and Spengler.”⁴ He freely inserts himself and his private and public experiences into his researches — in fact, he is invariably the ultimate subject of all his investigations and speculations — and quotes at length from his private journals in the body of his books. He further comments on, clarifies, or corrects his automythobiographical narratives in numerous dated parenthetical asides or footnotes, usually composed years after the main text itself.

IF Nietzsche was a self-described psychologist of culture, Rozanov — the “Russian Nietzsche” — was a physiologist thereof. And so is Gachev. These two Russian thinkers are not just anthropological, like so many of their predecessors from Soloviev to Florensky, but body-centric. They study history, politics and the arts with direct reference to human anatomical, metabolic, muscular, cardiovascular, excretory, secretory, and sexual realities. Like his ornate, confessional style, Gachev’s preoccupation with sex (which is urban) and Eros (who is rural) owes a great deal to Rozanov: “... Eros is the cosmic force which, according to the Hellenes, links a sunray to the earth, an idea to an object, and a man to a woman.”⁵ Gachev’s “Russian Eros,” however, is more moujik than Greek — a hirsute, earthy, carnal figure with horny hands and other extremities. Yet he is also curiously furtive, “adolescent,” “subtextual,”⁶ and shows signs of “debilitation.”⁷

NOW, Rozanov’s emphasis on, indeed celebration of, the erotic forms part of his critique of the Church’s denial of the body and its suppression of the sexual instinct. For Gachev, a Christian writer far more heterodox than even Rozanov, Russia’s ongoing population decline is due less to the socio-economic traumas of the post-communist transition or bad ecological and dietary habits, than to the “superfluosity” and “uselessness” of the “Soviet Russian male”: “... You’ve impregnated her — now get lost, you’ve had your fun ...”⁸ “... We don’t have blood, we have lymph.” He agrees with Rozanov that the practice of sexual segregation among the Ancient Greeks or in Islamic societies contributed powerfully to the health and passion of heterosexual unions by eroticizing the relationship between men and women.⁹ In Russia, however, male and female sexual identities and behaviours have tended to “merge.”¹⁰ Throughout the country’s history men were part-feminized and women part-masculinized, a development which during the Soviet period received political sanction: “Woman was forced into a leather jacket: she became ‘one of the boys,’ ‘Comrade Proletarian Student,’ and once again grew mannish ...”¹¹ Gachev’s Russia of the mind is a picturesque yet crumbling sexscape populated by epicene figures from across the social classes and demographic groups.

ROZANOV’S and Gachev’s use of the human body as both subject-matter and methodological instrument is informed by: 1) the two thinkers’ autobiographical orientation: of the billions of human bodies that have existed or exist now, they are most concerned with their own; 2) the sexualization of the subject of study (Rozanov’s depiction of the universe as

³ Igor’ Shevelev, “Sluchai Gacheva,” *Russkii zhurnal*, April 10, 1996, online edition (<http://www.russ.ru:8085/journal/>).

⁴ Georgii Gachev, “Samopredstavlenie k Sobraniuu sochinenii po internetu,” online edition (<http://gachev.userline.ru>).

⁵ Georgii Gachev, *Russkii Eros: roman mysli s zhizn’iu* (Moscow: Interprint, 1994), 12.

⁶ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 257.

⁷ Georgii Gachev, *Mental’nosti narodov mira* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2003), 346.

⁸ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 214.

⁹ Georgii Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 255-6.

¹⁰ Georgii Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 257.

¹¹ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 258.

womb, Russia as a vagina, Germany as a phallus; Gachev's insistence that infants are phallically shaped, as is the female breast); 3) a mystical belief that sex is an "eternally flowing... essence" which is forever in flux, so that a person's maleness and/or femaleness is fluid, dynamic, "individualized"¹² (Rozanov); and that Eros is "one of the great energies and essences of existence"¹³ which permeates all animate and inanimate things (Gachev).

ASKED in 1992 to explain Rozanov's popularity with younger readers, Gachev referred to his predecessor's spare way with words, implicitly comparing this with the scope and sprawl of his own productions: "Rozanov is the antibody of great Russian literature, of the novels of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev. He is their parasite and antipode, his miniatures are his sting, but he is incapable of painting a broad canvas or drawing a deep breath."¹⁴ The reference to Rozanov's works as "miniatures" brings to mind Nietzsche's characterization of Richard Wagner as "our greatest miniaturist in music who crowds into the smallest space an infinity of sense."¹⁵ But unlike Wagner, whose music dramas were beginning-oriented, harking back as they did to Teutonic and medieval legends, Rozanov, as the twentieth century succeeded the nineteenth, grew increasingly preoccupied with the End.

