

***SOPHIA-PRUNIKOS***

*The Dualistic Cosmogony of  
Vladimir Solov'ev  
and its Consequences  
in the Life and Work of  
Aleksandr Blok*

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A Thesis Equivalent Presented to the Graduate  
Faculty of the University of Virginia

Department of Slavic Languages & Literature

University of Virginia  
May, 1994

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<u>ABSP</u>	<i>Alexander Blok: Selected Poems</i>
<u>ABSS</u>	Александр Блок: <u>Собрание сочинений в шести томах</u>
<u>VS</u>	Владимир Соловьев: «Неподвижно лишь солнце любви...»

## DUALISM: AN OVERVIEW

It would seem that all attempts by man to account for his own origins – that is, the origin of the cosmos, of the Real – inevitably stumble across the problem of having to answer two related questions: what is the basis of evil, and what is the source of man's sense of separateness from, if not superiority over, the rest of creation?

Regardless of how evil is ultimately defined, even the most tolerant and optimistic of doctrines cannot but admit that ours is an imperfect world, relative to an imaginable cosmos in which all desires are met and the fear of death nonexistent. At the same time, the history of man *qua* species is replete with evidence that mankind, perhaps thanks to the endowments of reason and language, as well as other biological “advantages,” feels itself to have an ontological status that is unquestionably above that of animals, not to mention the subjects of the vegetable kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

It is certainly possible, by means of a slight shift in the angle from which these two questions are viewed, to envision them as composing fundamentally the same question, insofar as both concern a

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<sup>1</sup> A succinct statement of the relationship between consciousness and dualistic opposition (superiority) can be found in a curious place, namely in Philip K. Dick's neognostic novel, *VALIS*: “This is the danger of the archetypes; the opposite qualities are not yet separated. Bipolarization into paired opposites does not occur until consciousness occurs.” (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 177.

separation of man's earthly existence with all its expectations and obligations from another, irrational mode of existence that continually impinges upon man's consciousness and cannot be ignored. Of the various mythico-philosophical endeavors to explain or resolve this ongoing encounter with man's alienation from what Bataille terms the 'intimate order,'<sup>2</sup> perhaps the one that is most persistently revived, albeit in various forms, is *dualism*.

Properly speaking, dualism refers to a cosmogony in which two separate worlds (or universes) are brought into existence by two separate and usually opposed creative forces. In this purer form of dualism, most clearly exemplified by Zoroastrianism and other Near Eastern cosmogonies, there is generally an absolute alienation between the two created worlds such that the interactions between the respective creative forces is perceived as a struggle for absolute dominance in the form of a (military) victory.

In our own Judaeo-Christian tradition, this absolute form of dualism has been supplanted by what Ioan Couliano refers to as 'pseudo-dualism.'<sup>3</sup> In pseudo-dualist systems, the battle between the creators is not equally matched, and the creator of Evil or of the visible

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<sup>2</sup> Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 69 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Ioan P. Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 209.



world (if they were not consubstantial) is in some way subordinate to the creator of Good or of the ideal world (paradise). Any mythology, therefore, which attributes the creation of “this world” to a fallen angel, say, or to a less-than-omnipotent demiurge might be considered pseudo-dualistic.

The distinction between these two types of dualistic organization is not one that should be ignored, since the mode of conception in some sense dictates subsequent approaches to the problem of overcoming the implicit frustration of dualism. That is, in a pseudo-dualistic system, since the creator of the lower world is presumed to be inferior, the notion of redemption is more likely to be explicit, the task being to restore man to some original state from which he has diverged. In addition, as we shall attempt to show, the image of the creator(s) in dualistic cosmologies eventually becomes – if it is not already the projection of – the image of the artist, who presents himself as the embodiment of the (inferior) creator working at the human level.

Consequently, the inherent structural epistemological problems – the paradoxes, the internal contradictions – that become evident in the articulation of the dualistic world view as it tries to solve an intractable dilemma of human existence, are bound to produce tensions between the creator and the creation. Taken a step further, the artist who

envisions his own participation in the creative process as providing a link between two worlds (of any sort) can be presumed to be taking certain risks, which both test his belief in the reality of the worlds he seeks to unite by his craft, and threaten his ability to become or remain a unified consciousness existing in both realms simultaneously.

Dualism, especially of the sort known as (Neo-)Platonism, reappears from time to time as the philosophical basis for literary or other artistic movements which postulate an aesthetic ideal that resides in an area of existence or consciousness that is not accessible to ordinary men. These movements, such as Romanticism, then tend to promote an image of the artist as a Promethean hero, who by his machinations becomes capable of demonstrating the truth of the 'other world,' and of emulating in this world a modified form of experience that presumably obtains in the other. Even such an apparently commonplace notion as 'poetic inspiration' relies upon an implicit dualism insofar as the source of the poet's words is construed as divine: the *Iliad* itself, for example (for Homer is one of the central literary sources for our notion of poetic inspiration<sup>4</sup>), can be viewed as simply the outpouring of dactylic lines that results directly from Homer's

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<sup>4</sup>The argument, in recent times, over whether Homer really existed (i.e. was a single individual) is irrelevant here: the fact of the matter is that Homer's *writings* were once regarded, certainly during the time of Blok and Solov'ev, as being the font of European poetic tradition.

“Μῆνιν ᾄειδε, θεά.” (“Sing, goddess, of the wrath of Achilles...”). That is not to claim, of course, that the poet is not directly involved in shaping his text; yet craft without inspiration is traditionally considered cold, while inspiration bereft of craftsmanship may occasionally border on the incomprehensible.

Hence the nature of the problem: the creator who subscribes to a notion of inspiration must subtend two worlds: the mundane world of mechanics and technique, on the one hand, and the divine world of inspiration and illumination on the other. A consequence of the difficulty of this effort may become manifest in the life and psyche of the poet, to the extent that the heroism required for ‘crossing over’ from the mundane to the extra-mundane usually demands a more or less arrogant ego – one that in any case imagines itself capable of returning from such a dangerous journey – while at the same time a reduction in the space occupied by the ego is requisite to permit the influx of inspiration.

While it might be claimed that all creative enterprise is inherently dualistic (because it subjugates or opposes man the creator to another, more cosmic creative urge), the effects of an explicitly dualistic world view upon the life and work of an individual poet are seemingly more visible, and thus more capable of illuminating the

nature of the risks that man the creative creature takes when he presumes to transcend his natural domain.

## SOLOV'EV & THE SYMBOLISTS

As an example of the relationship between a philosophy that embeds a sort of dualism in its fundamental precepts and a derivative poetics that attempts to survive the potentially irreconcilable domains of dualistic thinking, we can look to the ideas propounded by Vladimir Solov'ev toward the end of the last century, and to the influence of those ideas (and perhaps the anxiety thereof) upon the poetics of the Russian symbolists, especially Aleksandr Blok.

The philosophical work of Vladimir Sergeevič Solov'ev (1853-1900) has been acknowledged as the first *system* of pure philosophy (comprising metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and esthetics) to be developed in Russia.<sup>5</sup> Within the brief span of his productive life, Solov'ev was able to develop a view of man, God and nature that, owing both to its syncretic and comprehensive character, as well as to its ultimate failure to resolve certain underlying paradoxes, was able to profoundly affect not only the future of Russian philosophy, but Russian art – especially poetry – as well.

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<sup>5</sup>V.V.Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 493, 530.



The complex development of Solov'ev's philosophy, which did not remain entirely abstract but rather touched heavily upon such issues as the political relations between East and West and the ideal unification of Christianity, is a topic whose vastness remains to be grappled with. Nevertheless, certain themes that form the stable basis upon which Solov'ev attempted to unify his philosophy are visible enough that it is possible to claim that it is this very set of themes that was eventually taken over by the Symbolists to serve as the philosophical basis for a poetics of "mystical idealism."

The tasks of the poet and the philosopher are rarely identical, although there may frequently exist an interdependence of one upon the other: the poet may look to the philosopher for a well-structured articulation of what in the poetry is intuitive or cannot be logically or empirically justified; at the same time, a philosopher – especially one concerned with aesthetics and the meaning of art – may feel obliged to examine cultural artifacts such as poetry to anchor reasoning that otherwise may come off as too abstract. In any case, the cognitive domains of poets and philosophers are frequently disjunct enough that a poetic school or movement is likely to borrow from a given antecedent philosophy only those ideas which support or modify in an apparently positive way a poetics that is already in place. In other words, poets

working within a given tradition are unlikely to look for reinforcement to philosophical arguments that undermine or contradict their own manifestoes.

This is not to say that poets cannot engage philosophical thinking thoroughly. Certainly it would be erroneous to assume that someone of the erudition and intellectual stature of Aleksandr Blok would read Solov'ev with only a superficial interest. It remains a fact, however, that only certain of Solov'ev's wide-ranging concerns were crucial to the formulation of the Symbolist credo. Not only that, but as we shall see, Solov'evian images were not borrowed into Symbolism without a modicum of reinterpretation. This reanalysis, or refocusing, of a philosophical system that already contained serious structural contradictions, resulted in a poetic philosophy even less capable of withstanding the disintegrating effects of unresolved metaphysical and axiological dualism.

Unlike the formal dualism of the ancient Near Eastern religions or the clearly defined opposition between the sensible and ideal realms exemplifying Platonist thought, Solov'ev's philosophy was, one might say, almost *unintentionally* dualistic. For while Solov'ev was without doubt greatly informed by Hegel and Schelling in the construction of his vision of the Absolute,<sup>6</sup> his vision of man – or of Sophia, which is the



ideal image of man – as the mediator between the unconditional and the conditional suggests that Solov'ev believed it possible to unify what he termed the first and second Absolute Principles.<sup>7</sup>

To that extent, Solov'ev's dualism is (unlike most true dualistic schemes) essentially optimistic.<sup>8</sup> And it perhaps his optimism, seeing in human history a determined movement toward the divine, that caught the attention of the Symbolists.

We know little of the earliest sources of Solov'ev's philosophical leanings, aside from the fact that his father (Sergej Mixajlovič Solov'ev) was a widely respected historian with an almost apocalyptic sense of contemporary human history, and what we learn from Solov'ev himself about his earliest encounters with the feminine archetype, the прекрасная дама named Sophia who beckons him to Egypt for what we can only surmise was some sort of initiatory revelation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 493. The Conditional is apparently that which exists with respect to *conditions*, such as temporality or physicality. This is in contrast to the Absolute, which is also Unconditional, i.e. outside the realm of attributes.

<sup>8</sup> The question arises as to whether it is not in fact this optimistic, almost positivistic, orientation within an essentially pessimistic world view that places such enormous stress upon the historiosophical structure.

<sup>9</sup> The location of Egypt, which is explicitly commanded in Solov'ev's famous poem "Three Encounters" ("*Tri svidanija*")—" 'Be in Egypt!' a voice within me sounded" – is designated for reasons that are not clear within the context of the poem. However, if Samuel Cioran is correct that Solov'ev's Sophiology is linked to or derived from that system of Christian Gnosticism known as the Valentinian speculation, then the choice of Egypt perhaps becomes clearer: in his chapter on the Valentinian speculation in *The Gnostic Religion*, Hans Jonas writes, "In the typical systems of the Syrian-Egyptian

We can trace this latter, more mystical branch of Solov'ev's manifold intellectual roots to Novalis, to Böhme, probably to the Neoplatonists, and to qabalah.<sup>10</sup> In addition, there are traces of ideas from Paracelsus and Swedenborg. Beyond these sources (who influenced not only Solov'ev but the whole theosophical movement of the late nineteenth century, beginning with Blavatskaja),<sup>11</sup> Solov'ev seems to maintain the requisite secrecy<sup>12</sup> regarding the specific influences of mystical ideas upon his conception of the nature of reality. In any case, what is important to understand about Solov'ev is not so much the sources of his mysticism, but that the mystical or intuitive side of his philosophy, the one that was of most interest to the Symbolists, was framed within a highly rationalistic, almost Darwinian

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Gnosis, it is the latter [i.e. the "female Thought of God"] who personifies the fallible aspect of God, usually under the name of 'Sophia'. (p. 176).

