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Gershenzon: a philosopher among critics

Gershenzon: filozof pośród krytyków

Mikhail Gershenzon, a literary critic, historian, and social thinker of the beginning of the twentieth century in Russia, is considered even today "a major historical figure of the late tsarist and early Soviet periods"¹. who belongs to the most creative minds of twentieth century in Russia.² "A philosopher and literary critic of the highest standing, a philosopher among critics and a critic among philosophers"³, Gershenzon concentrated on theological and philosophical problems at the end of his life. However, he expressed his philosophical views in many of his works that are not of a philosophical character but often directly influenced the treatment of the subject he discussed.

HERACLITUS AND PUSHKIN

According to Gershenzon's *Gulfstream* (1922), the original wisdom of mankind included all religions and all of science (1.213)⁴ and he found the best expression

¹ D. Davies, *Mikhail Gershenzon's "secret voice": the making of a cultural nihilist*, in Timberlake, E. Charles (ed.), *Religious and secular forces in late Tsarist Russia: essays in honor of Donald W. Treadgold*, Seattle: University of Washington Press 1992, 168.

² B. Horowitz, *A Jewish-Christian rift in twentieth-century Russian philosophy: N. A. Berdiaev and M. O. Gershenzon*, "Russian Review" 53 (1994), 497.

³ H. Frank, *Introductory memoir*, in Mikhail O. Gershenzon, *The key to faith*, New York: Macmillan 1925, 7.

⁴ References are made to Михаил Гершензон, *Избранное*, Москва: Университетская книга 2000, v. 1–4, in particular, to the following works: *Мудрость Пушкина*, 1.9–106; *Статьи*

of this ancient wisdom in Heraclitus. In his view, Heraclitus' fire refers to the pure cosmic motion imperceptible by senses. This is metaphysical fire, the beginning of all, called God by people. Fire is just pure motion (1.214). This spiritual, incorporeal fire, alive and wise, manifests itself as material fire (1.216). There is no God who guides the world; God is the world process itself. In the world there is only change; there is no goal, no direction of this change (1.219).⁵ The essence of being is just purposeless motion which is an ever-living fire, and, in that sense, fire is the essence of reality. Such wisdom, as original, is also in the deepest levels of our individual and communal psyche and its originality makes it the wisdom to which we should assent. This is done unwittingly most of the time and only some thinkers do so explicitly, with the conscious effort to justify it. Heraclitus, for Gershenzon, was one such thinker. Another was Pushkin.

At the very outset Gershenzon has to admit that Pushkin expressed his views about the essence of the world only 2–3 times and only in passing; to Pushkin, the Absolute was fire when he stated:

Is it that where everything *shines*
With imperishable glory and beauty,
Where *pure flame devours*
Imperfection of being ... (1.224).

But in the quoted fragment, "pure flame" is not necessarily "immaterial world flame" as suggested by Gershenzon, but simply pure, i.e., unpolluted material fire, since only such fire can devour imperfection of the world. On the other hand, it is possible to see that in the two verses:

A boundary, where there is no death, no prejudices,
Where *only thought burns in heavenly purity*

we receive "a full Heraclitean image of the One principle: incorporeal, burning fire — the thought" (1.225). However, not much stock should be put in these two verses, since they come from a draft, and in the final version Pushkin says that thought *lives* in heavenly purity (it has also been rendered as: thought *floats* in heavenly purity), unless, of course, when a claim is made that for Pushkin, life was burning, death — extinguishing of fire (1.225).

о Пушкине, 1.116–207; Гольфстрем, 1.213–305; П. Я. Чаадаев. Жизнь и мышление, 1.381–552; История молодой России, 2.7–160; Исторические записки, 3.427–524; Кризис современной культуры, Переписка из двух углов, 4.7–20; 4.22–48; Тройственный образ совершенства, 4.63–114; Ключ веры, 4.125–167; Судьбы еврейского народа, 4.171–192, Человек, пожелавший счастья, 4.269–276; Нагорная проповедь, 4.277–285; Видение поэта, 4.294–331.

⁵ This is a highly inadequate reconstruction of Heraclitus' views. But in the present discussion, Gershenzon's views on Heraclitus are in question, not the views of Heraclitus; for the latter, cf. Adam Drozdek, Heraclitus' theology, *Classica et Mediaevalia* 52 (2001), 37–56.

Pushkin used more extensively a "fiery" terminology in reference to the states of the human soul. Life, i.e., the human soul, is fire, although there are different burning intensities for different souls (1.227). Each passion is a fiery state of the soul (1.229). The soul becomes inflamed most strongly in sexual love (1.236). All of it is proof that Pushkin was an all-out Heraclitean.