OF course, a longing for, even an intoxication with the apocalyptic is a defining trait of late-imperial Russian culture. The literary scholar Liudmila Saraskina explains: "At the approach of the Master of Chaos the Russian eschatological consciousness experiences, as well as fear, something akin to bliss, for as the true Antichrist, he is the distorted reflection of Christ at the end of time."¹⁶ For his part, Nikolai Berdiaev observed that "In Russia there developed an eschatological spiritual structure, end-oriented, open to the future, filled with a sense of impending doom [...]."¹⁷ "Indeed, some post-revolutionary literary works may be read as instances of fictive flight from the *eschaton*, imaginative escapes from the Apocalypse — or at least apocalyptically-coloured interpretations of 1917. Thus, Zamiatin assays pre-historic ("The Cave"), historical (*The Scourge of God*), and post-historical (*We*) responses to the October revolution, whereas in Aleksei Tolstoy its events are rendered realistically (*The Road to Calvary*), in Bulgakov mythically (*The White Guard*, *The Master and Margarita*), in Remizov impressionistically (*Russia in a Whirlwind*), in Sholokhov folklorically (*The Quiet Don*), and in Pasternak lyrically (*Doctor Zhivago*). Yet other writers and poets, such as Platonov in *Chevengur* or even Solzhenitsyn in *The Red Wheel* continued to use the Book of Revelation as an imaginative referent for the Bolshevik assumption of power, with varying degrees of subtlety and obliqueness. In this sense, Solzhenitsyn "foreclosed the topic" (закрыл тему), to use the Russian phrase: with the appearance of his ten-volume, four-novel epic of World War I and the revolution, apocalyptic interpretations of Russia's destiny could henceforth only be projected into a notional, imagined future, as in Tatyana Tolstaya's novel *The Slynx* (2000).

ROZANOV did not live long enough to effect an imaginative or fictive escape from the events of 1917 à la Zamiatin or Remizov. As the year wore on, he sought refuge from the approaching catastrophe in physical flight. He attempted to hide. In September 1917 he and his family moved to Sergiev Posad, where he composed his last work, the *Notes on the*

¹² V. V. Rozanov, *Liudi lunnogo sveta*, 2nd ed. (St. Petersburg: Novoe Vremia, 1913; reprinted Moscow: Druzhba Narodov, 1990), 32-33.

¹³ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 7.

¹⁴ Gachev, *Amerikanskii kosmos*, 607.

¹⁵ *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 627.

¹⁶ Liudmila Saraskina, "Aktivisty khaosa v reghime Action," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 27 February-5 March, 2002.

¹⁷ N. A. Berdiaev, *Istoki i smysl russkogo kommunizma* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1955; reprinted Moscow: Nauka, 1990), 70.

Russian Apocalypse. It is here that we find what is perhaps the most striking passage in the whole of Rozanov, the fragment entitled "La divina comedia."

CLANGING, GRINDING, CREAKING, AN IRON CURTAIN COMES DOWN ON
RUSSIAN HISTORY.
THE SHOW IS OVER.
THE PUBLIC STANDS UP.
"IT'S TIME TO PUT ON OUR COATS AND GO HOME."
THEY LOOK AROUND.
BUT THE COATS AND HOUSES HAVE ALL VANISHED.¹⁸

THESE lines are sometimes adduced to show that Rozanov's claim to the term "iron curtain" predates that of Joseph Goebbels (1945)¹⁹ and Winston Churchill (1946). More important, however, is the notion of history as spectacle, which Rozanov attacks.

EVER since 1789, political revolutions have been *performed*. They have been theatrical, even carnivalesque events. The two Russian revolutionary productions of 1917 are a case in point. They, too, had their stage stars, such as Kerensky and Trotsky; spectacular mob scenes; ritualized sieges, massacres, and executions; sanguinary visuals. Vladimir Mayakovsky, who before 1917 strove to be a Futurist, post-Nietzschean demiurge, in the course of that fateful year reconfigured himself as a Futurist, crypto-Marxist dramaturge. In his play *Mystery-Bouffe*, which was written and staged for the first anniversary of the Bolshevik takeover, the line between political reality and the dramatic unities is blurred. Such revolutionary theatricals or theatrical revolutions continue to be a feature of modern cutting-edge politics. In 1989 Václav Havel (in real life, a playwright) plotted and directed the fall of the Czechoslovak communist regime from the Magic Lantern Theatre in Prague, while in Mexico the leader of the rebel Zapatista movement, Subcomandante Marcos (in real life, a philosophy professor) regularly appears before the world's media as a solitary, enigmatic masked figure, a dramatic cipher out of Brecht or Beckett (the masque was cancelled in a public statement in May 2014). Most recently, the two Ukrainian revolutions of 2004-05 and 2014, developed the street theatre aspect of such systemic upheavals yet further: cf. the covered stage erected at one end of Kiev's Independence Square on which poets, folk ensembles, and rock musicians performed, priests officiated, and would-be or actual political leaders present themselves and their programs, to be applauded or booed by the assembled multitude.

ROZANOV, though, finds the theatricality of the October revolution and its audience response appalling; even vulgar: "We are dying like braggarts, like actors."²⁰ This national apocalypse — the author is tragically aware that in 1917-18 Germany, France, and Britain, despite the devastation of war, remained very much within history — is for him both terrifying and tawdry.²¹

WHEN he wrote the Notes Rozanov was not only in despair over "the death of Russia";²² he was ailing, hungry, and cold. Indeed, he had but a year to live. Rozanov's body and its wants, which had been such a prominent presence in his writings, make their final,

¹⁸ V. V. Rozanov, *Sochineniia* (Leningrad: Vasil'evskii ostrov, 1990), 512.

¹⁹ *Das Reich*, February 23, 1945.

²⁰ Rozanov, *Sochineniia*, 471.

²¹ In his review of Repin's painting *October the 17th*, Rozanov declares that the artist depicted the "shrove-tide of the Russian revolution, its carnival, full of insanity, flowers and rapture" ("O kartine I. E. Repina '17-oe oktiabria,'" V. V. Rozanov, *Summerki prosveshcheniia* (Moscow: Pedagogika, 1990), 369.

