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Not by Bread Alone: Maxim Gorky's Sacramental Metaphors

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The purpose of art is to make us see, not recognize, things.

—Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device" (1917)

The task of culture [is] to develop and strengthen a social conscience and a social morality in man [...] the Revolution was made in the interests of culture, and it was precisely the growth of cultural forces and cultural demands that called the Revolution into being.

—Maxim Gorky, *New Life* (1917)

In the early years of Soviet power, the Bolsheviks' aims were "not merely the seizure of power but the seizure of meaning" (Bonnell 1997, 1). Lenin and his party were not the only ones concerned with defining the meaning of what Isaak Babel called a "good revolution."¹ Working against the grain of the Bolsheviks' essentially iconoclastic view of the Revolution, socialist intellectuals like Gorky believed, as Richard Sites writes, "that bread and politics alone were not enough, that life had to be enriched by emotion, that communism itself was a kind of religious commitment, and that many people needed a unified set of rituals and symbols to bind their feelings to the goals of the regime" (1989, 120). In the highly charged atmosphere of Silver Age literature, Gorky stood apart from the Symbolist and God-seeking (*Bogoskatei stroi*) movements, with their mystically transcendent world view that hinted at a renewed form of Christianity.² Although at times his work reflects

¹ Like many Silver Age writers and poets, Babel owed his literary career to Gorky's mentoring and shared with him a belief in a "good" revolution, one he articulated most clearly in the *Red Cavalry* story "Gedali."

² Irene Masing-Delic provides a substantial overview of Silver Age thought in *Abolishing Death: A Salvation Myth in Russian Twentieth-Century Literature*.

³ "A Convenient Territory": *Russian Literature at the Edge of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Barry Scherr*. John M. Kopper and Michael Wachtel, eds. Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2015, 245–58.

what Barry Scherr calls the "impulses" of God-seeking, Gorky's concern with salvation through the "miraculous power" of the collective self demonstrates more clearly his humanistic philosophy of God-building (Scherr 2000, 451–56). Nevertheless, Gorky shared with his fellow writers the need to find a new language that would capture and express the true meaning of a world so newly transformed by the revolutionary break from the past. For that, Gorky drew on his own peripatetic life, so that images familiar to him in his early life—as an apprentice in an icon workshop or a baker, for example—inspire central metaphors that embody and convey the principles of God-building, which serves as the philosophical foundation for much of his work.

For Gorky, literary or "living" icons become the face of the cultural and spiritual rebirth of the collective self or "new man" (*novyi chelovek*). In a similar fashion, the image of bread becomes the substance through which this transformation is gauged. In Gorky's work, the effectiveness of these metaphors lies not in their ubiquity but in their mysterious or "sacramental" function. The sacrament expresses an essential relationship between the sign (bread) and the thing it signifies (the union among people), but is also understood as an act that forms communities.³ In Gorky's work, acts that allow people to form communities of mutual understanding and love—the making and sharing of bread is a key example—become sacramental, while similar gestures that fail to connect people to each other represent a kind of "false" sacramentality. The difference between the sacrament and false sacrament in Gorky can be subtle but is indicated by the function of what we can call his "sacramental" metaphor.

Gorky's sacramental metaphor—like Northrop Frye's understanding of the "ecstatic" metaphor—can be contextualized in ways of perceiving the world that dominated the fin-de-siècle literary and intellectual climate in Russia. As Frye points out in "The Expanding World of Metaphor," a special type of metaphor—one that seems to open up a "channel or current of energy" between two worlds—arises in societies in which a "split between a perceiving subject and a perceived object is not yet habitual" (1990, 111). This way of seeing provides one way to distinguish the development of Western literature from that of Russian and may be approached as a kind of iconography (113).⁴ Icons, bread, wine, or any other sacramental object or word contains not only its form but its invisible essence or idea. In order to "see" this essence, Stephen

³ For Karl Rahner the sacrament is essentially a communal act and "can be celebrated only by a community which is gathered together in one and the same place" (1958, 28).

