

Transcultural Experiments

*Russian and American Models of
Creative Communication*

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Part I

History

Chapter 1

From Culturology to Transculture

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The Historical Context

Culturology is a specific branch of Russian humanities that found its earliest expression in the works of Nikolai Danilevsky (1822–85) and Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), culminating in the 1960s–80s with works by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), Aleksei Losev (1893–1988), Yury Lotman (1922–93), Vladimir Bibler (b. 1918), Georgy Gachev (b. 1929), and Sergei Averintsev (b. 1937). Culturology investigates the diversity of cultures and their modes of interaction and functions as a metadiscipline within the humanities, the aim of which is to encompass and link the variety of cultural phenomena studied separately by philosophy, history, sociology, literary and art criticism, etc.

The philosophy underlying culturology may be traced to the German intellectual tradition, particularly the views of Goethe, Herder, Windelband, Simmel, and Spengler on culture as an integral organism.¹ From this standpoint, culture embraces various kinds of cognitive and creative activity, including politics, economics, science, the arts, literature, philosophy, and religion. All of these fields find their roots in the primordial intuition, the “ur-phenomenon” of a given culture, which varies with specific historical and ethnic formations.

In Russia, this organicist concept of culture found its earliest expression in the work of Nikolai Danilevsky, a late-nineteenth-century Slavophilic thinker who half a century before Oswald Spengler outlined a

certain number of cultural-historical types, including "European" and "Slavic." For Danilevsky, culture is the broadest concept that embraces four kinds of activities: religious, political, socio-economic, and cultural in the narrow sense (art, science, and technology).² Culturological topics were widely discussed in prerevolutionary Russian religious philosophy, where Nikolai Berdiaev, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, and Pavel Florensky speculated on culture as a complementary aspect of cult, that is, as a free creative response of man to God's act of creation. According to Berdiaev, "in social life, the spiritual primacy belongs to culture. The goals of society are fulfilled in culture, not in politics and economics."³

The concept of culture proved to be central for many important thinkers in post-Stalinist Russia as an alternative to the concept of society dominant in Marxist theory. While society is divided into classes and parties, each fighting for power and supremacy, culture has the potential to unite people and transcend social, national, and historical divisions. From a culturological standpoint, culture can be defined as a symbolic responsiveness: Any new artistic work or philosophical theory introduced into the system of culture changes the meaning of all other elements, and in this way not only does the past influence the present, but the present gives shape to the past. The model of history as a unidirectional vector, which long held sway over the Soviet mentality, was challenged by the concept of culture as a multidimensional continuum on which epochs are not successive steps in humanity's progress but coexist on equal terms and give meaning to each other.

A strong challenge to Marxism in the 1960s came also from structuralism, the methodology that must be credited with propelling the concept of culture to the forefront of the humanities. Though both structuralism and culturology consciously opposed themselves to orthodox Marxism, there are clear methodological distinctions between them. The structuralist project is predominantly scientific and attempts to introduce the standard of mathematics and natural sciences into the core of humanistic research, whereas culturology, as influenced by neo-Kantian and hermeneutic traditions, is careful to emphasize the specificity of cultural phenomena as inaccessible to rigorous analysis and calculation. According to such major representatives of culturology as Bakhtin and Averintsev, the inability of the humanities to achieve formal rigor is to their advantage rather than to their detriment. Since the very object of the humanities embraces the free will and spiritual activity that escapes mathematical or naturalistic definition, the humanities elaborate their own criteria of precision and challenge scientific approaches to culture

as a system of informational codes. Thus culturology emerged in the USSR as a kind of third force in the methodological dispute between Marxism and structuralism: Abandoning social and ideological bias in its approach to culture, culturology also attempted to overcome scientific and technological bias as another form of reductionism. The formation of culturology as a single disciplinary field occurred in the late 1960s, with the waning of the initial enthusiasm for structuralist rigor and the publication of the last works of Bakhtin and the first works of Averintsev, which were internally polemical with respect to technological rationalism. In his notes made in 1970–71, Bakhtin insisted on "[t]he study of culture (or some area of it) at the level of system and at the higher level of organic unity: open, becoming, unresolved and unpredictable, capable of death and renewal, transcending itself, that is, exceeding its own boundaries."⁴

The advancement of culturology in the post-Stalinist period proved to be in consonance both with national traditions of universalism and with pluralistic and liberal modes of thinking. In culturology, "culture" is treated as a descriptive rather than a normative concept, the term itself being used both in the singular and in the plural. *Culture* as an integrity of disciplinary spheres presupposes the diversity of *cultures* as multiple national and historical types, each having its own formative principle, irreducible to others. While culturology is concerned with culture as a whole, it also recognizes the diversity of these "wholes" and is reluctant to discriminate among them in terms of value.

Thus the methodology of culturological research necessarily combines two procedures. First, it seeks to identify the broader underpinnings of diverse disciplines, to go beyond the specificity of any professional sphere. Mikhail Bakhtin, for example, in his meditations on the tasks of literary scholarship, insists that "[l]iterature is an inseparable part of culture and it cannot be understood outside the total context of the entire culture of a given epoch. . . . [N]arrow specification is alien to the best traditions of our scholarship. . . . In our enthusiasm for specification we have ignored questions of the interconnection and interdependence of various areas of culture . . . and we have not taken into account that the most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries of its individual areas and not in places where these areas have become enclosed in their own specificity."⁵

The second procedure presupposes a definition of cultural phenomena in terms of their historical and national specificity. If, within a given culture, various disciplinary and professional spheres are linked by a

common intuition, then the uniqueness of this intuition serves to distinguish one culture from another on a global scale. This aspect of culturology was most thoroughly developed by Aleksei Losev in his extensive investigations of classical aesthetics, demonstrating that antiquity as a cultural phenomenon preserves its individuality on all levels of interpretation. Analyzing the most abstract theories of the dialectics of sameness and difference in Plato and the neo-Platonic school, Losev shows that behind these abstractions, and "penetrating all antiquity . . . , lies a powerful and inescapable intuition of a *universal organism*, or the intuition of all reality as a living organism."⁶ For Losev, the principal goal of culturological research is to perceive the uniqueness of a given phenomenon as an "expressive faceness of being" (*vyrzitel'nyi lik bytiiia*). "In exploring any fact from the culture of classical antiquity, I did not rest until I found in it a quality that sharply distinguished it from everything that is not classical. . . . 'Style' and 'worldview' must be integrated by any means; they must necessarily reflect each other."⁷

These two aspects of culturology, "diversity" and "integrity," are inseparable, but certainly their respective significance may vary within the works of a given thinker. Russian culturology, as it formed in the 1960s, found great living proponents for each aspect of the discipline in Bakhtin and Losev, both of whom had already laid the groundwork for this methodology in their earlier works of the 1920s. While Bakhtin stresses the dialogic nature of a specific culture in its internal and external differentiations, Losev is more inclined to theorize cultural identity as a multifaceted manifestation of one basic, primordial intuition.⁸

Culturology and Cultural Studies

The best way to introduce Russian culturology to an American audience is to juxtapose it point by point with what is known in the English-speaking world as "cultural studies."⁹ We will take as a point of reference *Introducing Cultural Studies*, Ziauddin Sardar and Borin Van Loon's lucid summary of characteristic trends in the field. Five definitions that apply to cultural studies also reveal its parallels and contrasts with culturology.

1. "Cultural studies aims to examine its subject matter in terms of *cultural practices* and their *relation to power*. Its constant goal is to expose power relationships and examine how these relationships influence and shape cultural practices."¹⁰

* * *

Culturology aims to examine culture as the locus of all existing and possible practices that, taken as a whole, liberate humans from their natural conditions and physical dependencies, including the dependency of the weak on the strong, that is, the relation of power. Culture is everything created by humans and, in its turn, everything that creates humans in their distinction from and irreducibility to organic nature. By introducing a symbolic dimension to power relationships, culture mediates them through the liberating practices of signification, estrangement, deferral, and erasure of biological (racial, sexual) origins. Cultural practices cannot be reduced to power relationships as such and should not be seen as solely shaped and determined by them: Such reductionism is easily compatible with an oppressive and totalitarian politics of culture as an instrument of power.

2. "Cultural studies is not simply the study of culture as though it was a discrete entity divorced from its social or political context. Its objective is to understand culture in all its complex forms and to analyze the *social and political context* within which it manifests itself."

Culture exists in a social and political context but this context itself is only a partial aspect of culture and should not dominate the whole. Works of art and philosophy, spiritual practices and rituals, moral values, personal relationships, everyday practices of symbolic exchange and communication—all these multiple dimensions of culture prevent humans from being reduced to political animals. The task of culturology is to expose culture as an open totality surpassing and transcending any of its single constituents, including the political one. Culturology is the self-awareness of culture; its mission is not to govern culture through the institutions of power, as politics does, but to be its self-governing consciousness.

3. "Culture in cultural studies always performs two functions: it is both the *object* of study and the *location* of political criticism and action. Cultural studies aims to be both an intellectual and a pragmatic enterprise."

