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A SHORT STORY ABOUT THE ÜBERMENSCH: VLADIMIR SOLOV’ÈV’S INTERPRETATION OF AND RESPONSE TO NIETZSCHE’S ÜBERMENSCH

ABSTRACT. From the 1890s on, the atheist philosopher F. Nietzsche exerted a profound and enduring impact on Russian religious, cultural, and social reality. The religious philosopher V.S. Solov’èv perceived Nietzsche’s thought as an actual threat to Russian religious consciousness and his own anthropological ideal of Divine Humanity. He was especially preoccupied with the idea of the Übermensch since some two decades before the Nietzschean Übermensch was popularized in Russia, Solov’èv had already developed his own interpretation of the sverkhchelovek.

KEY WORDS: Antichrist, Bogochelovechestvo, bogoiskateli, Friedrich Nietzsche, Russian Nicheanstvo, sverkhchelovek, Übermensch

During the last decade of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th Century – a period often referred to as the Russian ‘Silver Age’ – the major representatives of the Russian intelligentsia became familiar with and indulged in the works and thought of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). The reading of the German philosopher was not a unilateral process of passive absorption, but spurred Russian intellectuals to actively reconsider their own thought and reformulate the course of their own philosophy. In his portrayal of the ‘Russian cultural renaissance’, the age of the flowering of arts and philosophy, the religious philosopher Nikolaj Berdjaev refers to Nietzsche as “the strongest Western influence” on this particular artistic and intellectual climate.1 He sees an equally important, though typically Russian, inspiration in the figure and thought of the religious philosopher Vladimir Solov’èv (1853–1900). Considering Nietzsche’s pronounced atheistic outlook on the one hand and Solov’èv’s religious viewpoint on the other hand, this juxtaposition strikes as odd.

One can indeed detect certain correspondences between Nietzsche’s and Solov’èv’s reasoning; the conviction that the 19th

century positivistic emphasis on science and man as a cognitive subject has caused the decline of Western philosophy and the search for new philosophical paradigms, based on the principle of life. Yet the philosophical discordances between the atheistic and the deeply religious thinker cannot be denied and Berdjaev’s statement would most certainly have disturbed Solov’ëv, since he considered the German philosopher to be his direct intellectual opponent.

Nietzsche started his philosophical ‘career’ two years earlier (with Die Geburt der Tragödie, 1872) than Solov’ëv (with his Master’s Thesis Krizis zapadnoj filosofii, 1874). Both thinkers were confronted with the legacy of the 19th century European Zeitgeist, in which materialistic and positivistic tenets gradually supplanted the belief in God. Both acknowledged that the traditional Christian doctrine was irreconcilable with modern mentality. Yet whereas the German philosopher developed an anthropology in which the ‘dead God’ is completely cancelled out, the Russian religious thinker – in spite of an atheistic phase during his adolescence – attempted to overcome the crisis in religion by reinvigorating the traditional belief.

Some months before his mental collapse, Nietzsche showed a growing interest in Russian actuality, but to my knowledge there is no indication that he knew anything about Solov’ëv, who was at that time the most famous and influential philosopher among Russian intellectuals. Solov’ëv on the other hand was well aware of Nietzsche’s life and works, although it is difficult to establish to what extent he really read the German philosopher, or rather he knew him only by reputation and secondhand information. For, when Nietzsche became known among the Russian intelligentsia in the beginning of the 1890s, his notoriety as the ‘atheist mad philosopher’ was often ahead of him and hindered an unbiased reading of his works. Neither in his published works, nor in his letters, does Solov’ëv reveal the sources of his familiarity with Nietzsche. References to Zarathustra and the Antichrist prove Solov’ëv’s knowledge of Also sprach Zarathustra (1883–1885, the fourth part was not published until 1892) and Der Antichrist (1888, published in 1895); yet they might also be retraced to a mere acquaintance with the titles of the works in question. Solov’ëv’s philosophical stance towards Nietzsche was possibly determined by his polemics with the Russian