⁴ Frye notes that, while the history of Western literature follows a trajectory of breaking down metaphor—detaching from the kind of belief inherent in the ecstatic or mystical metaphor—Russian literature seems to head in the opposite direction (1990, 113).

Cassedy explains, the viewer must be able to look beyond the visible into the invisible or immaterial. A sacramental object such as the icon, he continues, "allows the worshiper a limited contact with the immeasurable through the intermediary of sensible matter. So icon veneration has a kind of idealism built into it that operates in the mind of the ordinary worshiper" (1990, 103). What defines the difference between the sacramental and metaphor is that the worshiper's perception or gaze bridges the gap between the subject and object; the object does not represent the idea or essence but, rather, *becomes* the idea or essence.⁵ The sacramental object, then, is not perceived as an image but as the image or word of God incarnate. For Frye, the ecstatic metaphor functions in a similar fashion and links the individual with the power of the natural world through a mystical experience of self-transcendence (1990, 111). For Gorky, the sacramental metaphor is defined by its function and effects a different, non-mystical kind of transcendence. The image of bread in his work is a material object but can also become the incarnation of the revolutionary or even literary word that has the power to realize a collective self. The distribution of bread in Gorky's fiction, then, can represent the supreme act of sacramentality, marking points in his texts when his God-building philosophy is most clearly defined, when, as Gorky wrote in 1917, the "stern and just 'Voice of God'" has become the "voice of the people" (1995, 77).

Eating Your Words: Bread and the Revolutionary Word

It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that proceedeth out of the
mouth of God.
—Matthew 4: 4

It was clear to Gorky that the socialist movement would succeed only if it could nourish body, mind, and soul. In his *New Life* (*Novaya zhizn'*) essays from 1917–18, Gorky expressed deep concern about the revolutionary movement, which did not sufficiently address either the physical or spiritual needs of the populace. "[W]hat surprises and frightens me most of all," Gorky writes in December 1917, "is that the Revolution shows no sign of man's spiritual rebirth, is not making people more honest, more straightforward, and is not increasing their sense of their own value and the moral evaluation of their work" (1995, 109). Earlier, in May 1917, Gorky blamed this lack of ideals on people's inhumane living conditions. "The conditions in which they lived

⁵ On these dynamics of the Russian icon in its composition or in its veneration, see Uspensky 1976 and Shevzov 2007.

could foster in them neither respect for the individual nor awareness of the citizen's rights, nor a feeling of justice" (42). In Gorky's work, the sacramental transformation of bread into the word of the people represents the unity of mind, body, and soul into "one great feeling" in which "all people will realize their own significance, the beauty of their aspirations, and the blood ties of everyone with everyone else" (118).

Gorky's biography points to efforts to establish the link between bread and knowledge in practice. In the mid-1880s, he spent five years in Kazan, working in bakeries and frequenting Andrei Derenkov's grocery. For local university students, the store became a crucible of revolutionary activity and thought; the sale of bread from Derenkov's cellar bakery financed a library of forbidden books. Later, the Party School on the Italian island of Capri echoed the arrangement in Kazan. With Gorky now playing the role of patron, the school aimed to provide for a worker's material needs while transforming him through education into the "new man," an enlightened worker capable of creating a new culture among the proletariat (Scherer 1999, 172). The school, with its emphasis on philosophy, was short-lived. Lenin viewed it as an attempt by Bogdanov to create a "factional center" of God-building "deliberately hidden away from the Party," and moved swiftly to shut it down.⁶ Combined with Lenin's earlier "disappointment" with Gorky's *The Confession* (Ispoved', 1908), this move effectively ended the writer's exploration of God-building in his work.⁷