<sup>10</sup> Zenkovsky, 485-495. See also Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, "Solov'ev's Androgynous Sophia and the Jewish Kabbalah," *Slavic Review* 50, 3 (Fall 1991), 487-496.

<sup>11</sup> Recall that *The Secret Doctrine* was published in 1888. James Billington, in *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), sums up the Solov'evian syncretism thus: "Solov'ev's poetic references to a mysterious 'beautiful lady' were both a symptom and a cause of the new turn toward mystical idealism. The beautiful lady was in part Comte's goddess (*vièrge positive*) of humanity, in part the missing madonna of a revived romanticism, and in part the divine wisdom (*sophia*) of Orthodox theology and occult theosophy." (p. 471).

<sup>12</sup> P.F.M. Fontaine, in the appendix to Vol. IV of his multivolume cultural history of dualism, *The Light and the Dark*, makes the interesting claim that an "instance of the tendency to dualism is the occurrence of closed or secret societies...[which are classified as] esoteric because their members hold themselves apart from the common run of mankind and keep their secrets to themselves in order that they should not be profaned by the uninitiated." (p. 304).

form. Much of Solov'ev's philosophical argument concerning man's approach to Godness is backed up by evidence seemingly taken from biological taxonomy and a teleological or positivistic understanding of the laws of natural selection.

In fact, although the influence of Darwin upon Solov'ev is rarely mentioned, Solov'ev acknowledges Darwin, whose work he knew in German translation, in his long essay "Beauty in Nature" ("*Krasota v prirode*"). While Darwin may not be considered a direct influence upon Solov'ev, since the basic themes of Solov'ev's thinking had already been developed by the time Darwin's major writings would have become available to him, one cannot help noticing how Darwinian is Solov'ev's view of the *organic* nature of the universe, and of the relationship between the conditional and individual (ontogeny) and the unconditional and universal (phylogeny).

Solov'ev clearly has difficulty in reconciling his observation that on the one hand, man is an individual, presumably with a will of his own, while on the other, the totality of mankind, including its history and future, is itself a kind of organism, whose direction (he believed) is determined, and directed toward all-unity. Perhaps this dual nature of man (or any level of the organic) represents the fundamental problem of all dualism: that the individual at the same time comprises less



complex individuals and is a member of a more complex individual organism. Put another way, man can (or in Solov'evian terms, is obliged to) participate in the divine yet at the same time (because he is an individual) he is fully capable of turning away from it; in Eastern Orthodox thought, this deliberate turning away is identified with Evil.<sup>13</sup> Thus even in a system as developed as Solov'ev's there remains that persistent bugaboo "free will": it is free will that is inculcated in man by virtue of the Absolute's *need* to have a real Other that is somehow *to become* the Absolute itself, yet it is also free will that is either evil itself or the product of evil. (We can see here a Dostoevskiiian sympathy, where Solov'ev is led to the problematic conclusion that if the ideal in man (Sophia) is deterministically leading man toward the Divine, then the Absolute-granted freedom of will can only manifest itself by choosing another direction, i.e. by choosing evil, which is by definition a turning away from the divine.)

It is Solov'ev's "keen awareness of the tremendous power of evil persisting to the end of the world"<sup>14</sup> that prevents him, finally, from accepting a purely Christian view of the world, despite his ongoing

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<sup>13</sup> George Florovsky, in *Creation and Redemption* (vol. 3 of *Collected Works*, Belmont, MA, 1976), discusses the paradox of free will and evil within Orthodox theology in terms of the Last Judgment, and raises the question whether there is any room for revolt, defiance, opposition to divine will. See esp. 250-262.

<sup>14</sup> S.L. Frank, *A Solovyov Anthology* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1950), 28.

attempts to bring his philosophy under the rubric of Christianity and to reestablish “the unity of the Ecumenical church.”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, despite this sensitivity to the fact of evil in the created world, Solov’ev seems to be able to adhere to his doctrine of Godmanhood (*bogočlovečestvo*), a doctrine that on the surface certainly seems to embody a subtle Christian tenet, namely that God is present in every man and it is the presence of Godness in men that (although Solov’ev seems reluctant to mention “redemption”) will lead him in the right direction.

In such dualistic systems as Manichaeism, this kind of thinking, in which “a piece of God” is present in every man, leads to a position of antagonism toward matter and the material world, insofar as these are considered to be in illicit possession of the Light, and to have imprisoned the Light which naturally desires to return to the Good (or alternatively, Unity, the Original Light, the Absolute). In Solov’evian philosophy, however, the body (matter) in principle is not opposed to the immaterial, but rather exists as part of God's need to manifest his own existence. The problem with this optimistic dualism is that it posits an Absolute that in fact is not absolute: the Absolute, the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Unconditional, apparently *has a need to* create a (second) Absolute which somehow is necessary so that God's reality can become manifest.

It is unlikely that this particular internal contradiction in Solov'ev's philosophy – a trap which Zenkovsky perhaps unfairly attributes to Solov'ev's attraction to qabalah<sup>16</sup> – was a major or even visible problem for those who looked to Solov'ev's mysticism to provide a set of ideas and images that could be taken over and manipulated for the sake of creating poetry based on intuition. The point here is that the underlying, almost psychological dualism of Solov'ev's allegiance to the ideal but unstable unification of reason and faith may have gone unnoticed by those (such as the poets) who were predisposed toward finding *solutions*. As a consequence, what may have amounted to a small logical “fracture” in the underlying cosmogonic principles eventually became a larger fissure under the weight of Symbolist reinterpretation.

The question of how the Absolute manifests itself (which is indeed a major philosophical question posed by qabalistic emanationism) and the subtleties concerning how the created world is teleologically identical with the Absolute will continue to remain issues for debate among philosophers and theologians, but not necessarily poets. Of more

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<sup>16</sup> Zenkovsky, 497.



concern for poetry is the *image* of an ideal universe from which to obtain, in a fairly pragmatic fashion, the substances necessary for creating a beauty that is reminiscent of the Absolute kingdom.

Solov'ev's own ideas on the task of poetry fairly clearly point out the essence of what in his philosophy is of most consequence for the poet:

As belonging to both worlds man can and must through intellectual contemplation be in touch with the divine world, and while still dwelling in the world of struggle and anxious confusion, enter into communion with the serene images abiding in the realm of glory and eternal beauty...Every true poet must penetrate to 'the native land of flame and word' so as to borrow from it the archetypes of his creations and the inner enlightenment called inspiration which enables us to find even in our natural world colors and sounds for the embodiment of ideal patterns.<sup>17</sup>

To the mystically inclined poet, what is intriguing about Solov'ev's philosophy is the possibility that there is an ideal other world which generously permits him to bring into his own poetry the "archetypes" that reveal the truth of the other world itself. The temptation of this promise of inspirational energy in the form of images would naturally tend to inhibit any committed seeker from questioning too rigidly the reality of this potentially overwhelming beauty.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> V. Solov'ev, "God, the divine basis of creation and man" (abridged from Lecture 7 of *Lectures on God-Manhood*), in S.L. Frank, *A Solov'yev Anthology*, 39.

<sup>18</sup> One of the problems with elevating intuition to such a high status is that all moves based on intuition are assumed to be correct; incorrect moves result from interference from another faculty. It thus becomes impossible to

In addition to this casting of the ideal world as a both accessible and serene domain, Solov'ev's writings also describe an alluring image, borrowed more or less intact from Neoplatonism (namely, in the form of the World Soul) or its descendants, of the feminine archetype,<sup>19</sup> Sophia. This image, in Solov'evian terms, is "the divine basis or essence of that which, as creation, is distinct from God."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Sophia is the true rationale and end of creation, who takes the form of "a luminous and heavenly being separated from the darkness of earthly matter." Thus the image of the incarnation of the divine idea, the integral organism formed by all human elements and thereby representing both "the eternal body of God and the eternal soul of the world,"<sup>21</sup> possesses an erotic aspect (in the sense that she is *desirable*). The form of this anthropomorphization is close enough to that of the classically feminine muse<sup>22</sup> that She could easily be merged with that function; there would in that case be no reason to question her beneficence or divinity.

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question the accuracy of intuition.

<sup>19</sup> We must look at the allure of the feminine through nineteenth century eyes: the poetic tradition which was to take the Solov'evian image of Sophia most to heart was not an evenly balanced group of men and women. At the same time, idealistic projections of the feminine are frequently of interest to women for narcissistic, rather than erotic reasons.

<sup>20</sup> *A Solovyov Anthology*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Zenkovsky, 498.

<sup>22</sup> The connection between Sophia and the Greek Muse is hardly new; it is explicit in Russian ikons from as early as the fourteenth century: "The figure of Holy Wisdom, acting as a kind of inspiration or muse to Luke...has the same essential characteristics as the figure of Wisdom in the icon Wisdom Hath Builded Her House. The Muse icon type, with Sophia pictured with any

In this cosmogonic system, there remains a serious flaw, which is perhaps obscured by the luminous image of Sophia herself, namely: on the one hand, Sophia is the embodiment of the Absolute through man taken as an organism, and thus presumably the representation of the divine as manifest creation; at the same time, her luminous quality would seem to represent an attraction, which calls upon man's desire, his will, which as we have already noted is the source of Evil. In other words, the desirability that is imputed to Sophia implies that She, who is luminous but also abstract, must in some sense attract man to the ideal condition she represents. But to endow her with desirability also implies that without that particular characteristic, man might for whatever reason choose a different mode of existence. Thus from the Orthodox point of view, at least one hypostasis of Sophia is already grounded in the world of Evil (seduction), because she is by definition apart from the determined (unconditional) Absolute. Her attributes would appear to have no function other than to invoke man's free will to turn toward Her, and yet his will is potentially aligned with evil.

This suggests that as soon as this archetype is sexualized,<sup>23</sup> it is immediately contaminated because of its affiliation with passion (even

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of the four evangelists, is rare...The chief inspiration for this icon type was thirteenth century and fourteenth century neo-Hellenistic miniatures from the Balkans, which did indeed emphasise the Greek idea of the muse." Donald M. Fiene, "What is the Appearance of the Divine Sophia?" in *Slavic Review* 48, 3 (Fall 1989), 455.



if that passion is consciously oriented toward the Good). It then becomes possible to speculate, if we are indeed looking at this part of the Solov'evian system as true cosmogony, that the manifest Sophia might in fact be a demon (that is, a reduced or inverted form of the divine), or at least a second hypostasis of Sophia (for which there is some evidence in the Valentinian speculation)<sup>24</sup> whose disguise is in fact the most appropriate one to take for an opponent of the Absolute in a dualistic universe.