First, there is a problem of poetic license and the use of metaphors. Gershenzon states that for Pushkin, the figurative sense of words is identical with their concrete meaning (1.221); that he knows no distinction between spirit and body, symbol and thing (1.257); that he is a literalist who "never uses concrete words in figurative sense" (1.128). However, such sweeping statements are hardly justified. For instance, can flame, and purportedly incorporeal flame at that, devour anything? How can a flame accomplish it? By burning, to be sure, but calling burning devouring can only be used in metaphorical sense. When Pushkin says that he awakened good feelings with his lyre (1.38), should we understand that he really played the lyre or that he played any instrument at all? How, if not metaphorically, can the sower of freedom and thorn of glory be understood (1.43)? How can secret dreams literally drag anyone, and how can one breathe with his work (1.44)? Examples can be easily multiplied. After all, Pushkin is primarily a poet. Even Gershenzon recognizes as much when he states that Pushkin was not a philosopher, not even a poet-thinker, like Goethe, but a lyricist (1.226). Not that a poet cannot philosophize. Metaphysical poetry exists, and Tiutchev is a good example of such a poet. Solovyov called attention to religious aspects of Pushkin's poetry; Frank pointed to the need of philosophical analysis of Pushkin's poetry, but Frank, an excellent philosopher himself, failed to show in his many papers about Pushkin that Pushkin has anything interesting to offer as a philosopher.

And it can even be a question whether Pushkin had any interest in philosophy at all. In his discussion of correspondence between Pushkin and Chaadaev, Gershenzon says that in his letter, Pushkin praises the style of Chaadaev's *Philosophical letters*, but does not discuss philosophical issues presented in the *Letters* (1.134, 138).

There is also the matter of applying to the soul by Pushkin not only a fiery terminology. As Gershenzon himself indicates, the soul is represented in Pushkin's poetry not only as fire but also as liquid (1.264), life as chalice (1.268), feelings experiences by people as a drink, sweet or bitter (1.269). Moreover, the soul is presented as a solid body (1.271). So a strong case could be made that Pushkin was proposing a hydrodynamic psychology derived from Thales' ontology.

Heraclitus was not the only one who proposed a single principle of the universe. Among his predecessors, Thales saw this principle in water, Anaximander in the *apeiron*, and Anaximenes in air. The last principle could represent life and movement of the universe just as well as fire does. It also seems that the *apeiron*

would be a much better candidate for an incorporeal, otherworldly principle than fire, air, and water (the fourth element, earth, was not used by any Greek philosopher as a universal principle). Fire found only a tepid continuation in the Stoics in their distinctly corporeal idea of Logos and in the idea of periodic renewal through cosmic conflagration. However, air was also considered the cosmic principle by Diogenes of Apollonia, and the *apeiron* may be seen as surviving as the world of ideas in Plato and — incorporeal and somewhat abstract, but finite — the unmoved mover of Aristotle. Also, none of the principles were considered blind, purposeless. The idea of guiding the universe exists at least beginning with Anaximander and is certainly very strong in Heraclitus. This indicated that the most ancient wisdom was not commonly recognized by the Greek philosopher, and thus choosing Heraclitus seems to be arbitrary, and the element of randomness, lack of purpose is inexistent in Heraclitus. Therefore, if this randomness is supposedly an element of the primal wisdom, it is distorted by Heraclitus.

The fiery figurative language used for the states of the soul is not unusual in poetry, nor, in fact, in common parlance. Gershenzon himself states that Batiushkov used the same psychological terminology as Pushkin in his poetry on each page, namely that soul is fire (1.121) and even that Pushkin found this fiery terminology in Batiushkov (1.123). But Batiushkov, claims Gershenzon, does not have a psychological system as Pushkin, and does not propose a "thermodynamic psychology" the way Pushkin does (1.127). Gershenzon offers very little support for this claim. There is little in the way of a fully developed system of thermodynamic psychology in Pushkin's lyrics, and, to risk a sweeping claim, in any lyrics. Lyrical poetry renders the best way possible spiritual states of its protagonists and is little interested, if at all, in constructing a quasi-scientific system representing a spiritual buildup of the human being based on an equally fully, although only implicitly, developed ontological system. Making Pushkin a philosophical successor of Heraclitus is almost frivolous, and in this way, anyone who uses fiery terminology in any pronouncement about inner life: "I am burning with expectation", "your zeal extinguished", "his mental faculties dimmed", "her beauty is shining", etc., can become almost automatically a Heraclitean. This can be diluted even further. Gershenzon himself says that the poet is an exceptional being since in him breathes a fiery soul. However, as he explains, "fieriness, or, in other words, an exceptional vivacity, passion, vividness of perception and reasoning, in a word, an exceptional swiftness of spiritual motions . . . this is a distinctive feature of a poet" (1.41–42). In this way, by definition, any reference to motion and to aliveness can be considered an expression of Heraclitean views, and poets are best embodiments of the reality of Heracliteanism. Ordinary people, because they are less alive and spiritually swift, to a lesser extent exemplify the truth of the *panta rhei* reality, but exemplify it nevertheless, and the only alternative left is the denial of movement just like in Eleatic philosophy.

Making his favorite poet a Heraclitean, Gershenzon is ready to sacrifice his poetry, making him a literalist unable to use figurative language figuratively by clinging to literal meaning of words, whereby Pushkin is turned into an expositor of fiery ontology and psychology in a language which resembles poetry but is, in fact, a disguised philosophical treatise.