Culturology shares these two functions with cultural studies, but it presents culture not as the location of political criticism and action but rather as permanent dislocation of political practices through the further contextualization of their symbolic contexts. It is not only that a religious practice or an aesthetic device may be decoded to reveal an

encrypted political message—alternative ways of deciphering political phenomena as encryptions of mythological or aesthetic codes would be equally relevant. Even narrow party activities may be seen through culturological prisms as refractions or paraphrases of ritualistic codes, language games, literary narratives, or psychological archetypes. Culturology does not allow any single code or discipline to be privileged over the others and to serve as the ultimate vocabulary or universal basis of interpretation. Culturology is not a “pragmatic enterprise” along with other modes of cultural activities; it is rather a “metapragmatic” consciousness that is critical of narrow pragmatism, isolationist and/or hegemonic claims of any specific practice and discourse.

4. “Cultural studies attempts to *expose and reconcile the division of knowledge*, to overcome the split between tacit (that is, intuitive knowledge based on local cultures) and objective (so-called universal) forms of knowledge. It assumes a common identity and common interest between the knower and the known, between the observer and what is being observed.”

In its attempt to overcome the division of knowledge and extremes of specialization, culturology most closely cooperates with cultural studies. Culturology attempts to approach culture on its own terms and to develop a holistic language that avoids lapsing into politicism, scientism, aestheticism, moralism, or the absolutization of any single aspect of culture. This is why culturology departs also from the political accentuation of culture, which is predominant in cultural studies. If all other specialists work inside their own disciplines or realms of culture, unconsciously abiding by their rules and taboos, a culturologist makes his own culture the object of *definition* and thereby surpasses its confines, its *finiteness*.

5. “Cultural studies is committed to a *moral evaluation* of modern society and to a *radical line* of political action. The tradition of cultural studies is not one of value-free scholarship but one committed to social reconstruction by critical political involvement. Thus cultural studies aims to *understand* and *change* the structures of dominance everywhere, but in industrial capitalist societies in particular.”

Russian culturology emerged in a socialist, totally politicized, and morally indoctrinated society and sought the most radical alternatives to the existing system not in political engagement or moralistic lamentations that would have conformed to the prevailing ideological codes, but

rather in transgression of any established codes, including political and moral codes (such as “collectivism,” “materialism,” “the political hegemony of the working class,” and “the moral supremacy of physical labor”). Culture was viewed not as an instrument of politics (to which it was actually reduced under socialism) but as the horizon of liberation from the limits of one cultural realm by reaching out to other realms. For culturology, science presented an escape from politics; art, an escape from science; religion, an escape from art; philosophy, an escape from religion; and finally, culture, an escape from all of them, the capacity of humans to release themselves from all physical and symbolic prisons.

Both cultural studies and culturology pursue goals beyond pure value-free scholarship. Since cultural studies is focused on politically invested forms of culture, or even culturally disguised forms of power, the aim of this discipline is primarily critical and deconstructive. This is generally characteristic of the postmodern Western humanities, in which deconstruction became the primary methodology of cultural research. Culturology, on the contrary, is focused on the constructive potentials of culture and aims to broaden and multiply the meanings of every cultural symbol beyond its literal and pragmatic meaning. Deconstruction, at least in its conventional form of academic poststructuralism, is mostly understood as “the undoing, decomposing, and desedimenting of structures,” though, according to Jacques Derrida’s own intention, it “was not a negative operation. Rather than destroying, it was also necessary to understand how an ‘ensemble’ was constituted and to reconstruct it to this end. However, the negative appearance was and remains much more difficult to efface. . . . That is why this word, at least on its own, has never appeared satisfactory to me.”¹¹ Culturology is the art of explicitly *positive* deconstruction, which opens alternatives and free spaces within and beyond certain cultural practices.¹²

Culturology addresses the practices and institutions of power no less critically than cultural studies does, which is evidenced by the former’s liberational message and explosive role in the networks of Soviet official culture. But culturology is not a form of political dissidentism. It does not criticize one cultural politics on behalf of another, more advanced and progressive politics. Rather it criticizes politics, as a type of discourse, as a relation of power, as a narrow pragmatism, from the standpoint of culture as a whole. Culturology is not about opposition, but about transcendence: How to transcend a given practice or theory using the symbolic capacities of culture, its infinitely rich, multileveled encodings and decodings of every human phenomenon.

Cultural studies and culturology developed almost simultaneously as the extensions of their respective cultures' distinct theoretical needs and priorities. The name "cultural studies" comes from the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, established in 1964. In 1972, the Center published the first issue of *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* with the specific aim "to put cultural studies on the intellectual map."

It is more difficult to date the emergence of Russian culturology. It integrated Yury Lotman and his school's works on cultural semiotics (mid-1960s), the methodological notes of Mikhail Bakhtin (1960s–1970s), the research program of Vladimir Bibler and his scientific seminar "Arche" (from 1967), and the first publications of Georgy Gachev and Sergei Averintsev (mid- and late-1960s).

The founders of cultural studies—Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall—were working-class intellectuals inspired by Old Left and New Left ideals and heavily influenced by Marxism. By the early 1970s, Marxism had lost almost all political battles in the West and was receding into the more quiet cultural realm attempting to transform it into a new political arena. Cultural studies emerged and continued, in essence, as political studies of culture and experiments in its social transformation. Culture appeared to present a more open and accessible area for socialist experiments than economics or practical politics.

In Russia, the situation was quite the opposite: For many years the official culture had been utterly politicized and reduced to ideological and propagandistic functions. Soviet Marxism was in a position to impose on culture as a "secondary superstructure" all the power of economic and social determinations. The principal goal of Russian culturology was to depoliticize culture, to rescue it from the narrow pragmatic context where it served as an instrument of power. Culture was explored as the ultimate resource of human freedom and creativity that transcends social limits and historical determinations.

Which of these two branches of "cultural science" presents more potentials for the future? At first sight, the collapse of Soviet Marxism has eliminated the totalitarian context in which Russian culturology emerged. But is not the very collapse of totalitarianism an argument in favor of the culturological approach to culture as the metasystem that survives and transgresses all political contexts, even so powerful a one as that which dominated the Soviet Union for 70 years? The culturological approach to culture as a nonsurpassable and all-surpassing totality successfully challenged Marxist-Leninist and other politicist, or moralist, or

scientist approaches that attempted to reduce culture to one of its constituents. That is why culturology has become one of the main branches of humanistic scholarship in post-Soviet Russia, in fact, the leader in the methodology of research and teaching. In many universities, departments of culturology have replaced those departments of "scientific communism" and "Marxism-Leninism" that were previously responsible for the political supervision and utilization of all other disciplines.

*Culturology and Transculture*¹³

Though culturology is a scholarly discipline, it contains some possibilities that lead beyond the realm of scholarship, into certain practices that we call "transcultural." To use Bakhtin's words, culturology approaches culture as an "organic unity" that is capable of "transcending itself, that is, exceeding its own boundaries."¹⁴ Culturology takes a distanced view of culture that propels culture's own self-distancing, a disruption of its self-identity. Culturology "estranges" and "defamiliarizes" culture, in the same sense in which the major Russian theoretician Viktor Shklovsky defined "estrangement" as the main technique of art. According to Shklovsky, our daily habits and perceptions tend to retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic, as if they were natural, inevitable, and predetermined. "Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. . . . And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. . . . The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object* . . ."¹⁵

In the same way, culturology is a way of experiencing the culturality of culture. If art, as a part of culture, deautomatizes our perception of objects, then culturology deautomatizes our perception of art and culture themselves, exposes their artificial constructs and contingencies and thus allows us to transcend their automatism. Culturology distances and "alienates" us from the culture to which we belong by birth and education, and thus prepares us for free cultural creativity. In this transcending capacity, culturology becomes a critique not only of specific branches and disciplines within a particular culture, but of any given culture as a whole. At this point culturology grows into transcultural theory and practice. Transculture is a way to transcend our "given" culture and to apply culture's transformative forces to culture itself. Transculture is the

second order of "culturality" of culture, its capacity for self-cultivation and self-transcendence. If culturology is the self-awareness of culture, then transculture is the self-transformation of culture, the totality of theories and practices that liberate culture from its own repressive mechanisms.

This movement of transcendence starts within culture itself, as it liberates humans from natural dependencies through the system of symbolical mediations and replacements. Such cultural categories as "taste," "love," "word" constitute the realm of human freedom from the pressures of physical hunger and lust, from the physical presence of an object, etc. Simultaneously, cultural activity creates its own system of dependencies that are peculiar to a given culture, its ethnic, racial, social, or sexual determinants. In transposing their inborn qualities into a cultural dimension, humans still reproduce many of their physical conditions and identities on this symbolic plane. That is why many cultural activities, including literature, cinema, theory, and writing in general, are still designated by natural labels, such as white and black, male and female. Even ethnic labels—Russian, German, French—still connect culture with physical conditions, geographic regions, climates, landscapes, etc. Every culture has its own idiosyncrasies, manias, phobias, ideological assumptions and restrictions, modes of indoctrination, informational filters, etc.

By transcending the limits of these "natural," or "first order" cultures, the transcultural dimension opens the next level of human liberation, now from those symbolic dependencies, ideological addictions, patriotic infatuations that belong to us as members of a certain cultural group. To use Bakhtin's words, culture is capable of "transcending itself, that is, exceeding its own boundaries,"¹⁶—and therefore contains possibilities for transculture. Transculture can be defined as an open system of symbolic alternatives to existing cultures and their established sign systems.