Lenin's virulent opposition points to the potency of Gorky's project, one that is also demonstrated in the dynamics of the sacramental metaphor in his work. Gorky's novel *Mother* (*Mat',* 1907) shows, as an example, the progressive transformation of food into the revolutionary word. Taking the first step in her awakening into political consciousness, Nilova distributes pamphlets disguised as a peddler of hot food; the pirogi she delivers to the factory, though, are stacks of revolutionary pamphlets (*listovki*) (1961, 7: 264). Her new role as provider of both meals and printed speeches later develops in one kitchen scene: as her understanding of the meaning of revolution grows more complex, the preparation of food and flyers merge. Gorky's use of the same verb to describe the preparation of dinner and ink for the pamphlets deepens the link between them. "The whole day long she turned in circles [...] cooked [*varila*] dinner, and boiled [*varila*] lilac-colored gelatin for the proclamations" (I tselyi

⁶ See Lenin's 30 August 1909 letter to the students at the Capri Party School (1973, 15: 472-78).

⁷ See Lenin's letter to Gorky, dated 22 November 1910, in which he refers to a letter he did *not* write in response to the publication of *The Confession* (1973, 34: 434-35). This comment refers to a conversation Lenin and Gorky had during the former's visit to Capri in 1908.

den' ona kruzhilas' [...] varia obed, varia lilovyi studen' dia proklamatsii; 7: 292). On a symbolic level, the pamphlets become the workers' sustenance and are scattered "like salt over bread" (*Kak soli na khleb*; 7: 269). By the time Nilova devotes herself exclusively to the distribution of literature (7: 245), the meals she prepares become purely symbolic: Pavel's revolutionary friends refuse to let her cook for them anyway. The peasant Rybin completes the process through which the sign—in this case, bread—is again compared to leaflets and pamphlets, but given the added meaning of carrying the ideals of truth, freedom, and justice to the people. "Peasants! Believe these papers [...] For in these writings the truth is laid down. And the truth ought to be dearer to us than bread" (*Krest'iane! Bnagam etim ver'e* [...]) Potomu—v etikh gramotakh pravda polozhena, pravda eta dorozhe khleba dia nas dolzhna byt'; 7: 289).

The process of sacramental transformation is described when bread becomes the symbol of the nourishing word. The word, in turn, becomes the truth. Finally, the truth is empowered to unite people in their quest for meaning and purpose. By endowing human life with significance, the word—through sacramental signs—frees people from their meaningless existence. Rybin asks the crowd, "For the sake of what are you perishing in hunger? Strive for freedom—if I'll give you bread and—truth" (*Chego radi pogibeate v golode? Staraites' o vole—ona dast i khleba i pravdy*; 7: 298). In a similar scene that ends the book, Nilova embodies the word itself, which promises to resurrect the meaning of human experience through the united will of the people. In *The Confession*, this unity (*sobornost'*) proves miraculous, as the collective resolve of a crowd allows a lame girl to walk. Gorky's brand of sacramentality marks as sacred the relationship among the people themselves, not between people and their God. In his early work, Gorky represents the sacramental in the dynamic between bread and the word. As the bread becomes the word itself through the sacramental act, it becomes the catalyst for the people to exercise their collective powers of transformation. Because sacramentality functions as a hermeneutics of experience, a builder of meaning, Gorky's invocation of words as bread not only effects a revolutionary transformation in the lives of his characters, but ultimately informs Gorky's beliefs in the role of literature and the writer in postrevolutionary Russia.

Even before the turn of the century, Gorky began to articulate the sacramental elements of his God-building philosophy through the images of bread making and bread giving that often emphasize the absence rather than the creation of meaning. Instead of transcending its physical self, the image of bread is mired down by associations with physical needs, animalistic tendencies, false idols, and imprisonment. Short of developing a philosophy of sacramentality, Gorky was at least trying to build some system through which