The poet is proclaimed to have better and longer insights into the essence of the world than others. Only for a fleeting moment, an ordinary man can be dazzled by his personal truth that burns in him secretly. Only the chosen can see for a longer time their visions which are not given in concepts. These visions can only be expressed with comparisons, with images (1.13) and artists accomplish just that. This means that literal meaning cannot be reconciled with an attempt to express a vision, the poet must use poetic language to accomplish this goal, figurative, metaphorical language, quite contrary to literalism imposed on Pushkin.

Because artists are so privileged, their duty and the duty of art is to express their own visions. The role of art is to show in empirical phenomena the working of the ultimate laws accessible now through extrasensory perception (4.294) and art has for its only subject world harmony and striving for it (2.66). An artist's task is to express his vision of the world. The deeper this vision is, the more harmoniously it is expressed. The outward charm is an unmistakable sign of truth and power. Beautiful form instinctively attracts the attention of people. But beauty is also an obstacle in understanding the artist's vision. To many, this beauty is all they get from art. And so it is with Pushkin's poetry. Only now, says Gershenzon, we begin to see its depth (1.12). Art criticism is seeing the vision of the artist through the captivating form of its beauty (4.306). The gift of integral vision, called intuition, is metaphysical or artistic. The essence of artistic vision is that its content is inseparable from the form through which it is rendered. The essence of art is not in reproducing nature and not in transmitting artist's ideas to others, but in correctly reproducing his vision; and the represented reality is just the material, like paint or marble, used to that end.

However, the revelations of the poet are not the highest yet. The literary critic should not be hampered by the surface of beautiful form of an artistic work, but go beneath the surface "not to evaluate the work but, seeing for himself, to teach others to see the poet's vision" (4.306), to adequately elucidate what the poet wanted to express. In one conversation, Gershenzon stated that he knew about Pushkin more than Pushkin himself and that he could say what he wanted to say and what he wanted to hide "and also that which he said without understanding this himself, like Pythia".⁶ Poets are privileged by being endowed with the gift of having visions, literary critics are privileged by being endowed with the gift

⁶ Владислав Ф. Ходасевич, *Некрополь: воспоминания*, Paris: YMCA-Press 1976 [1939], 155.

of interpreting these visions. Poetry cannot speak for itself and a vision hidden in it will remain concealed if a critic does not point to its existence and meaning. The revelation of the poet needs to be amplified by a revelation of the critic to fully appreciate the poetry. However, in this way, Gershenzon, a literary critic himself, can effectively make Pushkin in his own image as an interpreter, make him a philosopher and theologian because he, Gershenzon, is able to break the superficial crust of the beauty of his poetry to which most people succumb and see that this poetry is really a message about what the essence of the cosmos is.⁷ And if Pushkin would have found such interpretations surprising, this would have testified to the limitation of his own understanding of his own visions. For such understanding he would have to turn to Gershenzon. The whole approach is summarized best in Gershenzon's own words. When criticizing Solovyov, Gershenzon says that Solovyov "ascribed his own erroneous idea to Pushkin himself (1.51). It appears that the same can be stated about Gershenzon himself."⁸

GOD

Was Gershenzon himself a Heraclitean? Are the views he finds in Pushkin really his own views? In the *Gulfstream* Gershenzon is rather evasive in stating what his own ontological and theological views are. In an attempt to find these views, we should turn to his other works, in particular, his small book, *A key of faith* (1922), his previously unpublished paper, "The sermon of the mountain", and his lecture, "A crisis of the contemporary culture" (1917).

A key of faith is written in the spirit of higher criticism and, in fact, Gershenzon refers to Julius Wellhausen as the one who proved that parts of the Bible are tendentiously distorted and even invented (4.166). When himself demythologizing Hebrew scriptures, Gershenzon refers, for example, to Genesis as a naive tale (4.127), to the struggle of Jacob with God as a myth (4.133), and to Joshua's covenant as a legendary history "composed, of course, very late" (4.140). He says that the Hebrew believes in his God since His existence was confirmed by miracles, and for this reason, "the history of the Exodus is embellished in the Bible with miracles" (4.142).

⁷ The religious and philosophical construction of Pushkin's world view is considered by Frank to be of "unbearable artificiality", Семен Л. Франк, *Религиозность Пушкина* and *О задачах познания Пушкина*, both in his *Русское мировоззрение*, Санкт-Петербург: Наука 1996, 221, 251.

⁸ This certainly is a reason why his works on Pushkin "being a subject of frequent but marginal citation, deservedly did not enter the cultural and historical circulation", Вера Проскурина, *Течение Гольфстрема: Михаил Гершензон, его жизнь и миф*, Санкт-Петербург: Алетея 1998, 287.