This does not mean that all our cultural identities are to be forsaken for the sake of transcultural liberation. We cannot and should not get rid of our primary symbolic identities, which are relevant to some levels of behavior. The transition of humans from a natural to a cultural condition did not deprive them of their physical bodies; on the contrary, their bodies acquired new expressiveness and vigor through the cultivation of physical abilities and the exercise of symbolic activities, such as speaking, dancing, drawing, writing, training in various arts and trades, and sports. In the same way, transcultural activity does not deprive us of our symbolic bodies, our constitutive identities as Russians and Americans, males and females, biologists and novelists, chess players and soccer players. Transcultural practice is not a diminishment of or confrontation with

our cultural selves but rather a way of expanding the limits of our ethnic, professional, linguistic, and other identities to new levels of indeterminacy and "virtuality." Transculture builds new identities in the zone of fuzziness and interference and challenges the metaphysics of discreteness so characteristic of nations, races, professions, and other established cultural configurations that are solidified rather than dispersed by the multiculturalist "politics of identity."

Although it is a theoretical extension of culturology, the transcultural model is not just a field of knowledge but also a mode of being, located at the crossroads of cultures. This transcultural dimension grows out of the potentialities of the global cultural network, seen as the next historical stage in humanity's liberation from deterministic mechanisms of both natural and cultural environments. The essential element and merit of culture is its capacity to free humans from the dictates of nature, its physical restrictions and necessities; but it is the capacity of transculture to free humans from the determinations of culture itself. Culture, by releasing us from physical limitations, imposes new limitations, of symbolic order, and transculture is the next step in the ongoing human quest for freedom, in this case liberation from the "prison house of language" and the variety of artificial, self-imposed, and self-deified cultural identities. In contrast to the European followers of Rousseau and the American proponents of a counterculture, what transculture suggests is not the escape from culture back to nature, to a primitive, precultural condition, but rather a progression beyond culture, into the postcultural condition that is technologically shaped by contemporary global communications.

Although transculture depends on the efforts of separate individuals to overcome their identification with specific cultures, on another level it is a process of interaction between cultures themselves in which more and more individuals find themselves "outside" of any particular culture, "outside" of its national, racial, sexual, ideological, and other limitations. I would compare this condition with Bakhtin's idea of *venakhodimost*, which means being located beyond any particular mode of existence, or, in this case, finding one's place on the border of existing cultures. This realm *beyond* all cultures is located *inside* transculture.

One of the prevailing arguments of contemporary cultural studies is that we are bound to the conditions and conventions of our cultures; we cannot transcend the contingencies of our sign systems. But even if we cannot rid ourselves of our "symbolic" body, we can integrate it into a more capacious transcultural dimension. Similarly, as we know, the creation of tools, signs, and values did not release humans from their

physical bodies and natural instincts but added a new, "transnatural," specifically cultural dimension to their existence. Now that the boundaries of "native cultures" have become too narrow for humans, we are developing other new dimensions that we call here transcultural.

Notes

1. The term "culturology" (German "Kulturologie") was proposed, perhaps for the first time, by the distinguished German chemist and Nobel prize winner Wilhelm Ostwald in 1915 in his address "The System of the Sciences." For a brief history of the term, see Leslie A. White, *The Science of Culture: A Study of Man and Civilization* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1949): 410–412.
2. N. Ia. Danilevskii. *Rossia i Evropa* (1869) (Moscow: Kniga, 1991): 471–472.
3. Nikolai Berdiaev. "Filosofia neravenstva," in his book *Sobranie sochinenii*, in 4 volumes (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1990 vol. 4): 556.
4. Mikhail Bakhtin. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986): 135.
5. *Ibid.*, 2.
6. A. F. Losev. *Istoriia antichnoi estetiki. Poslednie veka*. Book 2 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1988): 379.
7. A. F. Losev. *Ocherki antichnogo simvolizma i mifologii*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Izdanie avtora, 1930): 690, 693.
8. To intimate the scope and diversity of Russian culturology, I am supplying a selective bibliography at the end of this chapter.
9. In the late 1940s, the outstanding American anthropologist Leslie A. White attempted to introduce the term and concept of "culturology" into Anglo-American scholarship. Characteristically, he viewed culturology as a discipline with a larger field and intellectual capacity than sociology because "culture" itself is a broader concept than that of "society": "... Instead of dealing with cultural determinants upon their own level, i.e., culturologically, sociology brought them down to the socio-psychological level ... The attempts of sociologists to explain culture in terms of 'social process' or 'interaction' failed as of course it must" (Leslie A. White. *The Science of Culture: A Study of Man and Civilization*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1949: 80, 81). At that time, H. L. Mencken, the distinguished authority on the American language, found "culturology" "a rather clumsy word, but nevertheless logical" (*Ibid.*, 410). However, the term failed to achieve recognition in Anglo-American scholarship, obviously, for a deeper reason than mere "clumsiness." The concept of culturology, as it was elaborated by Leslie A. White and, independently, by Russian scholars, presupposes that culture is a comprehensive structure, "the extra-somatic continuum of symbol-borne events" (Leslie White) that is irreducible to social interactions and political contexts. "The explanation of culture is and must be culturological ... 'Cul-

- turology' specifies a sector of reality and defines a science. In so doing it trespasses upon the prior claims of psychology and sociology. It does more than trespass, of course; it expropriates as well. That is, it makes it clear that the solution of certain scientific problems does not properly lie within the provinces of psychology and sociology as previously supposed, but belongs to—i.e., can be solved only by—a science of culture ... 'Sociology' ... assimilates culture to its basic concept of interaction, making culture an aspect, or a by-product, of the social process of interaction whereas the structures and processes of human society are functions of culture" (*Ibid.*, 393, 412, 414). In culturology, culture comprises the method, not only the object of research. The approach that dominated Anglo-American scholarship under the name of "cultural studies," on the contrary, gives priority to socio-political perspectives on culture. Thus the difference between "culturology" and "cultural studies" is methodological, not only terminological.
10. Ziauddin Sardar and Borin Van Loon, *Introducing Cultural Studies*, ed. Richard Appignanesi (New York: Totem Books, 1998): 9. The next four definitions are cited from the same page.
 11. "Letter to a Japanese Friend" (1983), in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991): 272.
 12. See more on the methodology of potentiation as "positive deconstruction" in the chapter "The Permanence of Newness ..."
 13. The relationship between culturology and transculture is explored more extensively in the chapter "Culture—Culturology—Transculture," in Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995): 280–306.
 14. Mikhail Bakhtin. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986): 135.
 15. Viktor Shklovsky. "Art as Technique," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism. Modernism Through Poststructuralism*. Edited and with Introductions by Robert Con Davis (New York and London: Longman, 1986): 55.
 16. Mikhail Bakhtin. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986): 135.

Appendix

(compiled by Mikhail Epstein)

This very selective bibliography is organized according to my division of the discipline into nine major directions and thematic categories.

General

Filosofia i kul'tura: ukazatel literatury, izdannoii v SSSR na russkom iazyke v 1974–1981 gg. (Moscow: INION, 1983).

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Semiotic and Structural Approaches

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Chapter 2

Collective Improvisation And Transcultural Consciousness

Mikhail Epstein

Transcultural activity, as it emerged in Moscow in the early 1980s, was part of neither official Soviet nor oppositional dissident, nor underground avant-gardist cultures. The very meaning of "transculturalism" implies transcending differences among various cultures and bridging them across their borders. The transcultural project, as developed in the years 1982–90, before and during perestroika, played on those radical differences between official and nonofficial cultures that were later effaced by Gorbachev and Yeltsin's reforms, in the process of the de-ideologization and de-communization of Russian society.

Creativity and Communication

One aspect of transcultural practice is exemplified in "collective improvisation," a heuristic model that the author and some of his colleagues practiced in Russia. I will rely on my own memory and records in recounting the history of this transcultural project, which started as a creative enterprise among several friends. During the 1970s and 1980s I was fortunate to have among my friends representatives of various intellectual and creative fields: an artist, a sociologist, a physicist, a mathematician, a poet, and a philologist. We used to meet at each other's birthday parties and other similar celebrations. At that time, such gatherings were the

strongest intellectual need of the late Soviet intelligentsia, increasingly alienated from society and the institutionalized cultural establishment. However, I had to admit to myself that socializing within our circle was not as intellectually rewarding and gratifying as our individual communications, which concentrated around the really important creative aspects of each others' work. While sitting at the festive table, we exchanged jokes, discussed general political issues, tried to witticize about commonplaces and expose our ironic attitude toward the trivialities of Soviet life. This was a kind of collective psychotherapy, but I suspect that each of us was slightly disappointed by the redundancy of conversation when there was not much to say.

I was puzzled by this paradox: The same people who were brilliant in their individual creativity and in private talks, proved to be much less colorful when gathering to converse. I imagined that by inviting artist A, writer B, critic C, and physicist D, and introducing them to one another, I would witness a feast of the gods as they appeared to be in their studios, laboratories, and journals. Instead they turned out to be rather common people when coming together, and the only mark of their individual distinction was that they felt uneasy about this mediocrity enforced by conventional forms of socializing. The simple rule of multiplication—four talented people and thus sixteen possible ways of inspired communication—did not work in this case. Instead what we observed was a process of division and diminishment, such that in the presence of four gifted people each of them became one-fourth (or even less) of himself.