Whether Solov'ev himself understood this, understood that the perception of Sophia is fraught with danger arising from the illusion of her image, is not clear.<sup>25</sup> He states, however, that

both *hell* and earth, as well as heaven, follow man with particular concern during the fateful period when Eros is becoming part of him.<sup>26</sup>

It would seem that toward the end of his life, when the above sentence was written, Solov'ev may have realized the implicit danger in falling for the illusory image of Sophia, which because it is clothed by human desire is therefore contaminated. Not that Solov'ev would lose

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<sup>23</sup> Despite the innocent nobility of Solov'ev's faith in the divinity of human sexuality as the prerequisite for recreating the Absolute.

<sup>24</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 183 ff.

<sup>25</sup> This very same confusion, it seems to me, between "image" and "likeness," lay at the center of the Iconoclastic controversy surrounding the use of Holy Ikons in Orthodox worship. See Leonid Ouspensky, *The Theology of Ikons*, vol. I

<sup>26</sup> Zenkovsky, p 525.

faith in the artistic process; on the contrary, he continued to imagine that “erotic idealization...summons us to the transfiguration of man.”<sup>27</sup>

But whether those of his followers who were attracted simply to the feminine archetype and the promise of access to deeper symbols existing in the Unconditional were themselves capable of recognizing the ambiguous nature of Sophia and the danger of mistaking their own will for God's will, is a question that can be answered by a closer investigation of the poetry that is devoted to that image. There is certainly the possibility that it was precisely the tension between the ideal and the human that was itself of interest to those who saw in Sophia a kind of hope concerning the fate of man.

## THE SOPHIOLOGICAL POETRY OF VLADIMIR SOLOV'EV

Solov'ev's poetry, by and large, is more thematically consistent than it is well-crafted; in hindsight, Solov'ev was certainly more of a philosopher than a poet, but it is likely that Blok's appreciation of Solov'ev stems more from his reading of the latter's poetry, especially “Три свидания”, than of his more systematic and more abstract writings. Blok himself admits his preference for the poetry:

Есть Вл. Соловьев и его стихи – единственное в своём роде *откровение*, а есть «Собр. сочин. В.С. Соловьева» – скука и проза.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 527.

[There is Vl. Solov'ev and his poetry – a revelation unique in its kind, but there is also the “Collected Works of V.S. Soloviev” – boring and prosaic.]<sup>28</sup>

In any case, we can assume that Solov'ev's poetry, which does not in any way really contradict the Sophiological aspects of his philosophy, contains those images and ideas about the Eternal Feminine that were eventually borrowed by Blok.<sup>29</sup>

In his poetry, Solov'ev was more willing to *describe* Sophia, or at least his vision of her. This poetic struggle to describe the ineffable, to ground the abstract, is perhaps responsible for introducing enough of a distortion into the very conception of Sophia, that both Solov'ev and Blok at a certain point have mistaken some lesser image of Sophia for the original embodiment of Divine Wisdom.<sup>30</sup>

It is understandable, of course, that the need to manipulate images within poetic language might in some way inadvertently modify

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<sup>28</sup> See Blok's letter to E.P. Ivanov on 15 June (o.s.), 1904, in Blok, *Sobranie socinenij v sesti tomax*, VI, 65. Quoted in Samuel Cioran, *Vladimir Solov'ev and the Knighthood of the Divine Sophia* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977), 93.

<sup>29</sup> The poet Andrej Belyj, whose use of the Solove'vian doctrine we are not considering here, was apparently more willing to engage the philosophical writings than his eventual friend and rival, Blok.

<sup>30</sup> This, again, parallels the problem that beset Christianity, emerging as it did from Judaism, a religion whose god was invisible and thus could not be represented. The clash between icon and idol is suggestive of the problem confronting Solov'ev in attempting to present the ineffable as desirable. Though we have no definite knowledge of Solov'ev's earliest awareness of iconography, he certainly was well aware of the history of Orthodoxy, and his philosophy may have been in some way informed by the theological dispute at the center of the iconoclastic controversy.



an idea (i.e. Sophia) which is by definition abstract, being as it is a part of a highly speculative system of cosmogonic and eschatological thought. By definition, after all, the ineffable cannot be expressed directly, and therefore any description will have to be limited by language itself. Since full justice can never be given to the articulation of the ineffable object's true contours, such limitation must always yield an inadequate and untrue description. This is less of a problem if the limitations of language are always borne in mind.

However, failure from the outset to be aware that the limitations of language are bound to introduce perceptual distortions might in turn lead to a situation in which this "corrupted" image comes to be placed at the center of the system, displacing the idea represented by the image and thereby affecting the validity of dependent speculation.

Much of Solov'ev's poetry, especially the earlier works, takes the form of an address to some unspecified Thou (that is, the second person singular personal pronoun in Russian, *ты*). The antecedent to this *ty* does not seem at all to be invariant from poem to poem, insofar as in some cases this Other is being chastised, while in other it is being lauded. Except on those occasions when Solov'ev deigns to name his interlocutor, as in the poem entitled "To My Double", our only clues as

to the identity of this entity lie in grammatical gender and in similarity of descriptive features.

Solov'ev is not shy about addressing this Other from the very outset, not unlike an invocation, as is evident from the first lines of some of the poems under consideration: «О как в тебе лазури чистой много», «Бедный друг! истомил тебя путь», «Милый друг, иль *ты* не видишь» and so on. This very practice is also followed to no small degree by Blok, especially in those poems which are clearly derivative of Solov'evian Sophiology.

At the same time as he is direct in his address, seemingly on familiar terms with the addressee (the use of the familiar pronoun suggests this), the poet also locates Her<sup>31</sup> in a more or less cosmic setting. The images, the forces, the vectors are grandiose, celestial if not otherworldly:

О как в тебе лазури чистой много  
И черных, черных туч!  
Как ясно над тобой сияет отблеск Бога,  
Как злой огонь в тебе томителен и жгуч.

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<sup>31</sup> At this point, to avoid 'laborious periphrasis', I shall refer to both the Solov'evian and Blokian images of Sophia and her various hypostases as "Her" without further qualification, unless it is necessary in the given context to differentiate further. A difficulty that exists in English that is less problematic in Russian is that gender is difficult to infer from pronominal constructions without antecedent or explicit gender reference. The reader will thus have to take on faith that the recipient of both Solov'ev's and Blok's addresses is *usually*, in the poems under consideration, a Feminine entity.

И как в твоей душе с невидимой враждою  
 Две силы вечные тайнственно сошлись,  
 И тени двух миров, нестройною толпою  
 Теснясь к тебе, причудливо сплелись.  
 [1884; *VS*, 31.]

The imagery of these opening stanzas, in fact, is somewhat typical of a Solov'evian lyric: the dark, almost German Romantic clouds with the imaginable sunburst; the sense of impending storm or conflict between opposed natural forces; and especially the Divine Feminine cloaked in "pure azure."<sup>32</sup>

The dualism asserted to exist in Solov'ev's worldview is quite evident in this lyric: the "two eternal forces"; the "shades of two worlds"; the "reflection of God"; the visual contrast between the gleaming azure and the black clouds (both within the same 'Thou'). These oppositions constitute an expression in poetic terms of Solov'ev's ideas about the relation of the world to God:

Solovyov is keenly aware that the world in its actual state is fallen away from God and therefore broken up into separate and hostile parts – and this constitutes the essence of evil.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> This pervasive use of azure by Solov'ev is noted by Fiene, as well, who attributes it to the color used in early Russian icons. However, it is more likely that this attribute was found by Solov'ev in his study of gnosticism and occult systems derived therefrom. Of course, we have no real reason to doubt that this is the color that Solov'ev "saw" in his vision of Sophia, regardless of its symbolic or archetypal value.

<sup>33</sup> *A Solovyov Anthology*, 11.

Evil, here, is linked to fire (злой огонь), and what is more, this evil fire, this “fire of hostile elements,” is located squarely within the Other.

Without recourse to the rest of Solov’ev’s poetry, the nature or identity of *Thou* would remain a mystery, for within the terms of the poem alone, it can only be inferred that the personification to whom the narrator is speaking represents some manifestation of natural and supernatural forces, onto which Solov’ev is projecting a conflict.

The metaphors used to present both the conflict and its resolution rely heavily upon nature imagery, and involve a depiction of Nature as a space animated by unseen forces. The thunderclap of the sacred word (which we should perhaps read as *logos*, here) releases the pent-up forces and precipitates a purifying torrent upon the “devastated vale”, which not only puts out the hostile fire, but uncovers the brilliance of heaven, which in turn illuminates earth:

И туча чёрная могучими струями  
Прорвется вся в опустошенный дол.

Thus an almost cosmic battle of elemental forces is seen by Solov’ev in the passing of a thunderstorm: this elevation of the natural into the supernatural, this perception of immanence within the mundane, eventually forms the basis for Russian Symbolist poetics. As Renato Poggioli points out in his chapter on Symbolism,



Solov'ev held the revelations of poetry to be both possible and necessary precisely because he believed that our perceptions of the physical world, even if only as dim reflections in a dark mirror, foreshadow a higher spiritual reality which we could not reach merely by means of our senses or our thoughts...It is evident that such a mystical and poetic doctrine implied the use of that vague device which many others, before and after him, defined by the term "symbol," even though Solov'ev hardly used that word.<sup>34</sup>

The contrast between, in its simplest terms, light and darkness is almost obsessively repeated in Solov'ev's poetry. This is often expressed by means of reference to the sun, although darkness, which was created by the clouds in the poem discussed above, is sometimes simply a consequence of night, i.e. the absence or setting of the sun. In a poem written in 1887, we find, for example, the lines,

Потускнел, дорогая, закат

...

Всё, кружась, исчезает во мгле,

Неподвижно лишь солнце любви.

[1887; *VS*, 53.]

This poem is likewise devoted to an Other, but in this case, at least the gender of the object of that dedication is explicit. For although the first two words of the poem, "Бедный друг", are of masculine gender (the word for 'friend', derived from the word for 'other', being neutral

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<sup>34</sup> Renato Poggioli, *Poets of Russia* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970), 124.

with respect to sex), the substantive “дорогая”, ‘dear one’, reveals that Solov’ev is directing his poem toward a female.

Solov’ev seems, in these two poems, to be undercutting the pure image of the Other's natural radiance, as if to suggest that there is an unwanted obscuration of an image which he intuitively realizes is divine or eternal. In “О как в тебе лазури...”, two great and opposed forces have been merged, there is “unseen hostility” within the very soul of the person being addressed, and the “brilliance of the heavenly vault” is only uncovered after it has been washed in light released by the sacred word. Similarly, in “Бедный друг...”, the Ты of the poem is haggard and dark, as if She has gone through some ordeal (about which Solov’ev declines to ask) and the sunset is tarnished. “Death and time rule on earth,” but apparently this feminine Other is above them, implying she is at least to some extent divine.

Thus there seem to be a number of presumptions on the part of the poet, namely that (1) this Other is transcendent yet susceptible to corruption and other human attributes (e.g. haggardness, exhaustion, hostility, secretiveness, and even evil); (2) he is aware (through intuition) of her true nature; and (3) it is permissible for him to declare his love for Her.