to understand the effect of sacramentality and the reasons for its failure. Just as Matvei, the hero of *The Confession*, must discover false belief before he undergoes real spiritual awakening, Gorky's reader first encounters the non-sacramental image of bread. In such an image, bread fails to function as a sacramental sign; it does not become the word and therefore generates no meaning beyond the thing itself. In the monastery where he stays for several years, for example, the bread is connected with physical pleasure rather than spiritual transcendence. The Schema-monk Mardarii, in his fourth year of fasting, is plagued with starvation-induced hallucinations and obsessive hunger. To Matvei, the sensual pleasure Mardarii derives from the contraband bread he sneaks in undermines the meaning of the monk's "deed" (*podvig*). In their final meeting before Mardarii's death, the monk can only think of satiating his hunger; he is reduced to the function and pleasures of his mouth. "He said nothing to me, but only smacked his lips, sucking on the bread, — obviously he had no teeth left" (On uzh nichego ne govori! so mnoi, a tol'ko chmokaia, posasyvaia khleb—vidimo, zubov u nego sovsem uzhe ne bylo; 1961, 5: 226).

The monastery bread is associated with the satisfaction of even baser needs as well. In the monastery's filthy, subterranean bakery, the depraved Milka oversees the production of profane bread; Matvei's grimy feet and streams of sweat mix into the dough. The animalistic Milka cannot transcend his desire for and hatred of women, despite Matvei's repeated attempts to provide biblical examples of female spirituality. When he discovers Milka performing an "onanistic sin" (onapovyi grekh), Matvei directs his disgust at the bread as well as at the baker: "After all, you bake the bread, you dog!" (Ved' ty—khleb pechesh', sobakai; 1961, 5: 226). At the monastery, the materialism and depravity of the monks is also represented by images of non-sacramental bread. "The monastery," Matvei notes, "is wealthy, there are many nuns, and they are all so corrupt! [gruznye, a description that links them with the fifth—*griaznyi*—of the baker], with faces that are fat, soft, and white, as if fashioned out of dough" (Monastyr' bogaty, sester mnogo, i vse gruznye takie, litsa tolstye, miagkie, belye, kak iz testa splelyu; 5: 210). Matvei's description of the monks suggests an ironic parallel with the pastry larks (*zhivotniki*) that are, in Russian folk ritual, associated with the coming of spring and with Easter. However, the monks prove to be false idols made of dough, providing neither rebirth nor resurrection.⁸

Gorky explores the idea of the subverted resurrection through the dynamic of the failed sacrament, presenting the reader with an inescapable moral conundrum. In "On the Steppe" ("V stepi," 1897), Gorky shows how,

through the failure of bread to become sacramental, its characters are unable to experience the rebirth of their humanity. Described at different points of the story as wolves, beasts, bears, and cattle, Gorky's starving heroes—the "soldier," the "student," and the narrator—seemed doomed from the start. Although he introduces a paschal atmosphere through the soldier's song, Gorky sets the story during the fall, after the harvest. But the story's two figurative "resurrections" are as stale as the bread the three men steal from a lone traveler. The bread itself fails to take on any significance other than as a means to satisfy hunger and a way to gauge the moral lassitude of Gorky's characters. The lone traveler refuses to share his bread with his fellows, at first firing a gun at them. The bread is not given willingly and the prescribed words—"my dear brothers" (*dorogie brat'ia moi*)—are not pronounced (1960, 2: 302). Thus, the bread fails to have a humanizing effect on those who, like a bear in winter, would suck on its own paw (2: 300). The "student," although satiated, still murders the lone traveler for his money. The soldier and the narrator continue on, seemingly unmoved. "And no one is guilty of anything," concludes the narrator, "for we're all the same—cattle" (I nikto ni v chem ne vinovat, bo vo my odinakovo—skoty; 2: 307).

In *The Confession*, the description of the monastery's bread oven, like that of the monks themselves, harkens back to an ancient world. Listening to a story about a novice's sister, who commits suicide to avoid an arranged marriage, Matvei stares into the stove.

Its stoking hole was before me—like some kind of ancient and blind face, its black maw full of evil tongues of triumphant flame, it chewed, the wood whistling and hissing. I saw in the fire Grisha's sister and I thought: For what purpose do people rape and destroy each other?