²² Rozanov, *Sochineniia*, 510.

tragic appearance in this passage: "I am tired. I can't go on. A handful of flour, a handful of groats, five hard baked eggs can often save my day."²³

FOR Rozanov, the Russian revolution was the triumph of the nihilistic principle engendered and nurtured by the "former Christianity," that is, the Church he had consistently criticized as repressive of natural human urges and the Christ he had lately found "insubstantial"²⁴ and "terrifying."²⁵ God the Father he now defined as imperfect *because* He had a Son: "Without the ontological inadequacy of the father there cannot be a son":²⁶ an insight that is (negatively) Nietzschean in its world-catastrophic implications. One is also reminded of Baudelaire, who believed that the act of the Creation marked the fall of God, or Paul Valéry's famous, "Dieu a tout fait de rien, et le rien perce."

WHETHER one chooses to see 1917 as a Russian apocalypse or, to quote Carlyle's no less striking phrase about an earlier revolution in a different city and country, the death-birth of a new world, the fall of the Soviet Union had far less world-historical grandeur. It was protracted, messy, relatively bloodless and in narrative terms, strangely unresolved. The significant myths had ceased to signify decades before the red flag came down over the Kremlin. They had lost their imaginative power even before the infrastructure had rusted, the pavements had cracked, the environment had been polluted, and the bellies of the Party secretaries had started to sag. The Soviet Empire expired by slow and protracted stages; its end was entropic. We now realize that the nihilistic fervor which had so frightened Rozanov had exhausted itself within the span of a generation. The Putinites' attempts to create a single national narrative that melds the Soviet experience with that of the Russian Empire and even Muscovy has been a damp squib, although the peculiar vapor it gives off has succeeded in culturally intoxicating the non-autonomous and non-self-sovereign segments of the populace.

TODAY'S Russians hanker after the imagined glories, felicities and comforts of the Soviet period, which in the minds of many has been transformed into a political golden age when Russia was great, Stalin was good, people loved each other with a passion that surpasseth all understanding, and every family had caviar for breakfast. The "non-historical part of the human being wears, like a medal, the imprinted memory of a richer, a more complete and almost beatific existence" (Mircea Eliade).²⁷ By the time the new millennium arrived, and with it Boris Yeltsin's New Year's gift of a new president, the people had experienced too much change, too much history: coups, wars, crime waves, economic crashes. They sought a place of psychic safety where they could hide from all this excitement, a conceptual cocoon they could wrap themselves in. They found it, with the active encouragement of the Putin administration, in a "new pastoral vision of the Soviet past" (Svetlana Boym).²⁸ (In 2014, however, a new and potent dose of geopolitical stimulants was administered by the powers-that-be to their subjects).

GEORGII Gachev was one of the first members of the post-Soviet cultural elite to wax nostalgic about the good/bad old days, albeit without any hint of the postmodern irony that permeates, say, the novels of Viktor Pelevin or the music of the nationalist rock group Liubé.

²³ Rozanov, *Sochineniia*, 510.

²⁴ Rozanov, *Sochineniia*, 478.

²⁵ Rozanov, *Sochineniia*, 495. Even the Virgin Mary was a "martyr" in heaven for, as Rozanov tells Christ, "Thou hast forgotten her in Thy celestial majesty" (Rozanov, *Sochineniia*, 496).

²⁶ Rozanov, *Sochineniia*, 508.

²⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols* (Princeton UP: Princeton, 1991), 13.

²⁸ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 64.

In a 1994 apologia provocatively entitled “I Am a Soviet Man,”²⁹ he declares that he is “neither ‘Russian,’ nor ‘of Russia,’ nor ‘modern,’ but part of Soviet civilization.”³⁰ Such moods were present in Gachev’s writings even while the Soviet Union still existed. In a letter to his family of October 10, 1991 he defines his attitude towards “Soviet reality” (советчина), with which, he says, he has always had a filial relationship: “After all, I spent my entire life living with this parent. So what if he lost all his money and turned out to be a drunk and an idiot — it’s no different than a mother whose son is a thief but whom she nonetheless adores, while he has ‘I luv Mum’ tattooed on his arm.”³¹

GACHEV’S proud claim to be a *homo sovieticus* is amply supported by the facts of his biography. He was born in 1929, the son of a Bulgarian communist philosopher, who perished in the Gulag, and a Russian Jewish musicologist. Like Rozanov, whose father died when he was fourteen, Gachev was brought up by his mother. In 1946-1952 he attended Moscow State University, where he read German and Slavic Philology. Upon graduation he moved to Briansk and for two years taught at a high school — again, shades of Rozanov, who was a schoolteacher in the same town some seventy years earlier. He defended his candidate’s dissertation in 1959 and thereafter held a succession of academic sinecures with the inevitable title of junior research fellow (младший научный сотрудник). There was a brief interlude in 1962-1963, occasioned by a passionate love affair (of which more later), when he worked as a welder in a village autoshop in Moldavia and then joined a ship of the Black Sea merchant marine. In 1965 Gachev moved into an *izba* in the village of Shchitovo some 70 kilometers from Moscow. Here he farmed and cogitated: “... I run a barter economy in the material and spiritual sense ... : I cultivate my soul in nature.”³² True, he also owned a dacha in the exclusive writer’s settlement of Peredelkino near Moscow, where he spent the autumn and winter. He was married twice and had three children.