There does not appear to be anything particularly erotic in this, and in fact it would seem that Solov'ev's devotion, if we may call it such, is simply that: the declaration of piety by one who understands the true and divine nature of his Beloved. Nevertheless, there is something about the denied suspiciousness in the second stanza of "Бедный друг..." that shifts our perception of the relationship between speaker and spoken-to, so that it appears all-too-human:

Где была и откуда идёшь,  
Бедный друг, не спрошу я, любя;

Precisely this familiarity, which has the effect of immediately reducing the distance between Solov'ev and the Other (perhaps as a wish on his part), hints that there is already some sort of distortion in the perception of this Being, especially in light of the imagery of mixture and contamination. What is not clear, however, is whether the poet's inability to perceive the Eternal Feminine in her pure radiant state, without admixture or reflection, is a consequence of actual contamination of the object (in which case we are obliged to question the divine nature of this Other), or contamination of the subject (projection; in which case we must question the validity of Solov'ev's "vision"). This epistemological problem, unfortunately, does not remain

located entirely in Solov'ev; rather, it embeds in itself the eventual downfall of Symbolism itself:

In brief, modern Symbolism leads to one of two blind alleys, intellectualism or irrationalism. The second alternative is the more frequent. By being made a vessel of the irrational, the symbol turns into a microcosm reflecting another microcosm, thus becoming something not too different from what Freud means by that very word: a symptom of spiritual trouble and psychic disorder, the distorted mirror of the artist's neurosis, of the poet's narcissism.<sup>35</sup>

Without going further, for the time being, into the psychology of a poetics that is focused on the Idealized Feminine, suffice it to say that the trap referred to by Poggioli is already being subtly and most likely unconsciously laid in these two early and seemingly simple poems by Solov'ev. It should be stated here that locating this distortion in the subject, i.e. the poet's "neurosis," rather than in the object may merely be a consequence of a psychological (as opposed to, say, a theological) viewpoint. There is no guarantee that the object seen in that mirror is not, in fact, corrupt or distorted as well.

From a poem written in 1885, it would appear that Solov'ev himself places the responsibility for the inadequacy of the correspondence between poet and Divine Inspiration squarely on the poet, absolving the source of that inspiration completely. In this case, he is careful *not* to address his poem to Ты; rather he uses (without

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<sup>35</sup> Poggioli, 141.

antecedent) the third person singular pronoun он, but it is not terribly difficult to read this displaced “he” as the poet, either in particular or as a symbol for a particular problem faced by any poet in seeking to obtain inspiration. In any case, we again see images of corruption, this time in the form of deception and disillusionment:

Восторг души расчётливым обманом  
 И речью рабскою – живой язык богов,  
 Святыню муз – шумящим балаганом  
 Он заменил и обманул глупцов.

Когда же сам, разбит, разочарован,  
 Тоскуя, вспомнил он святую красоту,  
 Бессильный ум, к земной пыли прикован,  
 Напрасно призывал нетленную мечту.

[1885; *VS*, 40.]

Whether or not Solov'ev is here castigating some other poet or, as is more likely, himself for in some sense not being equal to the moral challenge of transcribing without corruption the “living language of the gods” (plural!), is not as important as the poet's stance with respect to this dimly perceived ghost (призрак). Perhaps all poets at some time or another complain within their verse of the failure of language, or more drastically, their personal failure to “attend to the Muse,” but in this poem, Solov'ev seems to be even more pessimistic than one might expect about the possibility of putting “into lamenting verse” the “captivating sounds of former love.” The final lines



Не поднялись коснеющие руки,  
И бледный призрак тихо отлетел.

reveal the quite tenuous nature of that which the poet is attempting to capture for his poetry. The failure to execute an appropriate gesture of praise is enough to cause (or permit) the “pale ghost” to fly away, as if some magical ritual had been improperly performed, thus losing forever the desired magical effect.

This image of the pale ghost flying away, birdlike (which in Solov’evian terms must be an image of Sophia or some manifestation of Her), is a symbol of the fleeting grasp of “daylight” or ordinary consciousness upon some other form of consciousness which resides in another, mythical realm. It is reminiscent, in fact, of Eros flying away from Psyche (in Apuleius’ version of the tale, at any rate)<sup>36</sup> when the latter violates the former's interdiction to look at him in the light. In this myth, something divine is lost by some negligence or improper behavior. Now, without claiming any universality for this problematic of the artistic endeavor to understand that which is perhaps

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<sup>36</sup> *The Golden Ass of Lucius Apuleius*, translated by Robert Graves. (New York: Farrar Straus and Cudahy, 1951). While the story of Eros and Psyche is not, on its surface at least, concerned with the relationship between the artist and the source of inspiration, but rather is a mythological allegory about the soul's need for (erotic) desire, nevertheless there is the suggestion that subjecting the mystical (Eros) to rational or worldly consciousness (symbolized by the lamp that is lit by Psyche to illuminate the face of Eros as he slept) in fact stains or contaminates the truth of that vision (it is hot oil from Psyche's lamp that burns Eros on the wing, causing him to wake up and fly away).



incomprehensible,<sup>37</sup> it is nevertheless additional evidence that the *perception* of the divine (as source) is sometimes recognized by the artist himself as being in jeopardy because of his inadequacy to properly propitiate or interpret that source.

This is not, then, a problem unique to Symbolism, or to Solov'evian theosophy, namely that the poet is obligated, by virtue of his sensitivity or awareness, to express the nature of his vision of the divine Other in human terms, which by its very accomplishment would obliterate or lose that which it seeks to bring into this world. But a more particular characteristic of the Solov'evian circle is the location of this mystical object in the idealized Eternal Feminine.

This vision of the Eternal Feminine, as we have seen, is unstable within the Solov'evian context, or rather, Solov'ev seems in places to be regarding the *вечная* Sophia as the object of his attentions, while in others it is a more earth-bound or conditional feminine likeness. This is not to suggest that Solov'ev himself is unaware of the difference

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<sup>37</sup> Interesting in this regard is the plight of Sophia herself, according to the Valentinian speculation, with which Solov'ev was familiar as the basic system of Gnosticism. Consider the following passage from Jonas: "That passion had originated and spread from the vicinity of the Mind and Truth but now infected the Sophia and broke out in her so that she went out of her mind, pretendedly from love, actually from folly or presumption, since she had no such community with the Father as the Only-Begotten Mind...The passion was a search for the father, for she strove to comprehend his greatness. This, however, she failed to achieve, because what she attempted was impossible, and so she found herself in great agony. (*The Gnostic Religion*, 182). See also Cioran, *Knighthood*, 22 ff.

between Sophia and other hypostases, such as the World Soul. As Cioran interprets this aspect of Sophiology,

Confusion has arisen over the identity of this World Soul. She is often confused with Sophia or the Divine Wisdom of God, but in fact she represents the opposite of Sophia. Just as Sophia is divine, immovable, fixed and eternal, the World-Soul is extra-divine, and subject to the conditions of time and space.

...in the same way that in his Divine Wisdom God created the world out of the extra-divine in order to return it to his oneness, so also the World Soul is created in the image of Sophia, as the prototypic Wisdom of God. It is absolutely necessary that the World Soul be conceived of as a freely operating spirit in the extra-divine world, just as God is in the divine. Consequently, the World Soul is essentially a *dualistic spirit* [italics mine], one that can exist outside of God's oneness, or within it.<sup>38</sup>

So from the outset, there is embedded within the very conceptualization of Sophia the possibility for confusion. If Solov'ev himself must devote a good deal of poetry to maintaining a clear distinction between the two visions, one worldly, the other other-worldly, and if even he can never achieve the confidence that he has succeeded in glorifying the true Sophia, how can we expect the second-generation Symbolists, who borrowed Solov'ev's notion of the Eternal Feminine but without also appropriating the requisite philosophical discipline for defining Her, not to perpetuate and perhaps magnify the potential for confusion that Solov'ev pointed to?

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<sup>38</sup> Cioran, 24.

For Solov'ev, the problem remains one of maintaining faith in his vision of Sophia in spite of the realization that he is often unsure whether the image of the feminine that presents itself to him is indeed divine and absolute. In a fairly simple poem from 1892, Solov'ev contrasts his own lack of belief in the physical or intimate evidence of his "kind friend", which he affiliates with a curious lack of belief in his own substance or reality, to his persistent faith in an abstract entity whose form is nothing less than cosmic beauty:

Милый друг, не верю я нисколько  
 Не словам твоим, ни чувствам, ни глазам,  
 И себе не верю, верю только  
 В высоте сияющим звездам.

Эти звезды мне стезею млечной  
 Насылают верные мечты  
 И растят в пустыне бесконечной  
 Для меня нездешние цветы.

И меж тех цветов, в том вечном лете,  
 Серебром лазурным облита,  
 Как прекрасна ты, и в звездном свете  
 Как любовь свободна и чиста!

[1892; VS, 77.]

Solov'ev does not seem to be contrasting physical reality or the material world with an uncreated other world; rather, the other world, despite its mystical nature, seems also to possess physical characteristics. So while "unearthly flowers" may grow in an "endless



desert,” and while dreams are sent from the stars, nevertheless the Milky Way and the desert are presented as actual places, regardless of how distant or abstract. Only that which is *objective* (“the shining stars on high”, i.e. the abstraction of physical relationships) is believable, while that which is specifically *human*, namely “eyes,” “words,” “feelings,” even the Self, possesses no veracity. Thus Solov’ev’s personal vision of his “kind friend” must itself be subjected to a check that validates only that which is in some sense unknowable, distant, abstract, unattainable. It is the beauty of timelessness and endlessness, which is merely hinted at by the apparent limitlessness of the cosmos, that is for Solov’ev the proof of divine love. And this love, according to his essay “Смысл любви,” is a characteristic of Sophia apart from the incarnate nature of the vision Solov’ev is addressing, which is untrustworthy:

Истина, как живая сила, овладевающая внутренним существом человека и действительно выводящая его из ложного самоутверждения, называется любовью. Любовь больше, чем разумное упразднение эгоизма, есть действительное оправдание и спасение индивидуальности.

[Truth as a living power taking possession of man's inner being and really saving him from false self-affirmation is called love. Love as the actual abolition of egoism is the real justification and salvation of individuality.]<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> V. Solov’ev, *Sočinenij v dvux tomax* (Moscow: Mysl’, 1988), vol. I, 505. English translation from *A Solovyov Anthology*, 157.



Are we reading too much into Solov'ev's insistence upon locating love as far away from himself as possible if we claim that perhaps it is the anxieties that are provoked both within and by the physical body that cause him to distrust it? Admittedly, unlike many Neoplatonists, Solov'ev is not, intellectually at least, opposed in principle to physicality, even in the form of sexuality. His rationale, as put forth in his essay "Красота в природе", is that man is destined to become, while still remaining man, a "higher organism," which can of course only occur by reproduction of the species:

Следовательно, смысла половой дифференциации (и половой любви) следует искать никак не в идее родовой жизни и её размножении, а лишь в идее высшего организма.

[Hence, the meaning of sexual differentiation (and, consequently, of sexual love) must be sought for not in the idea of generic life and its reproduction, but only in the idea of a higher organism.]<sup>40</sup>

He calls, naturally, for abolition of the ego as a precondition for love, a religious idea that is certainly not unique to Solov'ev. Yet his poetry, which concerns itself by and large with establishing both the reality and the desirability of the Eternal Feminine as that which will draw man toward his own perfection, oscillates between a concept of

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<sup>40</sup> Solov'ev, *Sočinenij*, vol. I, 493. English translation, *A Solovyov Anthology*, 150.

Sophia as transcendent and abstract, on the one hand, and as capable of provoking untrustworthy, perhaps erotic, responses on the other.