The problem we encountered was that of the ambivalent relationship between *creativity* and *communication*, between the "vertical" and "horizontal" axes of human symbolical activity. Creativity is built on the uniqueness of each person, while communication usually involves those qualities that are common to people, and, therefore, the highest success in society often belongs to the most common of the people who succeed in being more spontaneously and ingeniously common than others. How could we tackle this problem? Was there any way to bring together the values of creativity and communication so that the presence of other people would not paralyze each person's inventive capacities but rather mobilize and stimulate them to new modes of creativity? Was there any way to engage the unique gifts of each individual in the process of communication so that their originality would not be dulled and discouraged?

First Collective Improvisations: Trialogues

In attempting to answer this set of questions, the idea of collective improvisations was born. In May 1982 we began to meet, at first three of us, the artist Ilya Kabakov, the sociologist Iosif Bakshtein, and I, for sessions of creative communication, and this moment could be identified as the inception of the Russian transcultural movement. Our first improvisation, though it may seem to be a simple coincidence, was devoted to a transcultural problem: the existence of poets of Jewish origin, such as Pasternak, Mandel'shtam, and Brodsky, within the Russian language and Russian culture, and the new creative possibilities generated by this transgression of ethnic boundaries. What was important about this first improvisation, however, was not its topic—more or less arbitrary—but this new structure of communication that could assimilate our professional and personal differences and even sharpen them through concentration on a common problem.

Perhaps the most magical instrument of this type of communication was *writing*, which allowed us to incorporate the possibility of thoughtful and articulate self-expression into the framework of dialogue or, more precisely, "trialogue," as we later called our regular sessions. The alternation of oral and written communication is related to the dialectic of selfness and otherness, which is undermined both in the seclusion of the study and in light party talk. After our essays were finished and we read them aloud, we agreed to write commentaries on one another's texts, and this was a new round of creativity turning into the next round of communication. Now our thoughts about Jewishness in Russian literature became intermingled and inseparable so that Kabakov's text could be fully appreciated and understood only in its overlapping with Bakshtein's commentaries and vice versa.

Transculture as I saw it at this stage was the experience of transcendence, in a specifically cultural rather than psychological, metaphysical, or religious sense. It was transcendence of professional, educational, and occupational boundaries in order to produce an interpersonal cultural work in the form of collaborative textual unities.

The Origins of the Club of Essayists

After we had conducted nine improvisational sessions devoted to such diverse topics as "the role of garbage in civilization," "hysterics as a feature

of national character," "why Russians are so strong in hockey," and "the potential of the epic form in contemporary literature," a new opportunity emerged. At the end of 1982 the Moscow city authorities permitted the organization of a Cultural Center of Youth Leisure. Here we could test new modes of communication still absent in "adult culture," which was strictly specialized and divided into the so-called creative unions: one of writers, another of musicians, a third of artists, and so on.

I was invited to this center to do "something," and the first and actually the last thing that proved to be a success was the broadly publicized all-Moscow essay competition. The essay is a microcosm of cultural diversity, combining as it does philosophical generalization, artistic imagination, and historical or biographical authenticity.¹ Since our improvisations spontaneously acquired the form of the essay it was reasonable to expect that through public competition the circle of collective improvisations could be broadened and involve new participants. To put it briefly, improvisation is the communicative aspect of essay writing raised to the n th degree where n is determined by the number of participants. Improvisation is the social extension of essayism, which, starting in individual creativity, grows into a model of new community shaped across cultural boundaries.²

Invitations to the essay competition were distributed around the city; they hung in Moscow's most prestigious cultural institutions. About twenty-five people responded to this invitation, and as a result our second improvisational community arose, absorbing the winners of the essay competition. As distinct from the first trio, this one included a greater variety of professions and, especially important, individuals who had never met each other before.

The Transcultural Project

At that period, early 1983, I started to think more generally about the experimental possibilities of contemporary culture. It occurred to me that Soviet culture, not in spite of, but *due to* its collectivist and totalitarian nature, possessed some creative potentials that had never been realized before. The emergence of *sots art* and conceptualism, the postmodern trends in art and poetry of the 1970s and 1980s, clearly indicated the possibility of a "post-Soviet" mentality that challenged both official (apologetic, pro-Soviet) and dissident (oppositional, anti-Soviet) models of cultural activity. Though I enjoyed the textual eccentricities of Dmitry Prigov and especially the metaphysically provocative and shock-

ingly "superficial" art of Ilya Kabakov at that time, I was not quite satisfied with the parodic and ironic bias that dominated conceptualism at that time as a "parrot" of Soviet ideology and "split mirror" of mass consciousness. I wanted to approach Soviet culture on its own terms, objectively and theoretically, and to disclose some potentials for its organic transformation in the future, not as a consequence of some social upheaval or political disruption, but as a matter of internal "creative erosion." This is how I came to formulate some vague ideas concerning transculture as reflected in my notes and letters of that period.

Diary Entries (May-June 1983)

Is politics a part of culture or culture a part of politics? And if they embrace each other, whose embrace is stronger, and which will force the other to relinquish its hold?

The multiplicity of cultural layers within Russia is the prototype of future global culture. We have a Buddhist people, a Christian religion, and an Islamic power.³ We must understand how various elements of our culture—Western European, Judaic, Buddhist, Orthodox, Catholic, Chinese, Muslim—can be integrated in such a way that they might produce a creative synthesis, not an explosive mixture.

What to call it, "metaculture" or "transculture"? "Meta-" means beyond, "trans-" means across. They are related as goal and path, as target and arrow. Soviet culture is the point of departure, transculture is the path, metaculture is the culture of the beyond. Here-culture, where-culture, and there-culture.

It is necessary to treat Soviet culture even more seriously and solemnly than it treats itself. We should eliminate this intimacy and familiarity that contemporaries still feel towards their immediate surrounding, as if it were still alive. No, Soviet culture has deserved the solemnity of the burial ritual. This culture will die indeed when we start to do honor and render homage to it, as if it were dead.

Soviet culture should be understood as a rare and precious fossil, as a layer among archeological excavations of ancient millennial cultures—Egyptian, Chinese, Persian, Peruvian, and so on. It is unique as it has buried itself alive; it has died not from old age but from a lack of vitality. We should avoid any sarcastic denunciation or caustic humor towards this culture; it would be as inappropriate as sarcasm toward the Cheops pyramid or a mummy of the pharaoh. Let us at least pretend to have preserved some pious reverence towards the majestic remnants, and then they will turn out to be truly majestic.

Letter on Transculture (June 30, 1983)⁴

In the last half a year, beginning in January 1983, the contours of a new cultural movement, which I would call "transculture," are becoming clear. It is radically different from the counterculture, as the latter was produced in the West in the 1960s. I would also call transculture "reactive" (if not "reactionary"), emphasizing its distinction from the "revolutionary" counterculture. Marx called revolution "the locomotive of history" but it is clear that this mode of transportation has become obsolete long ago. Transculture uses rather the principle of a rocket that is driven through the air by its reaction to the rearward expulsion of gases: the transport of the late 20th century.

Transculture does not and cannot stand in revolutionary opposition to, let us say, monolithic, monocentric culture; it does not confront but oversteps, goes through, transcends the existing culture, cultivates its gaps and voids. Like the mirror-shield of Perseus, it reflects the dominant Medusian culture in a dual way: by reflecting and deflecting it simultaneously. Monoculture (dominant culture), when it recognizes itself in a mirror, loses its strength, freezes in awe, as if bewitched by its dead reflection. Perseus understood that he could not defeat Medusa with a "revolutionary" sword and instead resorted to a "reactionary" mirror. It is only Medusa's own reflection that can deaden Medusa. No external adversary can defeat this superpower, like no Hercules can defeat Medusa: It has to be turned to self-contemplation and be horrified by itself. Such is the mythic prototype of our cultural situation. Let's leave to others the heroic deeds of Hercules and Achilles, and let's take as our example resourceful and far-sighted Perseus.

Transculture has one crucial distinction: It is created in the integral form of culture rather than shaped by partial intracultural activities, like arts or sciences. This is a Russian tradition: The demarcations within culture always were perceived as less important than the position of culture on its frontier with nonculture (nature, religion, life, emptiness, nothingness . . .). Our gardeners cultivated not so much various species of trees but treeness as such, fruitness, gardenness. Culture existed among us as a quintessence of culturalness. Probably this is the sensibility of hermits—or nomads—in the desert for whom all distinctions between plants are negligent before the miracle and rarity of plant life as such. The rarity of culture makes it a miracle on this soil. Since the zone of a wasteland considerably expanded during the Soviet epoch, our perception of culture also became even more abstract, nostalgic, and holistic. Characteristically, in the 1920s and 1930s, the idiom "cultural person" became popular in the USSR. All differential descriptions—intelligent, educated, knowledgeable, skillful, polite, modest, organized, responsible, intellectual, erudite, and others—were condensed into one definition: "cul-

tural." Culture persecuted by non-culture loses all its specifications and becomes quintessential: culture "as such."