There is a contrast between the nature of God and the manifestations of God to man (4.125). It is clear to Gershenzon that by His nature, God is fire (4.126) and His existence consists in burning (4.126).⁹ God is an expression of knowledge that "the universe and the consubstantial human spirit are an untamed, fiery whirlwind" (4.156). He is an incorporeal and faceless, breathing fire, fiery God (4.127). In fact, the Hebrew God is most perfect as the symbol of the world since He is the least personified, resembling elements rather than a person (4.155–6). The Hebrew God is "a symbolic image of reality as the one system of forces" (4.154), but God is also the predestined law of the universe (4.150). There are cosmic laws, after all, and these laws are also represented by God.

From Gershenzon's analyses it is clear that God, in particular God as represented in the Old Testament, is a figment of individual and collective imagination, a useful self-delusion serving as a means of a more or less harmonious collective existence and even necessary for man's sanity. For example, the law of retaliation is superstitious; God's punishment is born in man himself and rises over him, "the punishment is not a miracle, but a natural fruit of the spirit dimmed by ungodliness. Nothing but faith in the true God provides a man with spiritual health" (4.147). But, although for Gershenzon there is nothing personal about a personal God, he does not want to renounce the divine sphere altogether. The one divine element he wants to retain is a cosmic law, a world order, the harmony which may not be seen in its entirety, but which certainly exists. The orderliness of the world is a basic assumption of science, but this assumption was made by religion long before the emergence of science. Each religion, says Gershenzon, presents a hypothesis that explains the world. This law of being is the meaning of the word God.¹⁰ Founders of religions pronounced their intuitive knowledge of reality in the religious systems they created. In particular, God of the New Testament is "the image of the eternal world order and His will is the inviolable law of being" (4.17).

God is a myth, but religion is needed nevertheless. In fact, there is no nation without religion since religion reveals the law of being and the human law that depends on the law of being (4.17, 4.277). Religion is the first, most ancient avenue of man toward the cosmic mechanism. This is knowledge not caused by idle curiosity, but necessary for proper functioning of individuals and societies. For millennia man has known that there exists a universal law of being as the only true way for any separate creation. But the formula of the law is unknown (4.16). We should live in agreement with these laws, although they are opaque

⁹ Gershenzon would certainly be pleased to hear from Origen that the phrase "God is devouring fire" means that what is holy, is called fire, and the opposite of the holy is cold (Origen, *Deprinc.* 2.8.3).

¹⁰ This sentence was later excised by Gershenzon.

to us and only the few can have an inkling of this sphere and can see what cannot be conceptually conveyed to others. As Gershenzon states in "The sermon of the mountain", any deviation from the law leads to suffering, thus there is nothing more important than to know one's own patrimonial law in the context of universal law. One has to learn how to live "cosmically right" without violating invariable order of the world and without hampering their actualization. The law is in me, it works through drives present in me, but is not accessible to reason (4.277).

Gershenzon gives, in many respects, confusing signals concerning his understanding of God. To him, God certainly is not a God of religion, but his references to the One Will (4.66), to the World Reason (4.86), to the objective reason (4.100), to cosmic reason (2.66), world will, etc. sound very religious and may even be an expression of a genuine longing for the transcendental. However, such references should not be treated literally. Maybe they are not meant to deceive, but are nonetheless deceptive. It seems that if we could extract from the natural world all the regularities and from history all historical laws, then the totality of these natural and historical laws could be considered the God of Gershenzon. If such laws could exist in isolation from nature and man, they would constitute a world akin to the world of Platonic ideas. For Plato, the eternal ideas make a world which is simply called being and this world is used by the Demiurge as models to mold matter into cosmos. In Gershenzon's universe there is, to be sure, no demiurge. The eternal laws by their nature mold the world, transforming it from one state to another. A cosmic reason is built into these laws; the laws are the cosmic reason, although impersonal. The laws allow for motion of matter and motion of human history and their motive character along with their regularity constitute their essence.¹¹ Their character as enablers and, in fact, the essence of motion, is reflected in the imagery of fire. There is really no fire, but the fiery character of fire presumably renders the essence of laws that guide the natural and social world best. These laws — impersonal, incorporeal, faceless — mold incessantly the world and we should live by them to avoid suffering and anguish. Seemingly, because of our personal nature, we picture these powers as a personal God, thereby deceiving ourselves, but this beneficial deception makes life easier, even pleasant.¹²

¹¹ In this sense it is correct to say that "for Gershenzon God blends with nature, with the cosmos and in this, by the logic of positivism, nature determines the meaning and goal of social existence of man", Ю. В. Видинеев, *Религия как символ исторического прогресса в мировоззрении М. О. Гершензона*, in А. Ф. Замалеев (ed.), *Нравственный идеал русской философии*, Санкт-Петербург 1995, v. 2, 17.

¹² In that sense there is some truth in the statement that for Gershenzon, "Jehovah is the personification of the universal needs of man", Frank, *op. cit.*, 20.

