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PETR CHAADAEV AND THE RISE OF MODERN RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHY

Abstract: I present and argue for two theses: the first concerns the degree to which Chaadaev's thought represents a breakthrough in the development of Russian social philosophy and the second concerns the Hegelian character of this thinking. I also show that Chaadaev's theory retained an open character closely tied to the crisis character of the social reality of his time and that it depended for its justification on the further course of the historical process, which is impossible to predict. All this leads to an interpretation of Chaadaev's view according to which the standard opposition of Chaadaev's two best-known texts, *The Philosophical Letters*, with their predominantly pessimistic picture of Russia, and the *Apology of a Madman*, which refutes this evaluation, is rejected.

Keywords: Chaadaev, Russia-Europe, Hegel in Russia, Christianity, Pessimism, Crisis, Slavophilism-Westernism

Whether or not a given theory constitutes a breakthrough in human thought is always a relative matter. Such breakthroughs are often preceded by the long and weary toil of countless philosophers, even of entire generations. This work is not always visible to contemporaries but becomes vividly clear in the aftermath of major changes in philosophy. Hence, such breakthroughs are not only the final phase of a chain of developments but also the medium through which such developments become visible, having frequently been of secondary or tertiary importance to their philosophical contemporaries (particularly in their early stages). Breakthroughs are thus often only like a "last drop" spilling over the rim of its epoch's rationale, but built upon processes that had taken place earlier. It is the breakthroughs, however, that give cultural and historical meaning to the processes and developments that preceded them, raising them to the rank of "pre-revolutionary thought". Thus new theories owe as much to their predecessors as the pavers of new philosophical trends owe to the revolutionary fruit they bear.

Thus, if we are to accept any theory as revolutionary, then only on the above conditions. A breakthrough theory is a new quality - new because whilst organically rooted in current traditions, it is at the same time a tool used to measure, judge - or at least order - these

traditions. In turn new theories breed new development trends and new traditions, which are in themselves a measure of the degree to which change has really taken place and against which the previous epoch's traditions can only function as a necessary and justified - but in the Hegelian sense abolished - cultural phase or, in other words: as belonging to a bygone culture.

These rather general remarks are meant to introduce - and at least partially explain - a theory which says that the ideas of Petr Chaadaev constitute a major breakthrough in Russian social philosophy. The revolutionary character of Chaadaev's concepts has been frequently underscored and broadly analysed. Here is how Aleksandr Herzen described his impressions following the 1836 publication of Chaadaev's famous *First Philosophical Letter*: "It was a shot that resounded in the dark night; maybe something was drowning and bemoaning its annihilation, maybe it was a signal, a call for help. Or a sign of dawn - or a sign that dawn would not come. Whatever it was, the fact remained I had to wake up".¹ "Chaadaev's letter rang out like an alarm bell, the signal was given and other voices arose from all around (...) Chaadaev only uttered what had been hazily budding in the heart of each one of us".²

It is impossible not to recall the authorities' response to the publication of the *First Philosophical Letter*: Chaadaev was declared insane and placed in medical and police custody, which was suspended after a year on condition that he "does not dare write a thing"³. Gershenzon was to state later that "even Russia has never seen a more cynical, mocking triumph of physical force over thought, , and human dignity."⁴

This spectacular decision from high up indeed came to bear greatly on the entire further course of Russian thought and realities. Subsequent monarchs perforce displayed a suspicious attitude towards theories that in any way continued or referred to Chaadaev's ideas - and as this was true of almost all Russian philosophical and social concepts from Slavophile to Marxist, the very idea of social philosophy became obscure. Thus Chaadaev in a way became Russian philosophy's original sin.

Another result - and another side - of this attempt to bring philosophy under political control was the adoption of a similar attitude to thought by the thinkers themselves, who

¹ A. Herzen, *Rzeczy minione i rozmyślenia* (My Past and Thoughts), vol. 2, transl. by E. Słobodnikowa, Warsaw 1952, p. 263.

² A. Herzen, *O rozwoju idei rewolucyjnych w Rosji* (On the Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia), in: A. Herzen, *Eseje filozoficzne. Rosja i stary świat* (Philosophical Essays. Russia and the New World), transl. by W. Bieńkowska, Warsaw 1966, p. 159-161.

³ M. Gershenzon, *P. I. Chaadaev. Zhizn' i myshlenye* (P. Ia. Chaadaev: Life and Thought), St. Petersburg 1908, p. 140.

⁴ Ibid, p. 137.

became virtually doomed to function in a political context even if their original goals had been far removed from politics. If Chaadaev's abstract theory, which was devoid of direct political allusions, had been declared the work of a madman and politically dangerous, then questions had to arise concerning both the kind of reality in which such judgements were possible and the thoughts which had led to such a decision. Regardless of the answers provided to such queries, these tendencies resulted first of all in Russian social philosophy's unusually high political content and deep-going preoccupation with current-day social issues and, secondly, in its high level on self-awareness and self-criticism, its constant self-propulsion through its ability to question itself, its role in social life, and its chances for freedom.