Consequent to the definition of beauty in “Красота в природе” as “the transfiguration of matter through the incarnation in it of another, a super-material principle,” sexuality must be abstracted from its physical basis:

Эта песня есть преобразование полового инстинкта, освобождение его от грубого физиологического факта — ‘то есть животный половой инстинкт, воплощающий в себе *идею любви*.

[It is necessary] for the nightingale's song to be an expression of sexual attraction partly transmuted into an objective auditory form. That song is the transfiguration of the sexual instinct, its liberation from the *crude physiological fact* [italics mine] – it is the animal sex instinct embodying in itself *the idea of love*.<sup>41</sup>

Implicit in this definition is that physicality itself, apart from its *symbolic* value (as the nightingale's song with its beautiful harmonics is rescued from its primal purpose as a mating call), is crude, even ugly.

As Solov’ev states quite explicitly later in the same essay,

Космический художник знает, что основа животного тела безобразна, и старается всячески прикрыть и прикрасить её. Его цель не в том, чтобы уничтожить или устранить безобразие, а в том, чтобы онн само сначала облеклось красотой, а потом и превратилось в красоту. Поэтому он тайными внушениями, которые мы называем инстинктом,

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<sup>41</sup> Solov’ev, *Sočinenij*, vol. I, 359. Translation in *A Solovyov Anthology*, 129.

побуждает самих животных из собственной их плоти и крови создавать всякие красивые оболочки.

[The cosmic artist knows that the basis of the animal body is *ugly* [italics mine] and tries in every way to cover it up and adorn it. His purpose is not to destroy or thrust aside the ugliness, but to make it, first, clothe itself in beauty and, finally, transform itself into beauty. Therefore by means of secret suggestions which we call instinct he incites the creatures to make out of their own flesh and blood all kinds of beautiful coverings...]<sup>42</sup>

The assumption that the animal body beneath its sexual adornment is ugly clearly does not admit of any relativism for Solov'ev, who denies any view of the organic and purely functional other than one which holds that it possesses no capacity for attractiveness, at least without some sort of transforming energy. Thus the same mind that assigns virtually absolute beauty to the celestial cosmos (the macrocosmic) cannot seem to translate that perception of divine pattern to the organic, the sexual, the meso- or microcosmic — perhaps even the pathological, which is, after all, merely the organic stripped of its productivity, or at least of its purpose.

It would seem that Solov'ev is here furtively subscribing to a dualistic, pessimistic attitude toward the body, while at the same time espousing a spiritualized Darwinian optimism about genetic combination. Looked at another way, certain physical images are held

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<sup>42</sup> *Sočinenij*, vol. I, 383. Translation from *A Solovyov Anthology*, 136.



to be capable of intimating the divine (e.g. the celestial, “silver”, “azure”, the desert, etc.), while physical entities at another level, particularly the mesocosmic, are esthetically problematic because they entail sexuality and animality. Thus it would make sense that any image of Sophia which provoked in Solov’ev any sort of erotic attraction would be suspect and untrustworthy.

This analysis, however, still locates the problem of “contamination” of Sophia in some dark area of Solov’ev’s own consciousness – a “blind spot”, where he cannot see that he is projecting personal repulsion by intimate sexuality upon an image that he takes *a priori* to be divine. Nowhere does this analysis agree with Solov’ev’s own veiled, and certainly unspoken, hypothesis that Sophia Herself, at least in her apparent form, might be *evil*:

Природная красота уже облекла мир своим лучезарным покрывалом, безобразный хаос бессильно шевелится под стройным образом космоса и не может сбросить его с себя ни в беспредельном просторе небесных светил, ни в тесном круге земных организмов. Не должно ли наше искусство заботиться только о том, чтобы облечь в красоту одни человеческие отношения, воплотить в осязательных образах истинный смысл человеческой жизни? Но в природе темные силы только побеждены, а не убеждены всемирным смыслом, самая ‘та победа есть поверхностная и неполная, и красота природы есть именно только покрывало, наброшенное на злую жизнь, а не преобразование ‘той жизни.

[Natural beauty has already clothed the world with its radiant veil; formless chaos stirs uneasily under the



harmonious form of the cosmos, but cannot throw it off either in the limitless expanse of heavenly bodies or in the narrow range of earthly organisms. Should not art strive merely to clothe in beauty human relations alone and embody in sensible images the true meaning of human life? But in nature dark forces are merely subdued, and not won over by the universal reason; the victory is superficial and incomplete, and the beauty of nature is merely a veil thrown over the evil life and not the transfiguration of that life.]<sup>43</sup>

Solov'ev himself thus informs us that natural beauty is deceptive, even a disguise taken on by manifest evil. Should Solov'ev's cosmological-theosophical formulation of this dilemma override for the modern reader the tendency to prefer a psychologically based interpretation of this ambivalence as a neurotic consequence of Symbolism and its mirroring self-referentiality, as suggested by Poggioli and to some extent, by Cioran? The question remains, how can we be sure that it is not the object in our line of sight – assuming that object to also have a will – that is deceiving us, rather than our own weakness, our own “chaotic desire”<sup>44</sup> which is distorting our perception of the desirable? In a dualistic system such as Solov'ev's, the answer to this question remains almost impossible to resolve, since evil can exist and operate independently and is itself a form of unknowing.

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<sup>43</sup> “*Obščij smysl iskusstva*” in Solov'ev, *Sočinenij*, vol. I, 392. Translated as “The Meaning of Art” in *A Solovyov Anthology*, 141.

<sup>44</sup> Cioran, 24.

Cioran quotes the “three principles which guide [Solov’ev’s] poetry” from the introduction to the third edition of Стихотворения Владимира Соловьева, which underscore Solov’ev’s awareness of the potential for duplicity within his system, if not understood properly:

1) the transference of carnal animal-human relationships into the superhuman realm is the greatest abomination and the cause of final destruction (the flood, Sôdom and Gomorrha [sic], the “satanic depths” of recent times); 2) the worship of feminine nature in itself, that is, the principle of ambiguity and lack of differentiation is susceptible to falsehood and evil no less than to truth and goodness, and represents the greatest *madness* and major cause of the degeneration and collapse which reigns at present; 3) there is nothing in common with the former stupidity and the latter abomination in the true worship of the eternal feminine which has genuinely received the power of God for all eternity and which has genuinely imbibed the plenitude of goodness and truth, and through them the incorruptible radiance of beauty.<sup>45</sup>

In this very same preface Solov’ev posits Anti-Sophia, who is the deceptive likeness of Sophia. Her deceptiveness is characterized by seductiveness, that is, she is taken for the *real* Sophia because of her attractiveness. Solov’ev seems to be quite aware, then, of his own shortcoming (or that of Man in general<sup>46</sup>), insofar as he knows he can

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>46</sup> The gender bias of pretty much all Sophiology cannot be discussed in the present context, other than to remark that the underlying eros presumes a heterosexual male libido with a feminine object, i.e. Sophiology is without doubt a male myth. An undeveloped speculation of my own in this regard is that, in purely psychoanalytic terms, the search for the idealized feminine that forms the basis of Symbolist sophiological writing represents not, as might easily be assumed, a desire for the untouchable (because of the incest

never tell, because there is no absolute external reference point which he can grasp, whether his failure to “achieve his theosophical conception of a radiant and positive apocalypse”<sup>47</sup> is the result of seduction (originating in the object) or projection (originating in the subject).

Before we leave the discussion of Solov’ev’s theosophical poetry to take up that of Blok’s variations on the same theme, it is necessary to point to one of Solov’ev’s later poems, “На том же месте” (1898), as embodying, at least within the context of the rest of Solov’ev’s poetry, an apparent resolution of his ambivalence toward the physical world and the potential confusion between nature and Sophia.

In the first stanza of the poem, we are presented with a summary of the problems that have plagued the attempt to stabilize the vision of the true Sophia: “threatening passions,” “disturbing dreams,” “painful anxieties,” as well as moments of weakness and succumbing to temptation (possibly the temptation to be seduced by the worldly vision of the Eternal Feminine, if not a more literal sexual temptation). Yet,

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taboo) Mother, but rather a *deflection* of the libidinal compass *toward* the untouchable mother as a displacement of the desire to know a forbidding or aggressive monotheistic father.

Evidence for this is found within the Valentinian speculation itself, in which Sophia develops a “passion” for the incomprehensible Father, the Absolute, which causes her to try to “know” him. Because of this obsession, or Passion, she ends up falling into an abyss, and is only rescued thanks to a salvator referred to as Horos (‘limit’).

<sup>47</sup> Cioran, 63.



the poem continues, during this period of temptation and anxiety, the creative process (which can be interpreted either literally as Solov'ev's own creative powers within a period of personal crisis, or as that teleological process by which mankind is led toward the Absolute) was somehow kept alive. This in fact seems to be a reflective moment for the poet observing the history of his battle with the forces of illusion, and optimistically noting that his creativeness, which is symbolic of a more universal creative force, was victorious.

Then, in the third and fourth stanzas, there appears to be a significant shift in Solov'ev's understanding of the divine, as if all of his earlier, defensive reluctance to perceive the truly divine in the earthly were no longer necessary: his need to locate the divine in a mysterious other world is now claimed to be naive, youthful:

Владычица-земля! С бывалым умилением  
И с нежностью любви склоняюсь над тобой.  
Лес древний и река звучат мне юным пеньем...  
Всё вечное и в них осталось со мной.

Другой был, правда, день, безоблачный и яркий,  
С небес лился поток ликующих лучей,  
И всюду меж деревьев запущенного парка  
Мелькали призраки загадочных очей.

[1898; *VS*, 117.]

Here are the same "spirits" or "ghosts" that flew away from the poet in "Восторг души расчётливым обманом," but now their



disappearance no longer seems to hold the same importance. The somewhat ghastly “spectres of mysterious eyes” perceived “between the trees of a neglected park” no longer portend, it would seem from the tone of this poem, the same sort of mystical revelation that was once deemed retrievable only from the Unearthly world. Earth herself (Владычица-земля) is now addressed as divine, as representing true and immortal beauty. The earth (as World Soul) takes her place next to the sun (the Absolute), whose illumination she receives:

Владычица-земля! Твоя краса нетленна,  
И светлый богатырь бессмертен и могуч.

It cannot be said for certain whether this elevation of the earthly, or rather, the Earth itself, is truly the result of a shift in Solov'ev's spiritual understanding, or merely a poetic attempt to rescue his own creative oeuvre from failure by reorienting his philosophy. It would seem, however, that since Solov'ev's lifelong goal was to find a way of mediating the dualistic split between spirit and matter, or in other terms between the Divine Sophia and the problem of human desire, perhaps this poem represents a culmination of that effort, a shift in the position of the lens through which he was examining the problem. In any case, what Solov'ev was apparently able to understand, even if it required a reformulation of his own ideology, could not be easily

transmitted to Blok and the other Symbolists, who were from the outset enchanted by an image that I am claiming was that of Anti-Sophia.