GACHEV was a short, slight, very dark man with thick black hair which, despite his seventy-odd years, shows no sign of graying, square glasses, and harsh features; he was all angles and lines. His name is almost an aptronym or a *nom de voyage*, for his very appearance calls to mind a dishevelled rook (Гачев—грач).

I first met him in Moscow in the spring of 1978, during the flaccid fag-end of the Brezhnev era. Six decades had passed since Rozanov’s iron curtain had come down. The Soviet Union still had a dozen years of political, economic, and demographic decline ahead of it. To extend Rozanov’s dramatic metaphor, a different play — now in its penultimate act — was being performed in the same theatre, grown creaky and drafty, before a shabbier, though far more cynical and knowledgeable, audience.

THAT spring Gachev introduced me to an old college friend, Vadim Kozhinov, a Bakhtin disciple and a self-described “statist” (государственник) who as a young man had married the daughter of the notorious Vladimir Ermilov, the leading Soviet literary critic under Stalin. Suave and worldly, Kozhinov was always ready with a quip and brought a humorous attitude to everything, including his own neo-Slavophile views. I recall an exchange between the two men. Gachev was complaining that he was not being published. In 1969 *Izvestiia* had denounced him for “mocking”³³ Stalin’s famous wartime address to the

²⁹ A title that calls to mind Aleksandr Zinoviev’s influential tract *Homo Sovieticus*.

³⁰ Georgii Gachev, “Ia sovetskii chelovek,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, Jan. 29, 1994.

³¹ Gachev, *Mental’nosti*, 359.

³² Georgii Gachev, “O sebe,” online edition (<http://gachev.userline.ru/avtor.php#pr>).

³³ “Venzelia vydelyvaet moia mysl’,” *Izvestiia*, March 3, 1969. Quoted in: Gachev, “Samopredstavlenie.”

nation of July 3, 1941 in one of his books,³⁴ and ever since Gachev had found it hard to get into print. Kozhinov pointed out, however, that his friend already had five books out, to which the latter replied that he had a dozen more in manuscript.

THIS lament was something of a leitmotif with Gachev. He repeated it when I interviewed him in May 2003. I wanted to question him about his attitude to Rozanov. Gachev was happy to oblige. Rozanov, he said, was a “journalist to the marrow of his bones” whose writings were forever being published in his lifetime, whereas he, Gachev, has been a “refusenik of the printing presses” (в отказе от печати).

BY the way, Gachev’s Wikipedia bibliography lists 34 books.

GACHEV second wife, the beautiful and accomplished Svetlana Semenova, is an authority on the religious thinker Nikolai Fedorov (1829-1903) — as apocalyptic a figure as anyone else in that generation of apocalyptic Russian thinkers. Tall, fair, majestic of bearing, though also warm and humorous, Svetlana was Gachev’s muse, his “Imperatrix,” the beautiful and benevolent ruler of his private universe. They had two daughters, Larisa and Nadezhda; Gachev also has a son, Dmitrii, from his previous marriage. I mention these family details because this thinker integrated his family into his literary productions in ways that are even more direct, frank and revealing than was the case with Rozanov. The latter, let us recall, was scolded by Mrs. Rozanov for sharing too many details about his nearest and dearest with his readers: “You write about the children too intimately, this should not have been published.”³⁵ Gachev’s own family have shown themselves to be far more tolerant of his far more “intimate,” hyper-confessional authorial modes.

IN a characteristically self-deprecating comment, Gachev claimed to be the most junior figure in the Gachev household — or *izba*-hold: “Peace in a normal family as compensation for my lonely childhood. The plot involves several different personalities learning to live together and my education by, among others, my children.”³⁶

GACHEV’S view of the world is imaginative, dialectical, ahistorical, and ascientific. The universe is governed by Love (Любовь) and Enmity (Вражда), two opposing principles that control the genesis, formation, existence and decomposition of all things and beings. The “corporeality” (телесность) of each ethnic/religious community consists of different combinations of the “four Hellenic proto-elements,”³⁷ earth, water, air and fire. Societies and cultures are “organisms”³⁸ nourished and shaped by the forces of Eros, Logos (language, intellect, reason), and Cosmos (structure, order, beauty).

... THE FATE OF A GIVEN PEOPLE IS THE TEMPORAL PROJECTION OF ITS STRUCTURE-COMPOSITION-DISPOSITION-CHARACTER. HISTORY (LIFE) IS THE FACTORIZATION INTO A TEMPORAL SEQUENCE OF THAT WHICH IS ALREADY IMPLICIT IN THE IDEA-PRINCIPLE-STRUCTURE OF A GIVEN PEOPLE (OR PERSON)...³⁹

³⁴ *Soderzhatel'nost khudozhestvennyjg form. Epos. Lirika. Teatr* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1968). Gachev had suggested that Stalin’s appeal in his speech to “brothers and sisters” and “friends” marked an adoption by the state of the discourse of “natural, patriarchal communal life.” Quoted in Gachev, “Samopredstavlenie.”

³⁵ T. V. Rozanova, “Vospominaniia ob otse,” *V. V. Rozanov: Pro et contra*, vol. 1-2 (St. Petersburg: izd-vo Russkogo khristianskogo gumanitarnogo instituta, 1995), vol. 1, 61.

³⁶ Gachev, “O sebe.”

³⁷ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 18.

³⁸ Gachev, *Amerikanskii kosmos*, 678.

³⁹ Gachev, *Amerikanskii kosmos*, 434.