Gershenzon's God is, to a large extent, a moniker for Bergson's *élan vital*. The latter was replaced a Creator and overcame the world views offered by mechanicism (that everything in the world can be explained by causal chains) and by teleology (that everything can be explained by the purpose, the goal toward which the world strives). The impetus of life assures the existence of harmony in the world and allows for freedom. This is life itself that consists in the need of creation or rather molding the coeval matter. In the *Creative evolution*, Bergson only tangentially refers to theological problems and only in one place seems to divinize the impetus of life, when he uses a similitude of "a center from which worlds shoot out like rockets". This center is not a thing but pure activity, "a continuity of shooting out. God thus defined, has nothing of the already made; He is unceasing life, action, freedom".¹³ The laws extracted from nature, universal living laws blended with the power of their execution become God for Gershenzon. In this, Gershenzon does not justify the religious image of a transcendent God; he reduces this image to what can be extracted from the natural world.

CULTURE

Are we closer to the true image of the world? Can we live more harmoniously because we know the cosmic law better? Gershenzon really answers both ways and it is quite certain that the cruel reality of the great war played no small part in his giving opposite answers.

Man's way is from chaotic movement of the soul to harmonious movement (4.285), from the disorder of primitive culture humanity ascends to the higher level of social orderliness. "The ancient God of the Hebrews personified the consciousness of a semisavage spirit that already conceives itself as a center and prototype of the world will, as an untamed energy, not as a regular motion. The world demanded of man only one thing: know and remember that you are in me, created by me and subsist though me" (4.162). The concept of God evolves with society, enabling the progress of that very same society. Also, the chaos of the world can be abolished through love. As Gershenzon says, only in the loving gaze we can see ourselves reflected integrally (4.101), and only through love does man wholly actualize his image of perfection (4.103). However, love is not inborn; an ability to love develops with culture (4.102). Cultural development, thus, allows for the development of love which is a force leading to actualization of harmony, order, peace, and beauty in the world.

¹³ Henri Bergson, *Creative evolution*, New York: The Modern Library 1944, 271. Other references to God in the book are at the end, in a discussion of Aristotle's God, Leibniz' God, etc.

On the other hand, Gershenzon expresses an opinion of a negative cultural influence on man. There are, in his view, three layers to the human soul. At the bottom there is physiological spirituality, the unconscious, the world will in man, the accumulated experience of predecessors (4.279). Above it there is ego, personality. On the top is self-consciousness (self-knowledge). Creative zeal at the bottom, coldness at the top, only in the middle is there living warmth. Every man has in himself a plan of his calling, a number of bodily energies, and spiritual strength given to him in a measure proper to him. But this calling is a mystery to him. Man's life would be cosmically right if the motion of the world was unobstructedly rendered in him through unconscious drives into personal will. However, already in the passing from the unconscious to personality, the stream of motion is halted in suffering, as though in a whirl. The law of life requires that the motion is not hampered. Only human consciousness violates this law. This is the meaning of the Sermon on the Mountain: the revelation of the world law as applied to human consciousness (4.280). Poor in spirit, humble people are those who elevated themselves above the animal level, those who recognize that they do not know. Blessed are those who seek for the truth since they will be satisfied: those satisfied with truth — all politicians, social activists, philanthropists, professors and directors of high schools, trusting their truth — will be hungry (4.281). Limits have to be known to judge what is good and bad. Full flexibility of the soul is an ultimate cosmic norm since the soul is the seat of life and, as such, it should be adequate for life by its flexibility and movement; therefore, what makes the soul flexible is a blessing, what stiffens it is evil (4.284).

There is in every man an image of perfection that speaks through warnings and pricks of conscience (4.273). A savage, immersed in nature, draws from it eternal knowledge: in him integral image of perfection is deeply stamped and, therefore, he can "express the first thought about God" and unmistakably guess the direction for man. On the other hand, in a cultured man, the image of perfection faded, leading to numerous mistakes made during the cultural history of man (4.112). In fact, Gershenzon derides what he calls a religion of progress that is still in force: the view that history is progress due to science (4.9). His opposition to culture is most prominent in his exchange of letters with Vyacheslav Ivanov, *Correspondence across the room* (1921). Man of culture, he says, cannot rise to the Absolute; his faith is affected by the reflection that distorts it. Our consciousness cannot rise above culture or does so only very rarely (letter vi/4.29). Cultural development is, for Gershenzon, no development at all since it stifles the original instinct of faith. It appears then that the deception of culture can be beaten by self-deception as already offered by Gershenzon, namely by presenting God as a personal being. Apparently, in its original state, mankind would not have

to resort to such distortion of the image of the Absolute to lead a fulfilling life. And thus, like Rousseau, he dreams "of a state of bliss — a complete freedom of unburdened spirit, a paradisiacal security" (letter iv/4.25).