## BLOK'S VISION OF SOPHIA

It needs to be restated, here, that as Blok received Solov'ev's notions of Sophia, he was clearly intent on adapting this schema for his own purposes. Unlike Solov'ev's more philosophically oriented followers,<sup>48</sup> who chose to further interpret Sophia in a more or less exegetical manner, Blok seems to have been interested only in the *idea* of the eternal feminine; he admits that he "has nothing to say on the theories of Solov'ev, on the metaphysics of Sophiology and apocalypse."<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Blok was all too sensitive to the problem of trying to confine the Прекрасная дама to the realm of human discourse:

Эту силу принесло Соловьеву то Начало, которым я дерзнул восхититься,— Вечно Женственное, но *говорить о Нём — значит потерять Его*: [italics mine] София, Мария, влюбленность—все догматы, все невидимые ряси...<sup>50</sup>

We can presume that it is not from intellectual indolence that Blok does not study Solov'ev's Sophiology more rigorously. Rather, it would seem that Blok's lack of interest in metaphysics derives from an

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<sup>48</sup> Especially Sergej Bulgakov, Florenskij, Berdjaev, et alia.

<sup>49</sup> Cioran, 100.

<sup>50</sup> Letter to G.E. Čulkov, 23 June 1905. In Aleksandr Blok, *Sobranie sočinenij v šesti tomach* (Leningrad: 1983), VI. p. 80.

intuition that, were he to discuss Sophia or the Прекрасная дама in an analytical fashion, he might destroy the idealization upon which the image was based.

This is merely speculative, of course, but as we shall see in the poetry, Blok's own faith in Sophia is somewhat unstable and rationalized from the outset, as if his commitment to Solov'ev's articulation of the image was less than total. After all, Sophia's radiance is presumably optimistic in nature, insofar as She represents the possibility of Man's approximation toward divinity. By the time Blok intercepts this image (c. 1900), which was more totally and enthusiastically taken over by his Symbolist compatriots Belyj and Culkov, there is already less historical reason for optimism, and Blok was at any rate not an optimistic person.<sup>51</sup>

Cioran attributes Blok's unwillingness to subject his version of the Divine Feminine to any type of skepticism to a recognition that to do so would be to equate the Divine Feminine with Astarte,<sup>52</sup> or in Solov'evian terminology, Sophia with the World-Soul:

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<sup>51</sup> Avril Pyman puts it aptly in the introduction to her selection of Blok's poems: "Blok valued passion and revolution both because they burnt away many evil, choking things and because of an inborn tendency to self-destruction." *Alexander Blok: Selected Poems* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1972), 29.

<sup>52</sup> Astarte, a lunar goddess of Phoenician cosmogonic mythology, was one such hypostasis, whose name was apparently first introduced into the Symbolist imagination of Sophia by Andrey Belyj.



Astarte is both the physically and spiritually seductive imitation of Her in the earthly sphere, and although the two are often confused, it should be made clear that the Radiant Mistress is eternal and unconditional whereas Astarte is temporal and conditional...Once again, faced with the dilemma of theorizing the differences between the two, Blok takes refuge in an intuitive awareness of their opposition...Blok appears caught between “mysticism” and “scepticism.” A wholehearted espousal of the former would deny the nature of Astarte; the latter alone would logically support only Astarte; and any “mystical scepticism” (that compromising and ambivalent synthesis so distasteful to Blok) would make Her and Astarte one. This is, of course, what Blok wants to deny, but his only means of rationalizing his intuitive mysticism invariably demands a certain amount of logical scepticism. This is the dilemma from which he wishes to escape by simply not speculating on Her nature and function at all.<sup>53</sup>

Blok's skeptical nature is confirmed by Avril Pyman:

Blok believed in the *objective reality* of other worlds. Yet, because this was a real belief, healthily rooted in a life-long love of Plato and in a sober and severe understanding of the nature of religion, he was free to fight the *poisons* of symbolism, the cloudy emanations of decadent mysticism; free to look for his other worlds in the distorting mirror of the everyday; free for just so long as he kept in mind that the everyday *was* a distorting mirror.<sup>54</sup>

So the picture we can form of Blok is as a severe skeptic who was nonetheless unwilling to challenge the veracity of his own image of the “Radiant Mistress.” Whatever the true personal or philosophical reasons for this reluctance, it can be asserted that this lack of vigilance

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<sup>53</sup> Cioran, 128.

<sup>54</sup> *Alexander Blok: Selected Poems*, 3.



(or, perhaps, lack of introspection) is exactly what led to the ultimate dissolution of the image and consequent loss of faith.

Blok seems to possess a foreboding of the consequences of the ambiguity surrounding Sophia.<sup>55</sup> His insistence upon protecting the intuitive aspect of his vision from skeptical inquiry does not prevent him from recognizing the mutability of Her appearance. In a poem from 1901 whose epigraph is taken from Solov'ev, Blok attempts to articulate how the image of Ты<sup>56</sup> both presents itself and changes:

Предчувствую Тебя. Года проходят мимо—  
Всё в облике одном предчувствую Тебя.  
. . .

Весь горизонт в огне, и близко появление,  
Но страшно мне: изменишь облик Ты,  
*[1901; ABSP No. 9, 63.]*

Twilight is important to both Blok and Solov'ev, presumably because it represents that region of mediation between the opposed

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<sup>55</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I will generally use the designation "Sophia" to refer to what Blok variously calls the "Beautiful Lady," "Radiant Mistress," even "Stranger", without attempting to establish any meaningful (for our purposes) distinctions between the differently labeled entities. This is not to suggest that Blok did not himself differentiate between these various "manifestations" of Sophia, but it would nevertheless be extraordinarily difficult to establish at any given point why Blok prefers one appellation to another.

<sup>56</sup> Like Solov'ev, Blok does not always bother to identify the Ты to whom he is addressing his poems, but the Solov'evian inscription, along with the imagery of sunset (recall the image from Solov'ev's 1887 poem: "Потускнел, дорогая, закат"), make it clear we are to understand Ты as essentially the same as Solov'ev's.

worlds of light and dark, intuition and rationality, as well as other obvious dualities. It certainly designates a border between this and another world, and within the context of this poem, the region where Sophia's visage becomes manifest. The fire that Blok sees in this region is both clear and terrifying, underscoring Blok's ambivalence about approaching that realm. Is it the volatility of twilight's fire that provokes in the poet feelings of suspicion, or is it rather his own predilection toward skepticism?

И дерзкое возбудишь подозрение,  
Сменив в конце привычные черты.

О, как паду — и горестно, и низко,  
Не одолев смертельные мечты!

The use of the future tense (паду) here is predictive: Blok seems to be acutely aware even at this early point that he will not be able to reconcile himself to his intuitive awareness of the other world (the “deadly daydreams”) and simultaneously to the Her unstable appearance. If we may stretch Blok's own metaphor a bit, perhaps he envisions that he will fall into the abyss between his opposed tendencies to faith and skepticism.

Blok's uncertainty about his own perceptions, as well as regarding his own devotion to this Other, is expressed rather succinctly in a poem from 1901:

Ты — другая, немая, безлика,  
Притаилась, колдуешь в тиши.

Но, во что обратишься — не ведаю,  
И не знаешь ты, буду ли твой,

[1901; “Будет день—и свершится великое” *ABSP* No. 11,  
64.]

It is curious that Blok would accuse his interlocutor of practicing witchcraft [колдуешь], or rather that he would interpret her lack of responsiveness [немая] and her featurelessness [безлика] as concealment and duplicitousness. In addition, he does not hide from Her his own ambivalence. Evidently, this ambivalence is based not simply upon uncertainty, but a deep-seated suspicion that this figure is evil, a worker of black magic.<sup>57</sup> No wonder his commitment to the glorification of this Other is not stronger!

While the image of the Other is ambiguous, representing a capacity for either inspiration or witchcraft, so is the persona of the poet himself. In “Двойнику”, written in the same year, Blok addresses not Sophia, but his own double. There are more-than-subtle indications within the poem that the double shares some features with Solov’ev, or perhaps even *is* Solov’ev. For example, the ты of this poem is called

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<sup>57</sup> Of the various types of magicians for which there is a separate word in Russian, the колдун, usually translated ‘sorcerer’, is perhaps the most likely to work a destructive form of magic. In English, this would mean something equivalent to ‘black magician’.



бедный друг, one of Solov'ev's more common vocatives for Sophia, yet this same ты is also referred to as an "old man" (старик) who possesses a "crazy laugh" (безумный смех).<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Cioran infers a very close, almost mystical relationship between Blok and Solov'ev:

As in his later articles, Blok also recalls the singular influence of the "living image" of Solov'ev on him in terms which are less restrained in this private correspondence than in his public articles. It is not only the deep impression of Solov'ev's appearance on him that he wishes to stress, but also the fact that in some inscrutable fashion a bond was sealed between the two of them, even though they did not know each other personally, that there took place a mysterious recognition between the two.<sup>59</sup>

Though it is probably not even debatable whether we can discern the spirit of Solov'ev in this poem, the use of the figure of the double in any case functions as a device for entering into a dialogue with Blok's own ambivalence, and Sophia is still at the center of it, forming something of a triangle:

Я ждал тебя. А тень твоя мелькала  
Вдали, в полях, где проходил и я,  
Где и она когда-то отдыхала,  
Где ты вздыхала о тайнах бытия. . . .

[1901; "Двойнику", *ABSP* No. 12, 65.]

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<sup>58</sup> Blok never actually met Solov'ev, and in fact saw him only once, at a funeral. Nevertheless, Solov'ev's *laugh* made a great impression on the younger poet, as he tells Ćul'kov in a letter of June 23, 1905: "...ЭТОТ СМЕХ — один из *необходимейших* элементов «Соловьёвства», в частности Вл. Соловьёва." Other evidence that this poem is addressed to Solov'ev lies in the fact that it was written in the year after his death.

<sup>59</sup> Cioran, 101.

Blok here seems to be playing off of Solov'ev's continual use of *ТЫ* to address Sophia, except in this case, She is relegated to the third person (*ОНА*), while the second person pronoun is reserved for the double/Solov'ev. Perhaps, in this stanza, there is actually also a fourth, namely the double's *shadow* (*ТЕНЬ*), whose glimmering reminds us of Solov'ev's "ghosts". Thus we have a problem of identities in this poem that is as complex – intentionally so, it would seem – as the identity of Sophia, whose various manifestations Blok wanted to avoid defining too narrowly.

Unlike the other "doubles" of Russian literature, namely those we might encounter in Gogol or Dostoevsky, the double of this poem does not represent the projection onto the external world of an intrapsychic split, but on the contrary, the introjection of an external Other into the Self: Blok is claiming in the last lines that he has taken on Solov'ev's comprehension, literally merged with it:

Мне ни тебя, ни дел твоих не надо,  
Ты мне смешон, ты жалок мне, старик!  
Твой подвиг — мой, — и мне твоя награда:  
Безумный смех и сумасшедший крик!

This merger with the philosopher-poet presupposes that Solov'ev, who is deceased at the time of the poem's composition (and therefore has crossed into another world), has at last witnessed Sophia, her

“attire, festive and marvelous” and the “strange spring flowers.” Blok ponders what meaning he will find in the erotically charged “blood red flowers” without his double, who is no longer capable of loving (не любя).

The geometry of the poem is thus the plane of dualism amplified by a mirror: the dualistic Other World, where resides Sophia, and where grow the flowers of inspiration, is now linked to (if not actually equated with) the land of the dead, into which Solov’ev has passed. Meanwhile, Solov’ev has an almost imperceptible shadow, while the two individuals, Blok and Solov’ev, no longer retain separate identities, once Solov’ev has “disappeared.” Perhaps, then, it is the very absurdity of this mirroring confusion, in which a mystical bond (between Solov’ev and Blok) permits a transfer of comprehension from one world to another, that causes Blok and his merged familiar Solov’ev to indulge their common “crazy laugh and insane shout.”