We don't appreciate sufficiently the fact that in the twentieth century Russian culture ceased to be a spontaneously growing totality of creative acts and became an object and product of conscious creativity. Soviet art and science were of an inferior quality because all forces were mobilized for the construction of culture as a whole. But in the Soviet model, the formative force of culture was politics, one of its narrow and most ambitious constituents that worked destructively on the whole. This supremacy of politics has to be changed into the creation of culture by the forces of culture itself. Transculture will be total but not totalitarian, since its center will be located within culture itself, not within its special branches. Transculture deliberately constitutes itself not as a creativity within culture but as a creation of culture by the forces of culture itself. Transculture is culture's potential for self-awareness and self-transformation.

It is not by chance that the most productive contemporary genres are museum, storehouse, archive, trash, encyclopedia, catalogue, album, book, inventory, instruction, commentary, that is, genres of objectification, preservation, conservation, and even annihilation of culture. This is another aspect of transculture: It reappropriates all modes of its alienation. We have accumulated so many specific forms of the reification of culture, by transforming it into museum, encyclopedia, storehouse, archive, or trash, that transculture has now the broadest perspective of appropriation of all these forms.

Since transculture is the self-construction of culture, the project becomes its principal genre. The numerous projects of transculture comprise its major products whose merit does not depend on the fact of their realization. Realization is the category of history, projectivity is the category of culture. The genre of the project presupposes its realizability and thus is distinct from purely theoretical (nonrealizable) projections and purely practical (realized) plans. A project is a theory that justifies in advance a certain practice but does not predetermine its realization. There are a number of projects that exemplify the current stage of transculture: the "lyrical museum," the "ultimate work," "epistemological practice," "neo-lubok," "collective improvisation." In the next letter I hope to be able to describe them in more detail. Transculture is undergoing such a turbulent period of initial formation that, like an infant, its character changes from day to day. . . .

Public Improvisations

The first public performance, conducted in the Central House of Art Workers in July 1983, was probably the crucial test for the very idea of

collective improvisation. Would people be inclined and able to write in the presence of others? Would it not be too heavy a responsibility—to express oneself in front of the group, to write coherently on a theme that one had never elaborated before, to complete the text within an hour, and to read it aloud to a large audience?

From about fifteen topics suggested by the audience one was chosen randomly, by drawing lots, and, amazingly, it was “a wreath”—a concept that corresponded perfectly to the very structure of collective improvisation, in which many individual approaches had to be interwoven, like flowers in a wreath. The sheets of paper were laid before each of us; we were left alone with our thoughts, and all of a sudden we felt (as we confessed later) something in the very structure of this improvisational space that impelled us to write and think in the presence of others. This co-presence proved to be unexpectedly inspirational, a magical space of communality where we no longer were obliged to pronounce common things in order to establish social contact with the others but could be justified and recognized in being ourselves, different from one another.

By positing a common topic, the improvisation from the very start gave necessary tribute to commonness, and from this moment on we were liberated to explore the most eccentric and idiosyncratic modes of interpretation. Usually in social communication the topic is never fixed in advance because to do so would seem to constrain the freedom of the speakers and to turn a time of relaxation into a more solemn occupation, a sort of scholarly dispute or conference panel. To follow the standards of politeness, people are ready to sacrifice their own interests, and the topic loosely wanders from the weather to shopping, from sports to politics, revolving around the “zero” point of neutrality and indifference. At improvisational sessions, as soon as the topic is fixed, all participants are free to develop it unpredictably or to digress from it meaningfully. What follows from the initial commonness is the imperative of individuation. At the same time, the collective improvisation never turns into a conference discussion because it displays individual rather than narrowly professional approaches to a common rather than a specialized theme.

The situation that originally seemed to threaten the participants with psychological stress, instead generated a state of inspiration that, as is known from the time of the Muses, comes as “otherness” to our mind, as if writing under somebody else’s dictation. Here, this otherness was personified by the presence of others at the table, an interpersonal rather than a super-personal mode of transcendence.

After this first improvisation, we wondered whether in the process of

co-thinking we had entered some flow of consciousness that was not limited to separate minds or to the simple sum of our ideas. When an electron is pushed from its orbit it emanates an energy that, adding to the energy of other displaced electrons, produces the most terrifying dynamics—thermonuclear energy. To use this as a metaphor, the displacement of cultural boundaries, the dislocation of separate concepts and images from their routine disciplinary orbits, produces an enormous discharge of transcultural energy, and this is what we permanently felt during the subsequent sessions. Some unfamiliar kind of intellectual energy was discharged by the transcendence of disciplinary borders.

Topics of Improvisations

Overall, in the six years from 1982 to 1987, we conducted seventy-two improvisations, approximately one per month. The most regular participants in our sessions were the literary scholar Olga Vainshtein, the physicist Boris Tseitlin, the mathematician Vladimir Aristov, the housewife Liudmila Pol’shakova, and the philologist Mariia Umnova. Also participating were the sociologist Iosif Bakshtein, the linguist Aleksei Mikheev, the mathematician Liudmila Morgulis, the poet Olga Sedakova, the theater critic Irina Vergasova, the cultural scholar Igor Iakovenko, and the artist Vladimir Suliagin. The sessions were occasionally visited by dozens of guest participants.

Generally, the preference was given to concrete and trivial topics, such as “sharp and cutting objects,” “punctuation marks,” “money,” “hockey,” and “jealousy,” because they contained a richer scope of associations than topics already elaborated and exhausted in metaphysics, such as “good,” “evil,” or “freedom.” The old logical rule says that the more narrow the concept, the richer its content; therefore, the most general concepts such as “substance” or “spirit” are almost empty. That is why we tried to approach issues belonging to ordinary life, to “no one’s” territory in relation to specific sciences and disciplines. It was surprising to discover how much transcultural consciousness has in common with the ordinary, lying outside demarcated cultural borders.

For example, our first topic that caused unexpected animation was prompted by the fact that the session occurred in the springtime, when people changed their hats from heavy winter ones to lighter coverings. As we wrote about hats and how they can be viewed and used in heroic, tragic, comic, and idyllic modes, this juxtaposition of everyday objects with the categories of traditional aesthetics allowed us to achieve a

double effect: On the one hand, high concepts were ironically estranged and reduced to the trivial; on the other hand, the trivial object was elevated to the rank of "eternal ideas." This "double-think," the ambivalence of ascending and descending interpretations, is one of the most enjoyable aspects of interdisciplinary communication. We called ourselves "metaphysical soldiers," implying that the "generals" of metaphysics like Kant or Hegel prefer to concentrate on the most general aspects of being and to observe it from the highest, "Olympian" perspectives as befitting commanders in chief, while we, rank and file, are thrown into the thickness of the ordinary and are responsible for the metaphysical explanation of the most trivial things, such as spoons and forks, fruits and vegetables, which will never attract the mind of a generalist.

A general concept, on a communicative plane, presupposes the ascension of various minds to a point of unity and universal harmony, which was believed to be the highest goal of metaphysical contemplation in Plato and Hegel. On the contrary, ordinary things are ordinary precisely because they cannot be reduced to one general idea. Interdisciplinary improvisation offered a variety of ideas that could resonate with the given object, but none of these ideas could encompass the object completely; therefore, difference in perspectives was justified by the opaque nature of the object itself. A man whipping his hat from his head and trampling it underfoot would be a gesture of heroic despair and determination, whereas the same hat put on the grass would signify an idyllic state of leisure where the top and the bottom are brought to the same level. All spatial polarities (tensions) are discharged (resolved) and what was meant to be on the head is brought to the level of the feet. These were only two of the numerous ideas that helped us to explain "the eternal essence" of the hat and still not exhaust it because the hat is far from being simply an eternal idea or a disciplinary term. No concept could be completely adequate to this ordinary object; rather its comprehension demanded the deployment of newer and newer concepts.

Below are listed some topics of Moscow improvisations:

1. Garbage
2. Hockey
3. Storehouse
4. Verbosity
5. Is the epic form still possible in contemporary literature?
6. Hats in tragic, heroic, idyllic, and comic aspects
7. Jealousy

8. Time—theater—space
9. Birthday parties
10. Sharp cutting tools
11. Berries
12. Alushi with blue legs (nonexistent species)
13. Shadow and sand (symbols of transitoriness)
14. Moods
15. Decorations
16. Animals in the city
17. Talking to oneself
18. Gestures and postures
19. Pain
20. Corridor
21. TV set
22. Solitude
23. Russian mind
24. Taboo and inhibition
25. Weather
26. Teacher and disciple
27. Myth and tolerance
28. A day as a life
29. Money
30. Punctuation marks

Techniques of Improvisation

We tried to alternate various modes of improvisational technique—gestures and postures in the intellectual dynamics of the communal body. The most regular kind of improvisation included six stages:

1. discussion of the topics suggested by all participants, choice of one of them, and distribution of its various aspects among participants (each chooses his or her own personal and professional angle on the subject) (approximately 30–40 minutes);
2. writing individual essays (1–1.5 hour);
3. reading and oral discussion of essays (1–1.5 hour);
4. writing a post-essay improvisation as a comment on or summary of what was written and discussed before (15 minutes);
5. reading and discussion of these meta-improvisations (20 minutes); and

6. collection of all written materials of the given session into a coherent whole, a "collective monograph," with a certain composition and order of individual "chapters" (10 minutes).