Чело её предо мной—словно некое древнее и слепое лицо, чёрная пасть подна злых языков ликующего пламени, жуёт она, дрова свистят, шипят. Вижу в огне Грешину сестру и думаю: чего ради насилуют и губят люди друг друга? (1961, 5: 219)

As with the reference to the *zhivotniki*, Matvei's description of the stove inverts its significance. Rather than acting as a source of warmth and sustainer of life, the monastery stove becomes an iron monster of fiery consumption, feeding on an innocent girl. The symbolic sacrifice of the girl to the blind beast is, of course, Matvei's way of imagining her forced marriage to a cross-eyed and boorish merchant. Yet, in both cases—the ancient sacrifice and the wedding—the ritual is deprived of meaningful intent and, therefore, of meaning itself.

Thus, the place where the bread is produced also becomes the locus of meaninglessness.

Likewise, in "Twenty-Six Men and a Girl" ("Dvadsat' shest' i odna," 1899), the description of the bakery oven establishes the theme of dehumanizing imprisonment. The oven looks like "the monstrous head of a fairy-tale monster" (*trudolivaia golova chudovishcha*); the stoking hole turns into a gaping maw and the air holes above into the "riddleless and impassive eyes" (*bezhalostnye i besstrastnye ochi*; 1960, 2: 403–04). Thus described, the oven seems more alive than the men, who are described as "living machines" (*zhivye mashiny*) so benumbed (*kak istukan*) by their monotonous work that they need to keep rocking so as not to turn to stone (or in this case, wood—*odergivniet*; 2: 403–04).

The eyes [of the stove] always watched us with the same dark expression, as the law regards slaves, and, not expecting anything human from them, looks contemptuously upon them with the cold disdain of wisdom.

Они смотрели всегда одинаково темным взглядом, как будто устав смотреть на рабов, и, не ожидая от них ничего человеческого, презирали их холодным презрением мудрости. (2: 404)

The bakery is a damp, underground prison of stone (*Каменная тина*). Sunlight cannot penetrate through the thick layer of flour dust that covers the basement's one window. Furthermore, says the narrator, the owner hammers the window shut "so that we could not give a piece of his bread to the poor or to those of our comrades who, living without work, were starving" (*chtob my ne mogli dat' nishchim i tem iz nashikh tovarishchei, kotorye zhivlia bez raboty, golodaln*; 2: 403). The most dehumanizing effect of the bakers' imprisonment, then, is their inability to interact with the bread they make in a sacramental way.

George Gutsche may miss the mark somewhat when he interprets the pretzel makers' need for an object of worship as the basis of Gorky's God-building (*Gutsche* 1983, 148). Rather, it is the need for meaning and purpose in human life that lays the foundation of Gorky's philosophy.⁹ As Dostoevsky shows in *House of the Dead*, the simple act of giving and receiving alms can regenerate human feeling where both men and meaning are imprisoned. But this pathway to freedom for Gorky's pretzel makers is blocked by the piece of iron that bolts the window shut. Instead, the men pervert the sacramental act

⁹ Bartkovich shows how the pretzel makers' solipsistic error—they "endow and stake their non-existent meaning and purpose with Tania"—leads to their failure (1973, 287–88).

by imagining the girl Tania as an "idol" to whom they feed pretzels as a "daily offering" (*ezhnedevnaia zherstva*) and onto whom they project an illusory connection. In reality, the "sacred rite" (*svyashchennyy obriad*) the narrator describes is not sacramental, but solipsistic:

And finally—probably, this is the main thing—we all considered her something of our own, something that existed because of our pretzels; we considered it our obligation to give her warm pretzels, and it became for us a daily offering to the idol, it became almost a sacred rite and with each day it connected us more closely to her.

И наконец—наверное, это главное—все мы считали её чем-то своим, чем-то таким, что существует как бы только благодаря нашим кренделям; мы вменили себе в обязанность давать ей горячие крендели, и это стало для нас ежедневной жертвой и доду, это стало почти священным обрядом и с каждым днём всё более прикрепляло нас к ней. (2: 406)

The pretzels—which the men themselves refuse to eat—are a profane offering, as Tania is a false incantation. In contrast with the bread rolls baked in the clean and airy bakery, the pretzels seem endowed not only with their bakers' misery but also with their filth and disease (2: 407). The pretzels do not function as a measure of the bakers' human feelings toward Tania, but merely as a measure of their expectations of her.