The image of a double in Blok's poetry is not always linked with Solov’ev, at least so explicitly. As Pyman points out in the note accompanying “Двойнику” in her selection of Blok's poems,

From now on [1901] the double is a constant theme of his poetry. Sometimes it is broken into the recurring themes of Pierrot and Harlequin, of monk and knight-errant.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *Alexander Blok: Selected Poems*, 198.



The theme of the double in the form of the “monk and knight-errant” can be viewed as a purposely exaggerated transposition of the inherent paradox of the artist needing to be both devout and passive, on the one hand, and heroic and egocentric on the other. This paradox, as mentioned earlier, is virtually irresolvable so long as the poet maintains an idealization of the Other World as a source of inspiration or illumination.

In this particular case, the images represent a certain objectivity, at least to the extent they can be mocked: the monk becomes the epitome of “false sanctity,” while the Romantic knight-errant can be reduced to a “fancy-dress knight, a ridiculous figure with a cardboard sword.”<sup>61</sup> The self-mocking attitude, presumably, would be accompanied by the laughter mentioned in the last stanza of “Двойнику”; that is, while Blok is the inheritor of a vision of the Idealized Feminine whose truth he seemingly cannot deny, he nevertheless does not appear to possess the sort of character that would enable him to be as faithful to that vision as might be required.

It is thus conceivable that at this point we are already witnessing a certain dissatisfaction with the neo-Romantic sensibility, as evidenced by a poem of 1902 in which the poet sets off upon a quest (accompanied

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 199.

by the usual Solov'evian-Blokian-German romantic imagery of night, the moon, rustling and shadows), only to encounter an invisible rider on an imaginary white steed, laughing:

Я вышел в ночь — узнать, понять  
 Далекий шорох, близкий ропот,  
 Несуществующих принять,  
 Поверить в мнимый конский топот.  
 . . .

И вот, слышнее звон копыт,  
 И белый конь ко мне несется...  
 И стало ясно, кто молчит  
 И на пустом седле смеется.  
 [1902; *ABSP* No. 15, 67.]

The laughter in this poem borders on mockery, as if the invisible rider (again some sort of double?<sup>62</sup>) were chastising the poet for his naiveté, or at least the futility of his quest. This futility is underscored by the word-for-word repetition of the first stanza as the last stanza: the almost Sisyphean problem of seeking to maintain faith in the face of absurdity.

This nearly cynical view of his own enterprise is pointed up even more sharply in Blok's imagery of the laughing harlequin, who becomes

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<sup>62</sup> Pyman cites Blok's friend, E.P. Ivanov: "In answer to my direct question as to who it was who sat laughing in the empty saddle, he...answered on a note of semi-interrogation: 'Probably, Antichrist.'" The figure of the Antichrist developed by Solov'ev warrants further investigation in regard to the present discussion.

an imagistic harbinger of Blok's ultimate failure or refusal to consider the quest to know Sophia a realistic activity:

Там лицо укрывали  
 В разноцветную ложь.  
 Но в руке узнавали  
 Неизбежную дрожь.  
 . . .

Восхищенью не веря,  
 С темнотою — один —  
 У задумчивой двери  
 Хохотал арлекин.

[*ABSP* No. 14, 66.]

This harlequin aspect of the poet expresses his growing distrust in the possibility of the ecstatic experience. The boundary between himself and ecstasy, represented by the “door of contemplation,” where the harlequin stands laughing, is too difficult to pass over, and in any case separates him only from a masquerade ball (Наверху — за стеною — / Шутовской маскарад). The harlequin also represents a form of romantic irony, in which Blok's own philosophical position is undercut by his disbelief.

Despite this internal conflict between the rational and irrational, and despite Blok's willingness to concede his lack of preparation to follow the path of Sophia, he does not totally lose sight of her. Whatever besets his physical existence, he claims in his 1902 poem “*Religio*,” he



will never be able to shut out the consciousness of the  
Incomprehensible:

Мой ГОЛОС глух, мой ВОЛОС сед.  
Черты до ужаса недвижны.  
Со мной всю жизнь — один Завет:  
Завет служенья Непостижной.  
[1902; "Religio", *ABSP* No. 16, 67.]

At this point a shift has already occurred in Blok's consciousness vis-à-vis the relationship between him and the image of the Eternal Feminine which he took from Solov'ev. Although he persists in maintaining Her reality, he has acknowledged Her inaccessibility, or at least that he cannot seem to keep the image of Her pure and untarnished. As a consequence, this Astarte version of Sophia<sup>63</sup> ('Astarte' being here used as a convenient appellation for an eroticized and thus describable variant of Sophia) begins to replace the more abstract, distant and ineffable form of the goddess.

This shift in perception, which can be regarded either as a consequence of Blok's frustration in trying to encounter an unseen,

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<sup>63</sup> Blok, in his refusal to limit his vision of Sophia, condemns himself to having to deal with other hypostases of her in his poetry and life. As for Astarte functioning not unlike Sophia in the role of Queen of Heaven and Creatrix, see Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 14, 27. There are suggestions that the prohibitions in the Book of *Deuteronomy* against ritual prostitution (and idolatry) that had been practiced by the Canaanites in fact were directed against Astarte and related goddesses. Thus, perhaps Belyj's Astarte is even on some mythological level identifiable with the *prunikos* ('whore') aspect of Sophia that eventually dominates Blok's poetry.

untouchable image or, on a more mythico-mystical level, as necessitated by the dualism inherent in the system of Solov'ev's articulation of the nature of Sophia,<sup>64</sup> brings with it a change in the scenery against which Sophia is imagined, as well.

She does not remain confined to the mysterious realm where the interplay of cosmic forces is metaphorized by foreboding meteorological and astronomical phenomena. The idealized mistiness through which we are usually permitted to view Her (and which functions poetically much as the placement of silk mesh over a camera lens to eliminate imperfections in the subject) ceases to be so dense in Blok's later poetry, so that as the vagueness that had been surrounding Sophia gradually evaporates, She becomes more humanized, and therefore more imperfect. In what amounts to a transitional image, the

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<sup>64</sup> Let us remember that Solov'ev is hardly singularly responsible for the development of sophia: not only is his imagery derived from Russian iconography, German philosophy, and early Christian-era gnosticism, but from medieval Kabbalism as well. Judith Kornblatt discusses the androgynous aspect of Sophia as deriving from the conflation of "the male *Hokhmah* and female *Shekhinah*." ("Solov'ev's Androgynous Sophia and the Jewish Kabbalah", 497). That this gender confusion was introduced by Solov'ev, however, is evidence that there is something unclear about the sexuality of Sophia from the very outset. Sex is of course dualistic by definition; its non-dualistic resolution is either asexuality, or, for Solov'ev, bisexuality: "For both Kabbalah and Solov'ev, the ideal is bisexual not asexual" (Kornblatt, 492). Thus polyvalent sexuality, an attribute frequently associated with prostitutes, becomes a significant characteristic of Sophia in her materialized or eroticized aspect.

Incomprehensible becomes the Invisible (невидимка, literally ‘the unseen one’ [f.]), but she now moves in a world that is half mystical, half urban:

Веселье в ночном кабаке.  
 Над городом синяя дымка.  
 Под красной зарей вдалеке  
 Гуляет в полях Невидимка.

[1905; “Невидимка” *ABSS* No. 600, 348.]

She is still perceptible in the usual fields, there is still a smoky haze, there are in this first stanza allusions to twilight (or dawn) and the distance. But the contrast provided by the saloon, the кабак, prefigures the drawing down of the once-heavenly image into the world of grubby men. The redness of the twilight sky is the color of blood, and the nature of love itself is reduced from devotion to the divine, to barroom melancholy:

Вам сладко вздыхать о любви,  
 Слепые, продажные твари?  
 Кто небо запачкал в крови?  
 Кто вывесил красный фонарик?

The ‘unseen’ quality of the feminine figure is ascribed in this stanza as much to the inattention, or blindness, of the “слепые, продажные твари” as to Her characteristic indescribability. Blok seems at this point to be accusing Mankind, symbolized rather pejoratively as a bunch of drunks,<sup>65</sup> for a worldliness that leaves it oblivious of the

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<sup>65</sup> While this paper intentionally does not incorporate much of Blok's or Solov'ev's biographies for the sake of analysis, it should be noted that Blok's



Unseen. This obliviousness is, in Blok's view, a *choice* rather than an absolute condition, for man, unable to continually deal with the demands of a spiritual calling (or, put another way, for the *poet*, unable to deal with the impossible demand of putting into words that which cannot be expressed), turns away from the divine and finds solace in revelry and the camaraderie of avoidance. An apt metaphor for this behavior is found in the choice of the prostitute, who makes no demands for commitment to a *relationship*, over the wife, who stands for the Eternal Obligation.

И ломится в черный притон  
 Ватага веселых и пьяных,  
 И каждый во мглу увлечен  
 Толпой проституток румяных...  
 . . .

Вмешалась в безумную давку  
 С расплеснутой чашей вина  
 На Звере Багряном — Жена.

Another reading of the last lines above would have the capitalized graffito “Жена” referring not to the wife, but to Woman, abstracted, and, considering the lustfulness of the inscription (suggested by the

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use of imagery of urban lowlife to symbolize the degradation of the relationship of man to Sophia corresponds to an increasing frequenting of Petersburg haunts by Blok in his actual life. For fuller discussion of Blok's life, see Avril Pyman's *The Life of Aleksandr Blok*, especially vol. I, *The Distant Thunder: 1880-1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

name of the place, the "Crimson Beast"), probably inaccessible to those within.

In a variation on almost exactly the same theme, Blok's much more famous poem Незнакомка (1906) finally brings прекрасная дама – the Unknown One, or the Stranger – into the human realm. She is, paradoxically, at last visible, clearly in quasi-human form,<sup>66</sup> – one hesitates to say it – *incarnate*. All the otherworldly imagery of boundaries, of distance, even of the double, persists, but now those images have been transposed into more local variants: the double is seen now in the glass of wine raised by the drunken poet (И каждый вечер друг единственный / В моём стакане отражён); the mystical moon is now stupid and leering (Бессмысленно кривится диск); the boundary between this and the other world is represented as a window separating the inside and the outside of a bar (Девичий стан, шелками схваченный, В туманом движется окне); Sophia's obscurity is now maintained by a dark veil:

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<sup>66</sup> Pyman points out that The Stranger is not simply the prostitute that Blok's contemporaries thought she was; rather, she retains an unworldliness, and this is because she is a *succuba* [a female demon that “visits men in their sleep to torment their dreams and to engage in sexual relations.” (Matthew Bunson, *The Vampire Encyclopedia* (New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1993), 248] This vampiric aspect, nevertheless, is responsible for the continuing drain on Blok's vision of the divine. In her same note, Pyman states that this succuba “was a thing without substance...the Moon-Goddess, shining with reflected splendour” (p. 219). This Goddess would have to be related to Astarte.

И странной близостью закованный,  
 Смотрю за темную вуаль,  
 И вижу берег очарованный  
 И очарованную даль.

[1906; "Незнакомка", *ABSP* No. 40, 90.]