Another type of improvisation was more fragmented: Each participant started to write his or her own topic, without preliminary discussion. Ten or fifteen minutes later the sheets of paper moved from the left to the right and continued moving periodically until the topic initiated by each participant made the full circle, incorporating the contributions of all others. For example, one wrote about the perception of time, another about the theater scene, the third about domestic animals; and as a result six or seven topics came to be interpreted consecutively by six or seven participants. Thus instead of six or seven individual essays we produced thirty-six or forty-nine textual stripes or layers arranged in six or seven thematic rubrics (collages).

More challenging and sophisticated was the third type of improvisation, which complicated the task of the second type: Each participant had to interpret the themes of other participants by relating it to his or her own theme. For example, A started his round of writing by discussing the role of money in the contemporary world; B, quite independently from A, launched the topic "the attitude of a person toward his/her own name"; and C targeted the problem of the contemporary village as a remainder of the pre-urbanist type of mentality. When B received A's paper he had not only to continue A's discussion of money but to treat this problem through its association with naming, and C had to add the village aspect to the topics of money and names. Sometimes the connections proved to be artificial, but in a number of cases the improvisation succeeded in manifesting how a given problem contained logical or metaphorical intersections with all other problems, however arbitrary their initial choice was.

One of Anaxagoras's sayings can best explain the meaning of our endeavors: "In everything there is a part of everything." The same insight emerged almost at the same historical period from another part of the world, China: "There is no such thing that would not be that, and there is no thing that would not be this" (Chuang Tzu). The third aphoristic argument comes from the leader of French surrealism, André Breton: "Every thing can be described by means of any other thing." Indeed, in the third type of improvisation all topics, independently launched, had to be convincingly linked. The name proved to be the universal sign of social exchange in the same way that money was a universal sign of eco-

nom exchange; and the lack of money (banknotes) circulating in the village proved to be an analogue to the absence of surnames and the dominance of patronymics in the village community.

The Lyrical Museum

The next step in the evolution of collective improvisations was the project of the lyrical museum, which involved interpretation not merely of concrete concepts and images but of singular things, such as those all of us have in our possession. Like some of our other projects, the lyrical museum was first designed to be deployed in a public space, in a gallery, but a series of tacit political resistances led us finally to implement this project in the apartment of one of our participants, Liudmila Pol'shakova, to the benefit of the entire project.

A singular thing as compared with a class of objects is still more opaque to reflection; it is difficult to articulate the idea of a hat but it is practically impossible to spell out the idea of this unique hat that belongs to Liudmila or to Vladimir and hangs on the wall of her or his apartment, as a potential exhibit in the lyrical museum.

The ultimate impossibility of rational assimilation or representation of a specific object adds still another dimension to transcultural consciousness, which operates not only with signs and symbols but also with singularities inasmuch as they are transcendental to consciousness and therefore cannot be presented in the system of cultural symbols otherwise than through their own authentic being. In the lyrical museum, verbal descriptions of objects are presented along with the things themselves, so that through the diverse levels of their semiotic representation and through the varieties of metaphoric associations and conceptual readings, the singularities could be posited in their irreducibility to concepts and signs, as occupying a distinct trans-semiotic space.

This was, incidentally, our response to the Derridean critique of the signified and the "metaphysics of presence." I cannot speak for other participants, but for me Derridean pan-textuality ("there is no 'beyond the text'") always seemed to be not only a strong speculative assumption but also an evident contradiction to his own important notion of *différance*. It is generally accepted that the relationship between signs is based on their difference from each other—but what is different from signs themselves? Textuality is based on the principle of difference, which necessarily leads beyond textuality itself, into the realm of things as being radically different from words and all modes of signification.

Things are selected and presented in the lyrical museum on the following assumptions:

- not because they belong to some famous historical personalities;
- not because they are representative of certain historical periods or national traditions;
- not because they exemplify some rare species of nature, some unique or typical artifacts of past cultures;
- not because they are imbued with universal or extraordinary significance;
- but because they are what they are by virtue of their most ordinary belonging to the most ordinary individuals.

A traditional museum semiotizes things by rendering them as signs of other realities, such as ancient civilizations or great people's lives and achievements, whereas the intention of our museum was the desemiotizing of things, the disclosure of the irreducible gap between their silent singularity and those multiple signs that claim to represent and interpret them. The lyrical museum aims to discover in mundane objects, such as kitchen utensils or children's toys, the level of experience that resists metaphorization and even signification and, in so doing, allows us to escape conventional perceptual habits and restore the materiality of an everyday thing, typically shrouded in ideological or commercial projections. In the lyrical museum, descriptions of an object were presented along with the object itself—the actual spoon, or hat, or candy wrapper—so that through the diverse, multidisciplinary levels of semiotic representations and metaphoric associations, the singularities of these objects could be posited in their "thisness," irreducible to concepts and signs.

The purpose of these and other experiments was to reinvest the daily, the quotidian, with dignity, integrity, and wonder. During the collapse of communism—the most extraordinary utopia of the past—we felt it our duty to create a utopia of the ordinary rather than to reject utopianism as such.⁵

Why in Russia? Why in the 1980s?

In my reflections on transculture in the 1980s, I often proceeded from its comparison with the phenomenon of the counterculture as it emerged in the United States in the 1960s. The counterculture opposed itself to the social and cultural establishment, but the very possibility of

such a legitimate opposition was sanctioned by democratic Western societies. In the USSR, we had no such open space within the society from which we could challenge the official culture. More importantly, we did not think that opposition could be culturally productive at all. By that time the Soviet intelligentsia already had acquired the experience of political opposition in the form of the dissident movement, but dissidentism finally proved to be anything but culturally productive. Opposition is not a creative mode of interaction with existing cultural conditions; consequently, the concept of "transcendence" was formulated as a type of cultural orientation distinct from opposition: Not to be "against" the existing and dominating culture but to take it as it is and to transcend it by acceptance and understanding; not to reject but to embrace and encircle.

This is why we were so strongly focused on the trivia of the Soviet lifestyle such as political myths, urban environments, storehouses, mass entertainments (like "parks of culture and rest"), sports (like hockey), and routine habits and customs (like birthday parties). Our intention was to test the limits of Soviet culture by inscribing it in the history of world cultures, by interpreting it as one of many possible cultural worlds, and by positing within it other cultural possibilities. From this perspective, Soviet civilization, instead of being simply rejected as a deviation from Western liberal canons, could be approached and even appreciated on its own, as one among many other great non-Western and "non-liberal" civilizations of antiquity and the Middle Ages, such as the Egyptian, the Babylonian or especially the Byzantine (huge bureaucracy, militarism, the synthesis of religion and politics, the role of books and scribes in culture, etc.).⁶

From a purely dissident point of view, such acceptance of the dominant culture instead of the unmasking of its repressive mechanisms could seem to be a betrayal or a compromise. I thought, however, that in the future such a transcultural vision of the phenomenon of Sovietism would be even more valid as this culture fades into the past. We felt ourselves to be not so much imprisoned by this repressive culture and therefore obliged to struggle against it, as situated on its border and thus capable of assessing it both from within and from without. To a certain degree, we projected ourselves at a space "beyond" this culture, in a post-Soviet space that surprisingly became a political reality much sooner than anybody could have expected: in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Unlike the "thaw" generation of the 1950s and 1960s who still believed in communism in their youth, we did not experience the moral obligation to become

anti-communists in the period of Brezhnev's "frosts." We were not disappointed by communism because it never had enchanted us.

There was still another aspect of Soviet and more specifically Russian culture that made it an appropriate site for transcultural experimentation. In contrast with Western culture, it always emphasized the integrity of cultural capacities, not their specification. The very concept of an "intelligentsia" in distinction from Western "intellectuals" refers to the variety of cultural interests and holistic mentality that does not limit itself to certain professional areas. Intellectuals are most of all specialists in their respective fields, while the intelligentsia specializes in the universal. This integrative character of the Russian cultural tradition was partly to blame for the rise of Soviet totalitarianism with its forceful unification of culture under the guidance of politics and ideology, but we believed that the Russian inclination for cultural totality would finally prevail over its own perverse and immature form, political totalitarianism.

We did not see the fragmentation of culture as its most desirable and progressive tendency, and we were not satisfied with the extremely specialized orientation of the Western humanities. For example, Western philosophy during the twentieth century had been increasingly leaning toward the (self-)analysis of philosophical language and was losing the integrative character that it had in the writings of Nietzsche, Bergson, and William James. If even philosophy tends to become a specialized and a technical discipline, with a more limited vocabulary than chemistry or botany, where would the proper place for the general concerns of mind be? Which discipline could take upon itself the role that had been philosophy's in the past?