THE “structure” Gachev refers to is the natural environment within which a given ethnic or religious population dwells, and clearly, his reading of the past has nothing in common with academic history. “He preferred historiosophic concepts to historical facts,” says Reiner Grübel of Rozanov.⁴⁰ The same holds true for Gachev. The outlooks and behaviors of individuals and groups are, in his view, invariably manifestations of a given, collective, ethnic Eros, Logos, and Cosmos. The motive force of history is the struggle — not of races or classes, but of the universal principles of Love and Enmity.

THE term that Gachev repeatedly uses to describe the end of the Soviet Empire is “breakdown” (развал). He recognizes the entropic nature of the collapse and agrees that it was unsightly, rather than spectacular. This is because, like Rozanov, he objects to the notion — metaphor — of history as spectacle. In *The American Cosmos* he quotes disapprovingly Fedor Tiutchev’s poem “Blessed is he who visited the world/In its fateful moments!” («Блажен, кто посетил сей мир/В его минуты роковые!»). Those “fateful moments,” Gachev comments, are but “coarse irritants” that thrill only “the talentless and the rabble.”⁴¹ History is neither linear or cyclical, but directionless; the scholar would do better to chronicle the events of the past, rather than search for patterns of meaning in them that possess a proleptic sense. Nor should he try to predict the future. If Rozanov ascribes considerable importance to the personalities and deeds of great men, for Gachev these outstanding individuals matter only in the short run, since with the passage of time their impact invariably dissipates, and it is as if they had never existed. For the teleologically minded Rozanov, “Wars took place, so that writers could describe them,”⁴² but for Gachev wars occur simply because Enmity has triumphed over Love.

THE fall of the Soviet Empire, to which Gachev always remained emotionally attached, nevertheless left him optimistic:

... THE CHAOS OF HISTORY AND OF ITS AGENT-COUNTRIES PASSES BEFORE OUR EYES IN ALL ITS GLORY: SOMEONE GALLOPS AHEAD ON A HORSE, LIKE NAPOLEON OR COMMUNISM, AND WINS A TRIUMPHANT VICTORY, BUT THEN FALLS INTO THE TRAP OF HIS OWN SUCCESS AND GROWS WEAK. WHEREAS THOSE WHO WERE DEFEATED RISE UP AND RECOVER. THIS APPLIES TODAY TO THE U. S. S. R. AND RUSSIA ...⁴³

GACHEV was a practising member of the Russian Orthodox Church. Like many Soviet intellectuals of his generation, he was baptized as an adult. He prayed daily and occasionally attended services — when, as he disarmingly reveals, he found himself baffled by the intricacies of the ritual.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, his is an essentially pagan worldview. The Divine is an infrequent presence in his texts, though Gachev insists that his meditations and writings are a form of communion with the Godhead: “I have put my life into the service of the intellect: I

⁴⁰ Rainer Grübel, “Rozanov kak instorik Rossii. Mezhdru spaseniem i mirom,” *La geste russe: comment les Russes écrivent-ils l’histoire au Xxe siècle?*, ed. Marc Weinstein (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l’Université de Provence, 2002), 133.

⁴¹ Gachev, *Amerikanskii kosmos*, 608.

⁴² V. V. Rozanov, *O pisatel’stve i pisateliakh* (Moscow: Respublika, 1995), 666.

⁴³ Gachev, *Amerikanskii kosmos*, 608.

⁴⁴ Gachev, *Amerikanskii kosmos*, 639-640.

extract ideas from every moment and experience, from every situation. And as I do that, I cleanse myself and rise up to be with the Spirit."⁴⁵

MORE revealing, though, is Gachev's admiration for Nabokov's "honest indifference in matters of church and faith"⁴⁶ and his admission that because he is at peace with the world and himself, he is largely lacking in religious feeling: "... I am too comfortable in this life, happy in my family, in love, so I don't particularly need God."⁴⁷ God is an irrelevancy.

LIKE Rozanov, Gachev privileges the communal over the societal and the political, and the familial over the communal and the personal. Rozanov's wife and daughters (though not his son) figure prominently in his texts. Gachev is forever referring to his own wife and daughters; less frequently to his son. Characteristic of Rozanov is the awareness of oneself as body and the use of one's sensory — sensual — experience as a methodological tool. His friend Erikh Gollerbakh recalled that the thinker "adopted an attitude towards all living things that was first of all 'gustatory,' 'tactile,' 'olfactory'."⁴⁸ Gachev's narratives are even more confessional and physiologically self-referential than Rozanov's, combining as they do an idiosyncratic, even eccentric interpretation of the history and culture of a given ethnicity or religious community with an exhaustive account of the author's bodily experiences as they relate (or do not relate) to the topic of study. "I realized that I am a device, an instrument, by means of which someone (something: History? Reality? God?...) is conducting an experiment, and so I act as an amanuensis ..."⁴⁹

THE most-remarked upon aspect of Gachev's writings is their high erotic content. Time and time again he describes, with a frankness that few other writers have ever equalled, his sexual relationship with his wives and lovers and even with himself. The subject of study is constantly sexualized, again in ways that call to mind Rozanov. Here are a few examples taken at random. The river Kurkureu in Chingiz Aitmatov's tale *Dzhamilia*, Gachev suggests, flows past the eponymous heroine and her boyfriend "like the ejaculation of the sperm of the world."⁵⁰ "Infants are mini-phallic, children are little rods" (Дети — фаллята, ребята — стерженьки).⁵¹ The female breast is "an enormous glans penis."⁵² The family is something similar, "a single choral phallus rising into the sky."⁵³ Needlework, that traditional female pastime, has cosmic, placentary overtones: "... Thereby the walls of the world womb are lined, assimilated and rendered familiar."⁵⁴ The guillotine is a "social, state-sanctioned vagina."⁵⁵ Like the Modernist he is, Gachev does not differentiate between the literal and the figurative, or between metaphor and metonym, fracturing traditional, established meanings only to reassemble their splinters and shards in a colourful new textual mosaic (to coin a metaphor).