It is on the basis of the similarity of the imagery, albeit under transformation, that we can assert that these later portrayals of the Stranger are degraded ("shadow", to use Jungian terminology) aspects of the same Feminine archetype that we see in Blok's poetry of a few years prior.<sup>67</sup> This suggests that there is something like a *process* of dilapidation that is affecting the image of Sophia, as if She were from the first suffering from a disease whose manifestations lay dormant until some critical immunological crisis, after which they begin to appear increasingly and unabated.

This metaphor borrowed from immunopathology is perhaps not as outrageous as it sounds. For Blok himself seems to feel that he is suffering from a sort of incurable and terminal spiritual malaise.<sup>68</sup> In

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<sup>67</sup> The epistemological problem of calling any two distinctly named or posited entities "the same" is not at issue here. Both Solov'ev and Blok are fairly sloppy about the nomenclature and attributes of the Eternal Feminine, so to call any of them "the same" as any of the others causes as many problems as it solves. All that is being claimed for the present is that, *qua persona*, the Stranger is not a new character within the narrative line of Blok's *oeuvre*.

<sup>68</sup> It is a curious paradox that when it comes to psychological disease, fault (since all evil must have a cause) is generally ascribed to the sufferer of the disease, even if allowances are made for the convergence upon the individual psyche of certain "external" circumstances ("trauma," etc), while in the case of so-called organic disease, we would not *think of* blaming the sick person for the destruction wrought by tiny (i.e. invisible) pathoorganisms. In



any case, he is enough of a believer in the ongoing deterioration of his once idealized and hopeful image that his subsequent work capitulates to the inevitable, the terminal.

We have no absolute proof, of course, that in the sequence of poems under consideration the allusions and addresses to feminine objects necessarily have anything to do with each other, and thus, one might argue, what is being identified here as an inevitable and continuing debasement of an originally holy image may actually not represent any sort of progression at all. However, evidence from Blok's letters and biography, testimony from his cohorts, the repetition in these and similar poems from the same time of certain images (colors, sunset, stars) and personae (harlequin, ghosts, a central feminine ты), even formal lyrical qualities (four-line stanzas, hepto- or octosyllabic lines, ABAB rhyme), all converge to indicate that Blok is perceiving throughout, albeit with different lenses, essentially the same Being.<sup>69</sup>

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the case of spiritual malaise, we do not seem to know whether to blame the individual believer or the belief system to which he subscribes. Certainly in Blok's case, he never imagined that the Sophia Prunikos was by its own malformed dualist genetics a *psychopathoorganism*.

<sup>69</sup> Pyman points out (p. 28) that "The Most Beautiful Lady Herself" is outside the chronology of Blok's development. While he felt Her as an immanent presence all other themes faded in awe before Her Majesty...Yet in his later work, particularly in the poems of the Third Volume, while She is not always present as revelation, she *is* present as dogma. Occasionally, in Blok's most tragic verses, the very desolation of Her absence seems to underline his belief in Her objective existence."

In two of his later poems, we see the Ты of the poem as first, something of a sadomasochistic tease whom the poet finds repulsive, and then as the restored Muse, toward whom Blok is still ambivalent, although he is willing to acknowledge the role his own doubt has played in defacing Her image.

In “Унижение” (“Humiliation”), the literal scenario of the poem is a dismal encounter with a prostitute in a (Petersburg) brothel. The sunset, as symbol of the boundary between dark and light, is still present, even in the first stanza, and again in the fifth and seventh, signalling that the *mise-en-scène* of the poem is not to be dealt with too literally. There is, in this poem, at last sexual contact between the poet and the Other, and the experience is anything but ecstatic:

В жёлтом, зимнем, огромном закате  
 Утонула (так пышно!) кровать...  
 Ещё тесно дышать от объятий,  
 Но ты свищешь опять и опять...  
 [1911; “Унижение”, *ABSP* No. 59, 120.]

Of course it could easily be argued that this poem is not at all connected with the earlier poems addressed to or otherwise about the Eternal Feminine, were it not for the evidence provided by both “Невидимка” and “Незнакомка,” in which the vision of the archetype is already stained and possesses certain attributes of a prostitute. Even if one wants to address the biography beneath this poem, it is difficult to

maintain that the prostitute is simply a prostitute, especially since in the last stanza she is referred to as “мой ангел вчерашний”:

Ты смела! Так ещё будь бесстрашной!  
 Я — не муж, не жених твой, не друг!  
 Так вонзай же, мой ангел вчерашний,  
 В сердце — острый французский каблук!

This curious command by the defeated poet, that the hooker in question at last do him in, penetrate him in the heart with her spiked heel, is in fact a desperate cry of remorse from one who has become debauched through spiritual weakness. It is a request for both release (death) and punishment,<sup>70</sup> and in the latter we detect again Blok's willingness to take the blame for the fact that the idealized feminine ultimately did not have the meaning for him that he originally expected. It is also an act of submission (as it seems to be in the real world of sexual behavior, as well): Blok in some sense is acknowledging the (moral?) superiority of Her whose image he has tarnished. Yet it is perhaps in reality merely a consequence of his own inordinate

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<sup>70</sup> This dualistic request is essentially that which motivates apocalyptic movements: the human universe is destroyed, perhaps by some purgative fire, which punishes man for his sinfulness, yet also frees him from his uncontrollable desires, which have led him into sin. Interesting in this regard is the embedded apocalypticism of both Solov'ev and Blok. The former inherited a strong anxiety about apocalypse from his father, a historian whose sense of world history became progressively apocalyptic toward the end of his life. In Blok, apocalyptic inclinations come to the fore particularly clearly in his most famous poem, “The Twelve” (“Двенадцать”): “A world conflagration in the blood/Lord, grant us Thy blessing!” (translation by Avril Pyman, *ABSP*, 50).



expectations of himself, his own sense of moral purity inculcated by his excessively virtuous mother,<sup>71</sup> that Blok allows no room for an image of Sophia that is at all compromised – within the range from goddess to whore, there is no intermediate and workable image of the divine.

Finally, in a poem entitled simply “К Музе” (“To the/my Muse”; 1912), the relationship between the sacred and the profane, between the abstract Sophia and the personal muse, is dealt with directly. The poem addresses the muse ambivalently, unsure as to whether She is good or evil, while it recounts Blok's personal historical struggle with the dual nature of the feminine.

И когда ты смеёшься над верой,  
Над тобой загорается вдруг  
Тот неяркий, пурпурово-серый  
И когда-то мной виденный круг.

Зла, добра ли? — Ты вся — не отсюда.  
Мудрено про тебя говорят:  
Для иных ты — и Муза, и чудо.  
Для меня ты — мученье и ад.

[1912; “К Музе”, *ABSP* No. 56, 117.]

Blok is here confessing that his poetic conflict has resulted more in torment than in inspiration. Yet few poets could be so *direct*, so chastising, in their addresses to the figure of the muse, which usually

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<sup>71</sup>Pyman claims that Blok, “protected from infancy from any kind of spiritual vulgarity, ...never lost his sense of rather aloof astonishment when confronted with the ignoble, the insincere, or, for that matter, with *anything aesthetically or morally unpleasing*” [italics mine]. *ABSP*, 12.

tend to rely on metaphors borrowed from classicism. This suggests that despite the despair Blok feels as a result of some failure to obtain what he believed he actually desired from the goddess, he is nevertheless on *intimate terms* with her. Intimacy, then, is apparently of greater import to the poet than abstract inspiration or even friendly relations.

Is it not paradoxical that all this time, Blok has been cursing Her distance, Her Unknowability, and yet by this point in his career and life, he knows her as intimately as someone to whom he is married? He chastises her for his own inability to understand her:

Я хотел, чтоб мы были врагами,  
 Так за что ж подарила мне ты  
 Луг с цветами и твердь со звездами —  
 Все проклятье твоей красоты?

Perhaps Blok has finally come to the realization that the divine inspiration he so desperately thought would come from the Прекрасная дама, if he could only reach Her, was actually embedded in the struggle itself. The passion to know Her, impossible for him as it was for the Valentinian Sophia to know the Incomprehensible Father, ultimately constituted the *materia prima* of his indeed inspired creation. The almost cleansing effect of Her destruction of what he held to be “holy and good” is not, in the final analysis, something that deeply disturbs him – its bitterness, likened to wormwood,<sup>72</sup> is at last conceived to be

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<sup>72</sup> Wormwood may be a reference to absinthe, of which it forms the base,

essential. Blok, after all, was an admirer of despair for the artist, and in fact believed that the true artist could not live without it:

И была роковая отрада  
 В попираньи заветных святынь,  
 И безумная сердцу услада —  
 Эта горькая страсть, как полынь!

## CONCLUSION

The relationship between the philosopher Vladimir Solov'ev and the Symbolist poet Aleksandr Blok was complex; both were complex men, each responding to his own internal schema for representing a certain spiritual function (called, as we have seen, by several different names), and each grappling, almost unknowingly, with a philosophical system that was ill-equipped to make either of them aware of its own limitations. On top of that, it seems from the vantage point of post-Freudian history, that each had his own reasons for positing not only the existence, but the supreme value, of an Idealized Feminine – an archetype, if you will, which in its purest conception represented the possibility for the transformation of mankind. While I have tended to neglect, in this paper, the influence of historical forces upon the creative imaginations of both Solov'ev and Blok, it must be emphasized

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while also referring to the apocalyptic symbol found in the Book of Revelation.



that both men were active participants in the larger historical struggles of their times, and each attenuated his vision of Sophia according to a projection of idealized human history.

We have, in the case of Solov'ev and Blok, what Harold Bloom might call a *misprision*, an "anxiety of influence." For it is certain that a good deal of Blok's eventual struggle with Sophia-Stranger-Unseen One-Beautiful Lady-Astarte-Whore of Babylon and all the other fragments of the Eternal Feminine that are found after she is dragged into physicality, must be seen as a struggle to fit an image, a construct, taken from late nineteenth century theosophy (borrowed in turn from numerous mystical and quasi-mystical branches of ancient gnosticism), into a world view shifted by several decades, and into a personality that was ultimately harsher, more prone to disillusionment, certainly less willing to compromise, and, finally, probably more imaginative.

The fundamental claim of this paper is that Blok, in his appropriation of Solov'ev's image, did not perform what is known in fiduciary parlance as "due diligence," that is, he did not examine the Sophiological doctrine in a thorough manner before adapting it to his purposes – which were, after all, more for the sake of poetry than philosophy.

We cannot say how Blok's life and poetry might have been affected had he been more circumspect with regard to Sophia. Ultimately, we are left anyway with Blok's grand *oeuvre*, which is an artifact of his life, however unhappy that may have been. But we can certainly speculate that had he understood the implications of the underlying dualism on which the entire concept of Sophia was based (since Solov'ev himself took this image from traditions grounded in unresolved dualism, and did not generate this figurehead entirely by himself), he might have understood that dualism presupposes an opposition between light and shadow: one defines the other. Consequently, as the shadow aspect of Sophia became manifest in Blok's perception of her, the degraded appearance of the idealized feminine might have seemed less of a violation of his moral sensibilities.

We need not speculate on how Blok might have spared himself the disillusionment that accompanied his failure to maintain a pristine vision of Sophia. At the same time, where most critics accept Blok's self-recrimination at face value, and consequently see in the coincidence of the poet's progressively dilapidated life and the progressively murky vision of the Eternal Feminine evidence only of neurotically distorted perception, perhaps this clouded perception on Blok's part is really the

result of misunderstanding. Perhaps this Sophia of the Many Names was from the very outset an imagined being whose real intention was to deceive the romantic poet into thinking he could have Her.