In response to these questions, various projects of a new humanist metadiscipline, which would be neither philosophy nor art nor science but would embrace the totality of various epistemological and disciplinary modes, originated at this time, and included "universics" and "intelnetics."⁸ If the essay and the catalog were transcultural genres of writing; and improvisation, the transcultural mode of communication; then universics had to become the transcultural mode of thinking. Its subject matter was "everything" and its methodological criteria "all," but it was far from abstract generalities, which in fact tend to be more specialized than the realm of concrete things and singularities. Even Hegel's universal philosophy of "Absolute Spirit" is limited by a professional jargon consisting of several dozen special terms—a poorer approximation of the richness of the universe than even meteorology or zoology, disciplines

that operate with thousands of special terms. In universics, each word existing in the language, even the most concrete and object-oriented, such as "apple" or "hat," could be conceptualized in the same way that the words "unity" or "spirit" are conceptualized in philosophy, and consequently analyzed as categories of being (the "appleness" of spring, of paradise, of discord, and of the laws of gravity could illustrate some topics of research). In particular, universics had to fully use the potential of metaphors, which extend and multiply the meaning of each word. This is only one example of how the transcultural project challenged both opposite tendencies: cultural specialization of the Western type and political totalitarianism of the Soviet type.

Among the cultural formations of European history that most appealed to us was the group of fourteenth and fifteenth-century Italian scholars and artists who called themselves humanists, and the communities of German romantics in Jena and Weimar in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. American transcendentalism of the mid-nineteenth century also was an attraction for our transcultural group. The Russian Silver Age (the early twentieth century), though appealing in its cultural breadth and universality, had some objectionable features, such as messianic utopianism and eschatologism, which prepared the psychological ground for the Russian revolution.

What was so important for us in these experiences of the past was the consciousness of culture in its wholeness and the experiments in creating not just new works of art or science but new works of culture, (re)configurations of its entire field. For the Italian humanists and the German romantics, culture was as tangible and manageable a substance of creativity as a piece of marble is in the hands of a sculptor. These were rare and happy periods in history when in the rupture between two great epochs, such as the Middle Ages and Modernity in Italy, feudalism and capitalism in Germany, capitalism and communism in Russia ("the Silver Age"), culture dramatically manifested its wholeness, allowing for a conscious shaping of its future. In this sense, humanists, romantics, and Russian religious thinkers were transculturalists. For them culture was not something abstract and distant, as it was for citizens of more stable historical periods and participants in more isolated domains of arts and sciences. They were not just writers, sculptors, painters, or theologians, but workers in the field of culture as a whole.

We were not aware that we ourselves were living in the last years of the "communist formation," on the brink of its turbulent transition to "post-communism," but we did have the feeling that "the time was out

of joint" and a dramatic break in historical continuity was imminent. This feeling was so intense that we perceived humanists and romantics as our "con-temporaries" living in the break between times.

The Interdisciplinary Association Image and Thought

With the advent of glasnost', the opportunities for transcultural activity expanded beyond our intimate circle. Though officially we bore the name the "Club of Essayists" and sometimes conducted improvisations in the Central House of Writers and the Central House of Art Workers, our primary bases were still the private residences of the participants. In May 1986, a new state decree permitted the organization of free associations and clubs for special interest groups which caused feverish activity among the intelligentsia. Among the very first newborns of glasnost', in October 1986, was the interdisciplinary association Image and Thought (*Obraz i Mysl'*), founded in the southwestern district of Moscow where the population of scientific and creative intelligentsia was especially dense.

The goal of the association as stated in its founding documents was to promote better understanding among the representatives of the humanities, arts, and sciences, and to elaborate a new mode of creative communication based on interactions among various disciplines.⁹ The regular weekly sessions of the association took place in the district library and were open to everybody. The room accommodated approximately fifty persons but depending on the agenda it could attract twice or thrice as many. Naturally, such large audiences were not amenable to collective improvisations. Thus the two groups—the Club of Essayists, the improvisational group of six to eight permanent members, and the broader association Image and Thought, with about twenty or thirty more or less permanent members—continued to co-exist rather than merging, though some people were members of both.

The intellectual strategy elaborated for Image and Thought was that of opening new cultural spaces across the existing disciplines, or, as I tried to formulate it, the foaming and bubbling of the solidified substance of culture. It is noteworthy that the majority of people who used to visit our club preferred to express themselves in spheres different from their regular professions. This discrepancy between the person's "routine" profession and his or her "cherished" occupation (or way of life) was typical of the Soviet dualistic mentality, with its ubiquitous splits between the "official" and "nonofficial." If the profession was physics or mathe-

matics, the occupation (and vocation) might be poetry (Vladimir Aris-tov) or literary criticism (Boris Tseitlin); if the occupation was stove setter or street sweeper, the profession might be metaphysics (Vitaly Kovalev) or poetry (Aleksei Parshchikov). One of our goals was to bring together these splintered aspects of personality.

It is true that the Soviet social system prevented people from the free pursuit of their intellectual aspirations and imposed forced divisions in their professional lives. But these divisions were not only false and forced; they had their positive aspects, stimulating those brilliant dilettantes who were not given a chance to test their gifts in narrow professional applications. Our club proved to be the repository for all these surplus intellectual values never solicited and utilized in Soviet society and perhaps even less applicable in those highly specialized Western societies where a person must concentrate narrowly in a certain profession in order to find an audience and achieve recognition.

The Bank of New Ideas

A special division established within Image and Thought was the Bank of New Ideas. It was designed to become a kind of patent bureau for those ideas in the humanities that rose above the boundaries of established disciplines and could be relevant for the culture as a whole. The traditional system of probation and defense of new ideas in the form of dissertation councils and university committees is usually even more narrow than those disciplines from which the corresponding ideas are advanced. As a rule, a dissertation presents a more specialized angle of knowledge than the discipline as a whole, and what is required from a doctoral candidate is not new ideas but a copious amount of read and cited materials. Thus, the Bank of New Ideas was established to accept, preserve, and disseminate the ideas that did not fit into separate branches of knowledge and that thus were unacceptable for specialized research councils. The Bank used as the primary motive of selection the novelty and the originality of the idea and its potential impact on the humanities as a whole.

The council designed for the assessment of new ideas consisted of representatives of various disciplines, and a list of seven criteria was elaborated according to which every idea had to be evaluated by each of the members of the Interdisciplinary Council. The first criterion was formulated in such a way that it would drive mad Soviet commissions for granting scholarly degrees: How wondrous is this idea? To what degree is

it capable of surprising, of exploding the existing paradigms of knowledge? We did not invent this criterion arbitrarily but borrowed it from such a "respectable scholar" as Aristotle, who emphasized in his *Metaphysics* that the origin of knowledge is wonder. "For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize . . . a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant. . . ."¹⁰ Epistemologically, wonder can be defined as the deconstruction of traditional modes of cognition and the change or reconfiguration of the paradigm of thinking within the scholarly community. The seven parameters devised for the evaluation of ideas will be discussed later in the chapter "Intelnet," devoted to the electronic forms of interactive intellectual "banking."

The first idea defended in our club and accepted for preservation in the Bank was "Diasophia," a discipline that would correspond to the latest stage of the self-development of the Hegelian "Absolute Idea." The author was Vitaly Kovalev, a follower of Hegel who attempted to explain the newest period of world history as a process of further self-realization of Absolute Reason beyond Hegel's own dialectical system; hence "diasophy" is literally "wisdom going across," transcending the border of the "ideal" in its reintegration with post-Hegelian historical reality. Later Kovalev published a book elaborating his ideas and became one of the most esteemed thinkers of his generation.¹¹

There were other contributions to the Bank that allowed us not only to evaluate certain ideas but to work out principles of their evaluation from a transcultural perspective. An idea, according to this vision, is not an abstract notion but an "eidos," a multidimensional entity modeled in space, like a sculptural image, possessing its own plasticity. The proportion between inductive and deductive components of the argument, the relationship between general aspects of an idea and its concrete material applications—all this lays the foundation for quite a new discipline called "eidetics," or the "aesthetics of ideas," which would be different from purely logical, philosophical, or ideological approaches to ideas. Logic asks if an idea is coherent and noncontradictory; philosophy asks if an idea is true and corresponds to reality or to the laws of the universe; ideology asks if this idea is practically and politically useful and can be implemented in the transformation of reality. As regards aesthetics, it asks how beautiful an idea is and how its complexity correlates with its unity. One of the most beautiful ideas is Plato's idea of "idea"—a universal entity that is one in many things, that cannot be seen or touched but is present in a variety of tangible objects making them similar to each

other though remaining different from all of them. If the "idea of ideas" is so beautiful, we have sufficient reason to judge ideas from an aesthetic point of view.

Specialization and Universality

One of the surprises following from my experience in Image and Thought was that the pursuit of transcultural consciousness was not an easy activity for the majority of our participants. Previously I believed that specialization is "unnatural," that it separates people and produces self-enclosed professional communities, whereas transdisciplinary consciousness could "naturally" bring them back to mutual understanding. My mistake was that I identified the advanced, synthetic stage of consciousness with its elementary, syncretic stage. Ordinary or trivial consciousness is common to the majority of people. All of us can discuss the weather, food, clothes, cars. Professional specialization divides this largest "trivial" community into smaller groups of initiated and competent "specialists."

But the next stage, transcultural consciousness, is not a mere return to the syncretic stage of everyday thinking. To a certain degree, it is even more specialized than the specialist's thinking, and only a few members of professional groups can overcome the boundaries of their disciplines to enter into productive intellectual exchange with members of other professions, without descending to the level of "commonness" and "triviality." The holistic unit of transdisciplinary thinking, "image-thought" (*mysleobraz*), is far from being as simple as a conventional unit of spontaneous, everyday thinking. Here is the crucial difference between the post-specialist, synthetic consciousness and the pre-specialist, syncretic one. Synthesis is always hypothetical and includes the space of uncertainty, the gap between those components that are brought together to form a new totality. Syncretic thinking is assertive, indicative in its modality, whereas the thinking of specialists can be characterized as conducted in an "imperative mood," that is, prescribing certain norms of professional methodology as a necessary prerequisite for obtaining new knowledge. Ordinary thinking describes, professional thinking prescribes, and only universalist thinking speaks in the subjunctive.