What does Gershenzon propose that we do? God is but a symbol of natural forces, so science would appear to be an avenue for subjugating nature. But this is impossible. We cannot know the one law on which other laws depend. Achievements of science and technology are impressive, but we must not forget the dark, i.e., unknown forces — forces that will remain forever inaccessible to existence of which we are awoken by such events as sinking of the *Titanic* (4.166).¹⁴ The cultural development only separates us from these forces and obscures their essence. If social and cultural avenue is closed, there remains the self. This must be the self here, on earth, because the afterlife, if any, is beyond our reach. Gershenzon states that he does not doubt in personal immortality: "I consider the self to be repository of true reality. But about these things, it seems to me, we should not talk or think" (letter ii/4.23). Eschatology is thus not a subject of discussion to him — although, incongruously, he discusses at some length Pushkin's eschatology — and it would be interesting to know how he envisions the existence of the self in the afterlife. For him, there is no supernatural world in the religious sense, so the self would be bound to earth (cf. Gershenzon's understanding discussion of Pushkin's belief in ghosts), but such a self could have a better insight into the laws governing the universe, thereby into God. However, Gershenzon hastens to add: "My God is invisible, He does not demand, does not frighten, does not crucify. He is my life, my movement, my freedom, my genuine wish" (letter x/4.42). God is the natural law in the universe, but as inaccessible to reason, He should not be sought there. There remains self-searching in which one can find God reduced to personal fire, freedom, and desire.

His program is delineated in the *Landmarks* article, "Creative self-consciousness" (1909) in which he states that there are two universal laws. First, the character of activity of our consciousness (its rhythm, tension, color) depends only on inborn psycho-physiological organization of the self. Second, direction and capacity of consciousness are largely autonomous (3.507). Consciousness is the organ of soul that takes truth in itself, divine truth. This truth is not what should be, but the generalization of experience of humanity, the norm that corresponds to the authentic and eternal essence of man. This truth is God in man, i.e., the conscious and cosmic self-determination of man. Only human will is alive and active and only through the will can consciousness actualize the recognized truth

¹⁴ Although he did not go as far as Blok who, on the occasion of the *Titanic* catastrophe, jotted down these words in his diary: "unspeakably overjoyed yesterday by the destruction of the *Titanic* (there is still an ocean)", A. A. Блок, *Собрание сочинений*, Москва 1963, v. 7, 139.

(3.508). Individual cognition cannot close itself in itself, cannot separate itself from the universal life of reason; and so any movement of the universal reason is reflected in each individual consciousness (3.510). A disregard of any kind of egoism did a lot of harm. Egoism is a great force. This is what makes Western bourgeoisie a great unconscious instrument of the divine work on earth.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, each step of history brings us closer to the understanding of truth about man. Materialism of Russian intelligentsia and its belief in creative power of social reforms is a childishly naive hypothesis about man. Another hypothesis should be given and it is summarized in Gogol's words, "the key to everything is in the soul". And thus, not social reforms lead to higher forms of life, but only correct structuring of each individual soul, primarily, moral work on oneself and moral influence on others. And the first condition of such a life is self-consciousness (self-knowledge).¹⁶

Everyone should perfect one's own self, everyone should start from oneself to save humanity and the world. In this, Gershenzon refers to a great tradition of ascetism of the Orthodoxy but without the latter's theology. Therefore, if bettering of oneself should be accomplished and moral work performed, what morality should be used? One can listen to the cosmic reason which is really natural laws, to the reason that cannot be rationally known. There remains feeling, inner sensation of the movements of one's soul to determine the path. The proposition is thus perilously subjective. Gershenzon rejects social dimension for social changes. Social changes are at best a side-effect of listening to inner voice that, hopefully, in an undistorted fashion, conveys the will of the cosmic reason, the cosmic reason that is really self-determination of man. There is thus really no room for checks and balances, for outside authority, because such authority is in us, or rather, such authority is us, i.e., "the key to everything is in the soul" turns simply to "everything is in the soul". There remains a way of society of individuals who can influence one another in a morally positive fashion. Gershenzon must assume here that these individuals are all well meaning, unwilling to trample one another's liberty, conducting harmonious life through the inner voice of feeling. And there can be no other way since, as Gershenzon states, "I would not define the conditions of perfection even for one man that I know well, not even form myself: the motions of the soul are so unpredictably complex and so are configurations of circumstances" (4.180). We just should obey the mysterious call of the soul, not trite rules of common sense (4.181).

¹⁵ The statement is made only in the original article, see *Landmarks: a collection of essays on Russian intelligentsia*, New York: Karz Howard 1977, 86–87, and is not repeated in *Historical sketches* 3.523.

¹⁶ The statement is not made in the original article; it follows the text of the original in *Historical sketches* 3.524.

It truly requires great faith on the part of Gershenzon to see what he proposes as a viable solution of social ills. In this faith, he follows in the footsteps of Lev Shestov who also proposed a self-centered program of social conduct. There is small wonder that Gershenzon writes in his letters to Shestov that he is closest to him in his views.¹⁷

HISTORY

Gershenzon's views on religion inevitably influence his judgment of religious phenomena, both on social and on personal level. He criticizes historians of his times for being deep-rooted rationalists who treat mysticism with disdain so that its spirit and sources are hidden from them (1.393), but he is no less rationalist in explanations he offers.¹⁸ He says that Chaadaev's spiritual states, typical for any mystic in preparatory phase, became very acute because of the nervous breakdown. By becoming a mystic, he became a slave of a religious and metaphysical system based not on reason and science but on randomly chosen verses from the Bible or on a literal interpretation of Gospels (1.401). In this Chaadaev espoused a naive audacity of a man who thinks that God speaks to him. Chaadaev ascribes to God his own thoughts and immediately prostrates before their objective divinity. It is difficult to see greater dogmatism of thought, says Gershenzon (1.423).