⁴⁵ Gachev, *Amerikanskii kosmos*, 635.

⁴⁶ Gachev, *Amerikanskii kosmos*, 635.

⁴⁷ Georgii Gachev, "Natsional'nye obrazy Boga v perevodakh Nagornoj propovedi," online edition (<http://gachev.userline.ru>).

⁴⁸ Rozanov, *Sochineniia*, 556, fn. 2.

⁴⁹ Gachev, "Samopredstavlenie."

⁵⁰ G. Gachev, *Chingiz Aitmatov i mirovaia literatura* (Frunze: Kyrgyzstan, 1982), 117.

⁵¹ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 48.

⁵² Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 48.

⁵³ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 102.

⁵⁴ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 49.

⁵⁵ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 104.

IN Gachev's reading, the city is denatured, a barren place of asphalt, buildings, machines, where "the only thing that is left of living nature, of its bosom, is the female breast."⁵⁶ He defines sex as "tactile bodily contact."⁵⁷ But sex is urban and therefore merely "an instance, variant of Eros, of Love, which unites the world into a single whole and nourishes life eternal through constant birth and creativity."⁵⁸

GACHEV'S Eros has something of Plato's and something of Freud's (and something of C. S. Lewis's, although I am not sure if he had read *The Four Loves*). In *The Symposium* Plato identifies Eros as a "great divinity," but also an "intermediate" one.⁵⁹ He is "rough and hard and homeless and unshod, even lying on the ground without bedding, sleeping in doorsteps and besides roads under the open sky."⁶⁰ Gachev's Eros is also a bit of a hobo. In Plato, Eros is associated with beauty and, because wisdom is beautiful, with philosophy. Gachev's Eros, who is emphatically differentiated from his bookish Logos, has no such intellectual pretensions. The thinker praises Freud for revealing the role played by the erotic in human life to the urbanized, industrialized, politicized Age of the Modern, but notes that he reduced it to mere sex and the sex drive. As for (post)Freudian psychoanalysis, it is a "delusion and mirage."⁶¹ Still, like the Sage of Vienna, Gachev sees Eros as both life-affirming and oriented towards communal living; but if in Freud, Eros has a dark counterpart, Thanatos, Gachev places far less emphasis on the human instinct towards death and destruction. This is because his universe is a fundamentally benign place, the presence of Enmity notwithstanding. His Eros, like Plato's, embodies the human longing for happiness.⁶² Here it might be worth pointing out that, unusually for a Russian thinker, Gachev hardly ever adopts a critical or negative tone in his writings. Rozanov's works are full of rants and *ressentiments* directed against, say, the West in general, Germany in particular, Nihilists, Jews, or Russia itself — as well as God the Father and God the Son. Gachev, however, has no axes to grind. In constructing his "national images of the world" he consistently displays an attitude of intellectual curiosity and kenotic humility.

BUT let us return to Rozanov's and Gachev's views on human sexuality. For Rozanov, Adam was created in the image of the Male-Female God (Rozanov actually speaks of two Gods, one male and one female). Thus created, Adam was "in his hidden fullness Adam-Eve, a male but also (*in potentia*) a female: they divided, and this was the *creation of Eve*."⁶³ For Gachev, it is reality (бытие), rather than God, that is "bisexual."⁶⁴ One is reminded of Rozanov's "I constantly longed to see the entire world pregnant."⁶⁵

HUMANS are phallic, writes Gachev, and children especially so, whereas reality is a "vagina, woman, mother." Both humans and reality can be re-gendered. When men (women are not mentioned here) are put to death or go to war, the male is "penetrated" by existence and "plays the part of the female."⁶⁶ Elsewhere he speaks of the "primordial

⁵⁶ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 36.

⁵⁷ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 107.

⁵⁸ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 11.

⁵⁹ *The Dialogues of Plato*, v. 1-2 (New Haven: Yale University, 1984); v. 2, 146.

⁶⁰ *The Dialogues of Plato*, v. 2, 147.

⁶¹ Gachev, *Mental'nosti*, 353.

⁶² *The Dialogues of Plato*, v. 2, 148.

⁶³ Rozanov, *Liudi lumnogo sveta*, 33.

⁶⁴ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 105.

⁶⁵ V. V. Rozanov, *Uedinennoe* (Moscow: Izd-vo politicheskoi literatury, 1990), 150.