The meaninglessness of the pretzel makers' sacred ritual and offering is revealed when Tania "fails" to resist the overtures of the soldier. It is significant that, after her trust, Tania emerges from out of a cellar; her foray into the adult world of human emotion signals her freedom from the bakers' confining idolatry. To emphasize their misuse of the sacramental act, Gorky includes in "Twenty-Six and One" an alternative path toward freedom when he shows how the bakers sing, their hearts "coming to life" (*ozhivliat*) as they do so (1960, 2: 404). As the voices unite, each man imagines "a road turning somewhere into the distance, lit by bright sunshine—a wide road, and he sees himself walking along it" (*doroga, kuda-to vdal', oveshchemnaia iatkin solntsem, —shirokaia doroga, i on vidit sebja idushchim po nei*; 2: 405). By imprisoning Tania in their inhuman world of slavish idolatry, the men imprison themselves even further. When she throws her last, angry words at them, Tania no longer refers to the pretzel makers by the affectionate diminutive *arestantiki* but by the non-ironic *arestanty*. Their imprisonment complete, the men return again to their "damp, stone pit" (*sytaia kamennai iama*), hav-

ing failed to conjure through bread and song both the freedom of the open road and Tania as their god (2: 414).

The Good Book

The clearest and most positive depiction of sacramentality and God-building before *The Confession* is Gorky's 1896 story "Konovolov," which demonstrates the title character's search for meaning through the sacramental images of bread and story telling. As in *Mother*, images of bread baking and reading alternate and intertwine. In an early scene the young narrator Maxim reads to Konovolov through the night; they stop only to deal with the bread. "We put the bread in the oven, got another ready, and again for an hour and forty minutes I read the book. Then another pause—the bread was ready" (*My posadili pech', prigotovili druguiu, i snova chas i sorok minut, ia chital knigu. Potom opiat' pauza—pech' ispekla; 1960, 2: 88*). In this way, bread becomes currency for narrative. Reflecting the reality of the time Gorky spent in Derenkov's bakery in Kazan', Konovolov takes half the money that he makes from the bread, and instructs Maxim to buy books with it (2: 92). When the two spend holidays in a nearby ruined house, they share their food with the homeless and hungry sheltered there. "They paid us for this fare in stories" (*Oni plattili nam za eti ugoshcheniia rasskazami; 2: 96*). In one scene, Kostomarov's *History of the Rebellion of Stenka Razin* affects Konovolov so powerfully that he uses the character's names to describe the conditions in the bakery:

He called the items he was working with by the names of its heroes, and once, when a baking cup fell off the shelf and broke, he bitterly and with malice exclaimed:

"Ah, to hell with you, Voevod Prozorovskii!"

Poorly baked bread he dignified with the name of Froika, yeast was dubbed "Stenka's Thoughts"; Stenka himself was the synonym for all that was exceptional, important, unlucky, or failed.

Он называл предметы, с которыми имел дело, именами её героев, и когда однажды с полки упала и разбилась хлебная чашка, он оторченно и зло воскликнул:

"Ах ты, воевода Прозоровский!"

Неудавшийся хлеб он величал Фролкой, дрожжи именовались Стенькины думки; сам же Стенька был синонимом всего исключительного, крупного, несчастливого, неудавшегося. (2: 98)

Konovolov's inability to distinguish the line between fiction and reality actually allows him to transcend the symbolism of one image for and replace it with that of another. In the same way that he brings bread to the hungry and the homeless, he feels true empathy for literary characters.