One of the problems is how to establish contact between universalist and ordinary thinking, and between people who are already crossing the limits of specialization and people who have not yet achieved the point of specialization. This is an issue of social and educational heterogeneity but

also of personal growth and self-awareness. The "synthetic" and "syncretic" layers of thinking are mediated in our minds through professional thinking, and communication between these two poles may present an even more complex problem than communication between universalists and specialists.

The Laboratory of Contemporary Culture

Although people from various parts of Moscow and even from other cities used to come to Image and Thought, it formally stayed a district organization. With the progression of Gorbachev's reforms, the next step became possible, and in February 1988 a new transcultural body came into existence: the Laboratory of Contemporary Culture. It was a part of the Center for Creative Experimentation (*Ekspperimental'nyi tvorcheskii tsentr*), located in the center of Moscow, and had the status of a citywide organization. The Center rented a spacious hall that accommodated about four hundred people; during some of our weekly meetings all seats were occupied and people even stood in the aisles.

The Laboratory was designed—as is implied by its name—as an experiment in various forms of transcultural activity, including discussions among the representatives of various disciplines and, most importantly, the refocusing of social life from political to cultural issues. This was an attempt to frame culture in the post-totalitarian epoch as a new type of totality that was no longer subdued by any of its components, such as politics or ideology—even the most liberal politics and democratic ideology, increasingly influential in the time of perestroika. We were equally reluctant to submit culture to any of its other constituents, to aestheticize or technologize culture, to subordinate it to the rule of religious beliefs or scientific rationality. The goal of the Laboratory was to advance culture's capacity for self-awareness and self-government as the growing totality among its multiplying divisions and specializations.

Religion, art, science, and politics, to the extent that they work to liberate a human being from the prison of nature, are forms of culture, mutually checking and restricting one another's power over society—power that, if unchecked, would monopolize and enslave the society. It is only through the mutual limitation of its various subspecies that culture maintains itself as a force of liberation, not only from the determinations of nature, but also from the usurping pretensions of each cultural realm trying to absolutize itself, such as religious fundamentalism and political totalitarianism, and also scientism, aestheticism, moralism, techno-

cratism. It is not that culture, in dividing its constituent parts, rules over them, but, on the contrary, by integrating them, culture liberates humans from their restrictive supremacy. Culture functions not by the principle of "divide and conquer" but rather one of "unite and liberate": By unifying different spheres of consciousness, it liberates us from the dictates of each of them.

Thus, the depoliticization of culture was necessary but not sufficient; what was at stake was the culturalization of politics itself, and, more generally, the creation of an interdisciplinary community whose goal could be defined as the active self-awareness and "self-cultivation" of culture.

I will cite from the program of our Laboratory that was published as a poster and circulated around Moscow in 1988–89, not only in cultural institutions but also on the streets, in squares, and in other public places, indicating a new openness in the society to alternative ways of thinking. All formulations should be understood against the background of what Soviet culture imagined itself to be: existing beyond the limits of time, self-confident, indestructible, unsusceptible to any criticism from within and hostile to any criticism from outside.

The subject of the Laboratory's investigation is contemporary culture which is aware of its place in time, is susceptible to crises, and is capable of self-criticism: culture as the laboratory of human creative potentials.

Science and art, philosophy and religion—all this is the focus of our attention but only inasmuch as all these spheres themselves find their focus in the unifying concept of culture.

Culture encompasses the interaction of different cultures: traditional and avant-gardist, popular and elitist, rebellious and academic, political and artistic. Our task is to intensify these differences and interactions, and to discover their hidden foundation in the growing openness of transcultural wholeness.

We do not limit the meaning of the "contemporary" by chronological frames. The aim of the Laboratory is to explore those cultural traditions that nourish contemporaneity and are perceived as its anticipation and prototype. This relates to the cultures of the Far and Near East and to the epochs of the Middle Ages and the Baroque. Contemporaneity is to be read as con-temporaneity, as the coexistence of various times in the present.

The main task of our Laboratory is the elaboration of contemporary cultural consciousness. Culturology is the tiny part of culture that contains the structure and the meaning of the whole like a seed contains the plan of the entire plant.

Our goal is to develop the abilities and potentials of the culturologist in each member of the Laboratory. This can be achieved by his/her integration in different cultural worlds and overcoming of obsessive complexes, manias and

phobias peculiar to one limited culture, to its socio-historical determinism and its specific system of prescriptions and prohibitions.

We conducted about twenty-five sessions of the Laboratory, some of which were attended by hundreds of people, but by the beginning of 1990 I felt that the short period of pluralism in Russia had come to an end, and pluralities were reconfiguring into new polarities. Where recently productive differences had existed among groups, associations, and cultural movements, now hostile oppositions began to arise, especially regarding the relationship between liberal and nationalist camps. I felt this very sharply in my increasingly strained relationship with Sergei Kurginian, the head of the Experimental Center for Creativity, whose position quickly shifted to "White Communism," as he called his attempt to synthesize communism with the mysticism of the Eurasian "collectivist" spirit. In 1990 the Center evolved to the status of a thinktank for those pro-communist forces in Gorbachev's late government that organized the failed putsch of August 1991 and endeavored to preserve the political unity of the Soviet Union as a communist superpower. This drift to extreme nationalism and communist revivalism was one among several circumstances that impelled my departure from the Soviet Union in 1990.¹² After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Center remained the stronghold of the so-called spiritual opposition to Yeltsin's reforms, a political euphemism that unites nationalist and neo-communist factions.

Notes

1. See "An Essay on the Essay" in part III of this book.
2. See "Improvisational Community" in part III, especially the section "The Integrative Mode of Intellectual Activity. Essay and Trance."
3. What is meant here is the passive, unpractical traits of national character and the militant, aggressive character of the political regime.
4. Originally addressed to the art critic and philosopher Boris Groys, who emigrated to Western Germany in 1981. In our correspondence we exchanged news on the cultural trends emerging on both sides of the Iron Curtain. See another excerpt from this letter cited on p. 65.
5. For more detail on the history and theory of the lyrical museum see Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995): 253–279.
6. Viktor Krivulin, a poet and essayist, recalls the effect of the eminent culturologist and Byzantinologist Sergei Averintsev's public lectures at that time, in the 1970s and early 1980s: "At the public lectures of Averintsev on Byzantium, which occurred in the overcrowded halls, the atmosphere was far from

being academic. The problems of medieval theological debates, the enigmas of Byzantine aesthetics, and first of all, the specific understanding of the form and ritual, the metaphysical spirit of civil myth-construction—all this revealed to numerous listeners new modes of comprehension of Soviet daily life. Medieval Byzantium was becoming closer to numerous listeners than contemporary Europe or America. The Platonic, non-human beauty of the State existence that acquired bizarre, but stable and finished forms, was fascinating. . . . Averintsev's Byzantium attracted Russian intellectuals in the same way as the Winckelmann's idealized Greece attracted Germans in the eighteenth century." (Viktor Krivulin, "Konets epokhi Ryb," *Novoe russkoe slovo* [New York], [17 February 1995]: 36).

7. See "The Teachings of Yakov Abramov as Interpreted by his Disciples," compiled, commented upon, and edited by Mikhail Epstein, translated from the Russian by Anesa Miller-Pogacar, in *Symposium: A Journal of Russian Thought*, Vol. 3 (Los Angeles: Charles Schlacks, Jr., University of Southern California, 1999).
8. See the chapter "Intelnet" in part III of this book.
9. The club Image and Thought (Obraz i Mysl') still exists in Moscow, thirteen years after its founding in 1986. Its program reads as follows: "The idea that united the representatives of various professions—literary scholars and chemists, philosophers and mathematicians, sociologists, novelists and poets—is the elaboration of the interdisciplinary language of creative communication and the interconnection of various areas of culture." The club has its own emblem: the letters O and M inscribed into each other to symbolize the holistic, roundish pattern of Obraz (Image) and dividing, zigzag-like pattern of Mysl' (Thought) in their creative interaction (see figure I, p. xi). The syllable "OM"—the acronym of the club's name—is the traditional Indian symbol of the unity of all spiritual beings, of the Higher Self potential above in identity with the Deeper Self actual below—the ideal all of us are striving for." On the current program and events in the club see the Web site (in Russian): <http://www.vavilon.ru/lit/office/obraz.html#adres>.
10. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. Book I, ch. 2 in J. L. Ackrill, ed., *A New Aristotle Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987): 258. On the relationship between scholarship, wonder, and imagination, and on the work of the Bank of New Ideas, see also Mikhail Epstein, "Theory and Fantasy," in his *After the Future*, 309–327.
11. Vitaly Kovalev, *Filosofia postistorii* (Moscow: Alva-XXI, 1992).
12. I came to the United States at the invitation of Wesleyan University as Visiting Professor of Russian and later spent a year in Washington, D.C., as a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.