It appears that Gershenzon made a progress in his historical explanations in comparison to other rationalist historians by seeing mystical experiences as the result of mental instability. And it is possible that he would also trace back to nervous breakdown religious experiences of non-mystical type. When he wonders why Pecherin became a monk, that is, in Gershenzon's words, took upon himself "the yoke of the most awesome tyranny than which none more absolute existed in his day — the yoke of Catholic monasticism"¹⁹, it is almost inescapable to seek an explanation in Pecherin's mental instability.

Gershenzon's explanation of the phenomenon of the Slavophiles downplays a genuine religious component by an attempt to reduce it to some general, colorless metaphysical statements.

¹⁷ Nathalie Baranoff-Shestov, *Vie de Léon Chestov*, Paris: Edition de la Différence, v. 1, 1991, 304, 306.

¹⁸ As William James, a great authority for Gershenzon, once put it, "the opinion opposed to mysticism in philosophy is sometimes spoken of as rationalism", *The varieties of religious experience*, New York: A Mentor Book 1958, 72.

¹⁹ This deprecation is made only in Gershenzon's *History of Young Russia*, Irvine: Charles Schlacks 1986 [1908], 93, and does not appear in Pecherin's biography, *Жизнь В. С. Печерина* (1910), 2.469.

In his *Historical sketches* Gershenzon says that in Kireevsky's view, everyone has a spiritual core that acts according to the laws unknown to us; this emotional and volitional core, not reason, is a channel uniting human soul with the world and with God (3.434, 439). Kireevsky advocates, in Gershenzon's words, "a cosmic law of human soul" according to which human soul unites with the Absolute by acquiring knowledge of this Absolute, yet not through rational cognition but through integral soul and its moral personality (3.439); this higher knowledge about God is faith (3.441). Kireevsky was a mystic and he taught that the transformation of soul can be accomplished by inviting Christ into one's soul (3.437–8). And yet, at the same time, Gershenzon states that in the process of acquiring an integral knowledge of faith, Christ plays no role in Kireevsky's worldview and any reference to Christ is the result of Kireevsky's error: "we can only say: strive for integrity, look for the relation of the world to your mysterious soul, and you will see truth; but to claim that this truth will turn out to be some specific belief, such dogma is obviously arbitrary" (3.441). This is how Gershenzon would like to see Kireevsky's philosophy who erroneously subscribed to Christian view and for whom "personally there was nothing more natural than to accept Christian revelation as the necessary truth", but by introducing this, he clouded and distorted his thought (3.442). "Having discovered basic law of perfection, he should have showed it to people in pure form, the law powerful only through its metaphysical truth without predicting forms in which the soul should manifest itself in the future". And yet he said that Christianity is such a form. It was this error which made Kireevsky a father of Slavophilism (3.444). "It is time to extract from historical philosophy of Slavophilism this multicolored/multiflorous seed which Kireevsky put in it — the seed of imperishable truth about the inner make-up of man" (3.445).

Views of another Slavophil, Samarin, suffer — in Gershenzon's opinion — from similar problems as Kireevsky's. Samarin says that God's will is the substance of human life and it is impossible to act outside this will. However, Samarin cannot help himself "not to crown his religious and philosophical thought with a system of specific dogmas. Dogmatism, as striving to express the desire of the infinite in an understandable formula, i.e., in concepts borrowed from the finite world, is a sign of limitedness and also a condition of man's power". In religious and philosophical teachings we have to carefully distinguish "the straight line of successively developing thought from a dogmatic superstructure" and from accretions with which a dogma distorts the essence of the fundamental thought. For Samarin and Kireevsky Orthodoxy was such a dogma, that is a conviction that their idea of God finds in Orthodoxy the best expression that the human mind can find (3.455). Gershenzon's is dissatisfied with such approach and he would like to see Slavophiles to remain on the level of the Absolute with the human

soul attempting to go by the rules of the Absolute. Gershenzon himself offers no help in how the soul should acquire this knowledge and what (who?) this Absolute is. A vague, generic statement should crown Slavophiles' ontology as is apparent from Gershenzon's castigations and they should suggest no theological particularities.