Konovolov's understanding that the literary author perceives and describes social inequities is key to his belief that, in describing the life of any man, an author imbues that life with meaning. "If some kind of writer would take a good look at me," he says to Maxim, "he'd be able to explain my life to me, right?" (*Ezheli by kakoi-nibud' sochnitel' prismoetrelsia ko mne,—mog by on ob'iasnit' mne moiu zhizn', a?; 1960, 2: 90*). Unlike Gogol's *Petrushka in Dead Souls*, Gorky's mostly illiterate characters are strongly influenced by a book's contents. The pervasive themes of the literary works that appear in Gorky's stories and novels are, not surprisingly, social justice and political uprising. Konovolov's favorites, in addition to Kostomarov's work, are Reshetnikov's novel *Podlipovitsy* and Turgenyev's "Mumu." He preters Stenka Razin to Pugachev, because the latter takes the title of "tsar" and stirs up trouble (*tsarskim imenem prikrivlia i mutit; 2: 95*). While he is enthralled with the freedom of Robinson Crusoe's situation, Konovolov cannot identify with Crusoe's role as master of "Friday," and so, in his imagination, kills off the enslaved native. "The island, the sea, the sky—you live alone by yourself, and you have everything, and you're free! There was also a native there. Well, I would drown the native—what the hell do I need him for?" (*Ostrov, more, nebo—ty odin sebe zhivesh', i vse u tebia est', i ty svobodn! Tam eshche dikii byl. Nu, ia by dikogo utopil—na koi chert on mne nuzhen?; 2: 114*). For Konovolov, Defoe's island (absent both the idea of slavery and the slave himself) represents an ideal. In his utopian vision, Konovolov forsakes books for the ease and freedom (*legko i svobodno*) of the road and the beauty of the world itself. "If you want to eat," he tells Maxim, "you can work for two bits; if there's no work—ask for bread and they'll give it to you" (*Zakhotelos' est'—pristal, porabotal chego-nibud' na poltinu; net raboty—poprosi khleba, dadut; 2: 116*). Such a dream is ironic, however, given the structure of Gorky's story, where the beginning reports Konovolov's suicide in prison after he has been arrested for vagrancy. What he needs more than bread is his freedom.

Once, when Maxim argues for the "reorganization of life" (*georganizatsiia zhizni*), Konovolov reacts angrily, pointing out that "Life is not the main issue, but man. The most important thing is man, understand?" (*Tut ne v zhizni delo, a v cheloveke. Pervoe delo—chelovek ... ponial?; 1960, 2: 106*). And in doing so, Konovolov locates his search for meaning in the context of God-building. Although Gorky would stop describing this philosophy in his work a decade after he wrote "Konovolov" (he himself predicted he would remain a lone "voice in the wilderness"), the essential element of God-building—that is,

its sacramental character—may have influenced the next generation of revolutionary writers, such as the Italian author Ignazio Silone, whose novel *Bread and Wine* equates revolutionary activity with sacramental acts. The spirit of sacramentality would also provide the foundation for Gorky's House of Arts and World Literature project which, together, would preserve both art and the artist. Famously dubbed by Shklovsky the "Noah of the Russian Intelligentsia" (1990, 162), Gorky traded on his international reputation to preserve Russian art, literature, and culture. In his *History of Russian Literature* Mirsky stated what everyone at the time knew: "Everything that was done between 1918 and 1921 to save writers and other higher intellectuals from starvation was due to Gorky" (1926, 111). Through his literary organizations and through personal involvement, Gorky provided food, housing, and paper along with pleas for release from prison and, in some cases, execution to scholars, artists, and writers.¹⁰ Ultimately, Gorky's contribution to the survival of Russian culture was more than just his ability to provide bread rations for writers, but his dedication to their work, as well. "[Gorky's] role in shaping the newborn Soviet literature of the twenties was a tremendous one," Konstantin Fedin remarked, "and his interest in the fate of a writer often determined the entire further development of a talented person and brightened the path of many a young writer" (1967, 3). For Gorky, the needs of an evolving culture called forth the "good" revolution, whose ideals could only be understood and realized through the nourishing word.

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¹⁰ On Gorky's advocacy and care for artists and writers, see the following sources: Finkel 2003, Hickey 1995, and Scherr 1977.

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