⁶⁶ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 105.

hermaphroditism” of the human body and cites Plato’s myth of the androgynes in *The Symposium*.⁶⁷

NOW, Plato classifies human beings into heterosexual men (sectioned from primordial androgynes), heterosexual women (also so sectioned), female homosexuals (sectioned from a woman, rather than an androgyne), and male homosexuals (sectioned from a male). Zeus placed the human pudenda in front of the male and female body “so that if male met female, they might in their embrace beget and their race continue to exist, while at the same time if male met male, there’d at least be satiety from their intercourse [...]”⁶⁸ Plato therefore recognizes that human beings are inherently either heterosexual or homosexual. So does Rozanov. He writes, sardonically,

THE MORAL LAW, HAVING UNJUSTLY INVADED A SPHERE WHERE IT DOES NOT BELONG, DIVIDED COITIONS INTO THOSE THAT IT DEEMED “NORMAL,” THAT IS, EXPECTED, AND THOSE THAT IT DEEMED “ABNORMAL,” THAT IS, “UNDESIRABLE,” YET “UNDESIRABLE” COITIONS ARE NOT DESIRED BY THOSE WHO DO NOT DESIRE THEM, BUT ARE SUPREMELY DESIRED BY THOSE WHO DESIRE THEM AND INDEED ENGAGE IN THEM.⁶⁹

IN his treatise *Solitaria*, he even identifies his own feminine side: “That which is noble in my writings came not from me. Like a woman, I merely knew how to imbibe it and then realize it.” («Благородное, что есть в моих сочинениях, вышло не из меня. Я умел только, как женщина, воспринять это и выполнить»)⁷⁰ Had there been no comma between только and как, this passage would have been even more provocative and modern-sounding!

GACHEV agrees with Rozanov and Jung, referring to them by name, that men and women contain within themselves at least a “sliver” (толика) of the opposite sex.⁷¹ Yet as a happily married heterosexual male who, by his own admission, uses his body as experimental device (I almost said, tool), he regards male/female coition as the norm. This sometimes leads him astray, culturologically speaking, though always productively so.

IN *The American Cosmos*, Gachev adduces Walt Whitman's poetic persona in order to explain 1) the American male attitude towards women: “... In Whitman a woman is merely a thing: he needs a beautiful woman so that she may conform to the setting, so that she can be the helpmate of a machine-living strong-willed titan”;⁷² and 2) the American attitude to nature: “Nature is just a fat wench, a gigantic bawdy-bawd meant to pleasure the cosmic body of the I. Nature is a sexpot” (Природа — просто огромная баба, бабища-бабета, на потребу космическому телу Меня. Природа — сексбомба).⁷³ Whitman, of course, was gay.

THE body Rozanov writes about is a decidedly Edwardian or even Victorian construct. It is concealed by heavy clothing, sees little of the sun, and is unfamiliar with exercise. There

⁶⁷ Gachev, *Russkii Eros*, 48.

⁶⁸ *The Dialogues of Plato*, v. 2, 132.

⁶⁹ Rozanov, *Liudi lunnogo sveta*, 34.

⁷⁰ Rozanov, *Sochineniia*, 73.

⁷¹ Gachev, *Amerikanskii kosmos*, 401.

⁷² Gachev, *Amerikanskii kosmos*, 227.

⁷³ Gachev, *Amerikanskii kosmos*, 214.

is a whiff of decadence, even corruption about it. Often, it is listless. Sometimes, it may even be dead:

THE SEXUAL MYSTERY OF GOGOL IS INTRIGUING. IT DEFINITELY DID NOT AMOUNT TO MASTURBATION, AS IS COMMONLY THOUGHT (CF. CONVERSATIONS). SO WHAT WAS IT? HE UNDOUBTEDLY "KNEW NOT WOMAN", THAT IS, HE LACKED A PHYSIOLOGICAL APPETITE FOR HER. WHAT, THEN, DOES HE SHOW US? THE EXTRAORDINARY VIVIDNESS OF HIS PALETTE WHENEVER HE DESCRIBES DEAD BODIES. ... HIS CORPSES ARE TWICE AS ALIVE AS ANYONE ELSE, HIS DEAD BODIES ARE NEVER "DEAD," WHEREAS HIS LIVING CHARACTERS ARE AMAZINGLY CORPSE-LIKE.⁷⁴

THE author goes on to point out that Gogol's corpses are individualized and invariably young and female. Note that in this passage, where he discusses subjects such as onanism and necrophilia, his judgments are purely esthetic.

NOT so with Gachev. In his American journal he records a conversation with a Russian exchange student at Connecticut's Wesleyan University, where Gachev taught as a visiting professor in the autumn of 1991. He quotes approvingly his informant's insights about sexual attitudes on campus:

THE MOST INFLUENTIAL THING HERE IS FEMINISM! THE GIRLS ARE LIKE MEN, THEY EVEN TRY TO BE MORE MANNISH THAN MEN. THEY PREFER TO PICK UP GUYS THEMSELVES. THEY REFUSE TO BE COURTED. ALL IN ALL, IT'S A PRETTY PURITAN SET-UP, THOUGH THEY ARE CAPABLE OF RAPING A MAN.⁷⁵

HOMOSEXUALITY and homoerotic art are among the few topics that prompt Gachev to abandon his usual defamiliarizing, child-like, kenotic posture and, as it were, raise his voice. Here is a passage from a journal entry, dating from 1994, which he quotes in *The American Cosmos*:

LAST NIGHT SV[ETLANA] SAT DOWN TO WATCH A NEW FILM, VITIUK'S STAGING OF G[ENET], SOME FRENCHMAN OR OTHER: THE LATEST FASHION WHERE PEDERASTS ARE CONCERNED... I TOOK A PEEK AND FOUND THE WHOLE THING TO BE PHYSIOLOGICALLY REVOLTING ... BUT SHE FEELS SHE HAS A DUTY TO KEEP HERSELF INFORMED EVEN ABOUT THE GROTESQUERIES OF MODERN CULTURE...⁷⁶

GACHEV "first hit upon the genre"⁷⁷ of the "life-meditation" by amorous accident. As he tells it, in 1961 he was working on his first book. He was "passionately analyzing" Achilles's jealous anger towards Agamemnon over the concubine Briseis, whom the king had stolen from him. The passion of the analysis was due to Gachev's sense of identification with the Greek hero, for at the time, though married and the father of a baby boy, he was having an affair with the young and attractive wife of the critic Ermilov, whom I already mentioned.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Rozanov, *Uedinennoe*, 150.