Gogol's admittedly curious *Selected passages from correspondence with friends* do not fare much better. Gershenzon expresses his astonishment concerning contemporary discussions about *Selected passages* wondering about where in this work Gogol's religion can be found and what is Gogol's religious drama. Gershenzon sees in this work only Gogol's concern for social welfare in Russia, nothing else. However, in the same breath he admits that "the person and law of Christ occupies in his teaching central position", and yet, incongruously, they "play only subsidiary role" since Christ for Gogol is "the greatest specialist of sociology, teaching, as no one else, the laws of historical existence". Gogol states that in his quest to see in human spiritual aspects overlooked by many, "I came to the One, Who is the only perfect knower of soul and only from Whom I could know soul more fully". In his comment of this statement, Gershenzon says that "there is not even an allusion here to religion in the direct sense of the word" (3.478). If not, to what Gogol alludes here? Merely to Christ as a sociologist? Gershenzon would not object since for Gogol, in his opinion, Christ is the best "knower and tactician of life — and that is all" (3.479). And to strengthen this conclusion, in a footnote, Gershenzon quotes a letter in which Gogol says that he was led to Christ by His extraordinary knowledge of human soul and that he "bowed to His divinity" (3.525). This admission could hardly be dismissed as containing no allusion to religion. How could statements referring to Christ be dismissed in such a way if, by Gershenzon's own admission "the profound religiousness of his [Gogol's] nature is beyond any doubt" (3.479)?

In conclusion, Gershenzon's philosophical and theological views did not look very enticing then and they do not have much of a following today. They are confusing, often inaptly expressed and, to a large extent, unoriginal and eclectic. As a philosopher among critics Gershenzon is not of particular consequence. But as a critic among philosophers his interpretative proposals are not earth shattering, either. His literary criticism has to be read with a large dose of skepticism and with great caution. He offers sometimes interesting interpretations concerning some details, but, on the whole, his vision of poetry and literature can hardly be accepted without serious modifications. It is similar with his historical work which he sometimes uses as a disguise for an expression of his own views. Of course, he is not the only literary critic and historian guilty of this, but he certainly distances most of them in respect of his concern to his own views.

GERSZENZON: FILOZOF POŚRÓD KRYTYKÓW

Michał Gerszenzon, krytyk literacki, historyk i myśliciel społeczny początku dwudziestego wieku w Rosji wyraził swe poglądy filozoficzne w wielu pracach.

Zdaniem Gerszenzona pierwotna mądrość ludzkości obejmowała wszystkie religie i całą naukę i jej najlepszy wyraz Gerszenzon znalazł u Heraklita. Jego zdaniem metafizyczny ogień Heraklita to czysty kosmiczny ruch. Mądrość tę odnaleźć można również u Puszkina. Jednakże czyniąc swego ulubionego poetę heraklitejczykiem, Gerszenzon poświęca jego poezję, czyniąc z niego literalistę niezdolnego do używania języka w sensie figuratywnym, a tylko w sensie dosłownym, przez co Puszkina przekształca się w wyraziciela ontologii i psychologii ognia w języku tylko przypominającym poezję, a co w rzeczywistości ma być traktatem filozoficznym.

Ogólnie rzecz biorąc, poeci są uprzywilejowani, posiadając dar posiadania wizji, a krytycy literaccy są uprzywilejowani posiadaniem daru interpretowania tych wizji. W ten sposób Gerszenzon, jako krytyk literacki, może uczynić Puszkina na swój własny obraz.

Czy sam Gerszenzon był heraklitejczykiem? Jasne jest z analiz Gerszenzona, że Bóg, w szczególności Bóg Starego Testamentu, to produkt indywidualnej i społecznej wyobraźni, dogodne samooszukiwanie się będące środkiem służącym do wprowadzenia harmonii społecznej, a nawet konieczne do zachowania zdrowia psychicznego. Jeśli można by odseparować z przyrody wszelkie regularności, a z historii wszelkie prawa historyczne, to owe prawa przyrodnicze i historyczne tworzyłyby Boga Gerszenzona.

Człowiek w obliczu bezosobowych sił przyrodniczych i społecznych musi doskonalić samego siebie. Przewodnictwo pochodzi ze wsłuchiwania się w rozum kosmiczny, tj. prawa przyrodnicze, rozum, którego nie można poznać racjonalnie. Pozostają wrażenia, wewnętrzne odczucia własnej duszy, by wiedzieć, co robić. Wszystko to czyni propozycję Gerszenzona niebezpiecznie subiektywistyczną.

Poglądy Gerszenzona na religię nieuchronnie miały wpływ na jego analizy historyczne. Krytykował on historyków za ich głęboko zakorzeniony racjonalizm i za traktowanie mistycyzmu z pogardą, lecz był on w nie mniejszym stopniu racjonalistą w oferowanych przez siebie interpretacjach. Jego zdaniem stany duchowe Czaadajewa były wynikiem załamania nerwowego. Jego wyjaśnienie zjawiska słowianofilstwa odsuwa w cień prawdziwie religijny czynnik przez redukowanie ich do ogólnikowych stwierdzeń metafizycznych. Interpretacja *Wybranych fragmentów* Gogola nie wypada wcale lepiej. Elementy subiektywne obecne są u każdego krytyka i historyka, lecz prace Gerszenzona są obarczone znacznie większą dozą subiektywizmu niż prace innych badaczy.