⁷⁵ Gachev, *Mental'nosti*, 367.

⁷⁶ *Amerikanskii kosmos*, 631.

⁷⁷ Interview with Gachev.

⁷⁸ Interview with Gachev.

Ermilov was certainly the Agamemnon, if not of Soviet literature, then of Soviet literary criticism.

EVENUALLY Mrs. Ermilov went back to her husband. Gachev, however, completed his book and in 1963 submitted it for publication. It was then that an internal reviewer, Vitalii Vasilevskii, “unmasked” and “cursed” the author as a Rozanov acolyte.⁷⁹ This was how the young writer learned of the parallels between himself and the earlier thinker, whom he had not read at the time. As we know, when five years later this book, or rather a truncated version of it, was published, it brought down upon Gachev the wrath of the state.

UNTIL the late 1980s Gachev was unable to travel abroad freely, though he crisscrossed the Soviet Union on foot and by train and once or twice was allowed to visit Bulgaria, his ancestral homeland. As a result he learned not to rely on on-site research and, indeed, to eschew it:

I EXPERIENCED ALL THE GOOD THINGS LIFE HAS TO OFFER: LOVE, NATURE, CULTURE, THE FREEDOM TO BE CREATIVE... – YET I NEVER SAW THE WORLD, ALTHOUGH I FELT A STRONG TEMPTATION TO DO SO. BUT WHO WAS ALLOWED TO TRAVEL IN OUR COUNTRY? COMRADES IN POSITIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY ... AND SO IN ORDER TO SATISFY THIS NEED I FELT TO SEE THE WORLD AND DIFFERENT COUNTRIES, TO LEARN ABOUT OTHER WAYS OF LIFE AND PATTERNS OF THOUGHT, I BEGAN TO STUDY AND DESCRIBE THE NATIONAL IMAGES OF THE WORLD. THIS IS HOW I TRAVEL: MENTALLY AND IMAGINATIVELY. FOR A YEAR OR TWO I IMMERSE MYSELF IN A PARTICULAR COUNTRY: I SURROUND MYSELF WITH BOOKS ABOUT ITS NATURAL ENVIRONMENT, HISTORY, RELIGION, CUISINE; I STUDY ITS LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND SCIENCE, LISTEN TO ITS MUSIC, VIEW ITS ART, FILMS, AND PLAYS – AND AFTER THUS COMMUNING WITH IT, I DEVELOP A PICTURE OF THIS WORLD AND I PAINT YET ANOTHER NATIONAL PORTRAIT.⁸⁰

GACHEV freely admits that his literary productions are prodigiously numerous and prodigiously long. “I, too, feel I’m a graphomaniac,” he humbly says when an acquaintance accuses Solzhenitsyn of this peculiarly Russian literary sin.⁸¹ As Gachev explains in one of his more ornamental passages, “like a hermit-crab or a black widow spider or a silkworm I spun my web, monotonously and maniacally... As a result I destroyed the form, for my purpose was not to create a finished work ... the amorphous intestine of my writings grew longer decade by decade...”⁸²

GACHEV likes to think of himself as transgressive — who doesn’t these days! He describes himself as a “genre criminal” (жанровый преступник)⁸³ and speaks of the “selfishness” of his method of literary production.⁸⁴ Yet here not all is as it seems — perhaps even to the author himself. In *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates compare the making of a speech to the growth of a living creature. This is the idea of organic form, which reflects the structure and content of the writer’s subject and theme. Gachev’s “life-meditations” are among the most vivid examples of organic form in Russian literature. These chronicles of the author’s

⁷⁹ Interview with Gachev.

⁸⁰ Gachev, “O sebe.”

⁸¹ Gachev, *Amerikanskii kosmos*, 361.

⁸² Gachev, “Samopredstavlenie.”

⁸³ Georgii Gachev, “Ot avtora.”

⁸⁴ Gachev, “Samopredstavlenie.”

researches, travels, family life, and physiological experiences amount to epic self-textualizations. It is perhaps in this strictly formal sense that the parallels with Rozanov — an earlier and equally passionate self-textualizer — are most valid. Writing is Rozanov's and Gachev's mode of intellectual inquiry and, in a very direct sense, physical existence.

AT the beginning of this article I quoted Berdiaev. I would like to conclude it with another quotation from the same source. Having discussed the eschatological orientation of Russian literature, he compares Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. While the author of *The Brothers Karamazov* is a "Dionysian artist," future-oriented, "prophetic," an author of "tragedies" and an "anthropologist" who is "entirely absorbed by the problem of man," Tolstoy is "an artist of stable and formed existence" who is non-prophetic and whose characters are "immersed in the life of the cosmos, the vortex of cosmic life." "Dostoevsky exists in history, Tolstoy exists in the cosmos," concludes Berdiaev.⁸⁵

THE same may be said respectively — respectfully — about Vasilii Rozanov and Georgii Gachev.

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⁸⁵ Berdiaev, *Istoki russkogo kommunizma*, 71.