Let us now try to define the content of Chaadaev's revolutionary concept. That which we may consider his philosophy's foundation, the source from which all his thoughts take their further course, is the juxtaposition and comparison of Russia and Europe and the resulting recognition of Europe as a yardstick for Russia and, conversely, Russia as a yardstick for Europe. A comparison of Russia to Europe in no way resembles one between, say, Russia and China. Europe and China appear here as two independent and natural systems, two separate worlds which do not need to confirm themselves through comparisons and superiority declarations nor haggle with one another over the degree of their perfection. Mutually indifferent, they cannot be a measure for each other - if only because Europe's chief ideals are based on freedom and progress and China's on tradition and custom.

For quite some time comparisons of Russia and Europe looked much the same. The change occurred practically prior to Chaadaev's reproduction of it in theory in the wake of the reforms of Czar Peter the Great. "Peter the Great - Nikolai Karamzin wrote - "transformed his country with an iron hand, making us into a people resembling Europeans. There is no point in sorrow. The bonds between the ancient and modern Russian mind have been broken for centuries to come."⁵⁵ This break, however, did not automatically mean the establishment of ties between Russians and Europeans. Peter's reforms started off a long, resistance-filled and chaotic economic and political process, whose dynamic outcome was Russia's Europeanisation - not only in that it took over European models and used Europe's achievements, but also in the sense of a "European enlargement," as result of which the

⁵⁵ Quoted after: W. Serczyk, *Kultura rosyjska XVII wieku* (17th Century Russian Culture), Wrocław 1984, p. 43, who in turn refers to F. Likhachev's text in the book, *Slovianskije kultury v epokhu formirovanija i razvitija slovianskich natsyji XVIII-XIX v.* (Slavic Cultures at the Time of the Formation and Development of the Slavic Nations, 18th - 19th Century), Moscow 1978.

Europe of the day became an increasingly abstract and theoretical concept - a "Western Europe".

Chaadaev's concepts, bred upon the evident rise of Russian philosophy, social thought, and art in the 18th and early 19th Centuries, were a theoretical replica of Peter the Great's reforms. They brought into view Russia's non-historical and Europe's historical character. Particularly important here is the fact that these terms evolved from comparisons of Russia and Europe. From Europe's perspective, with its achievements and centuries of accumulated success, Russia's situation is unnatural and totally unjustified. And while Europe is by no means an embodiment of final and objective solutions nor founded upon a natural model, its traditions, its history underlie this view. Europe is not history's sole possible product, nevertheless compared to countries which have not yet embarked upon the path of history it is certainly an excellent one.

At this point let us turn to the connections between Chaadaev's theory and Hegel. Indeed, this union seems to be more a matter of interpretation than psychological fact, Chaadaev himself sympathising rather with Schelling, with whom he corresponded and maintained personal contacts. Russian historians of philosophy also tend to pay more attention to Schelling's impact on Chaadaev than on the Hegelian elements in his philosophy. Resolving this is no small matter, as Chaadaev's concepts take on a contradictory hue depending on which of the two is accepted as the predominant influence on his thinking. If we take Schelling, Chaadaev must be seen as a mystic, his visions of society and history appearing as a means towards religious ends. If, however, we bring out the Hegelian traits, his philosophy becomes primarily a historical-philosophical concept leading to an original and inspiring vision of Russia.

To confirm this latter interpretation we will now point out several passages in Chaadaev's works which clearly harmonise with the basic and unique motives underlying Hegel's thought.

1. Chaadaev remarks that at the present stage of philosophical development the human mind sees history as the appropriate field for research and investigation. "It is time to realise that the human mind takes its strength not just from our narrow here-and-now, that it possesses another force, which by combining bygone times and times to come into one thought forms its

true essence and raises it to its proper realm".⁶⁶ For Chaadaev the most striking negation of such an attitude was the then dominant historical method, based on the continuous compilation of facts, examples, cases, and events, and the ceaseless posing of the most superfluous queries concerning them: who? whom? how? A passive attitude towards facts leads nowhere - and in fact we are long since aware of a sufficient amount of facts to explain or deny anything at will. The new historical concept saw as its main aim the investigation of history's essence, not facts.⁷⁷

2. Another side of servility towards facts is psychologism, the conviction that the most profound knowledge is to be gained from analysing the psychology of history's main actors. "This philosophy - Chaadaev writes - sees man either as a little fly senselessly darting towards the sun, or a creature whose nature commands it to constant improvement. But it always sees Man and nothing more. Having willfully banished itself into ignorance, and in the belief that it knows the physical world, it acquaints itself only with what the world chooses to disclose to the vain curiosity of the mind and emotions. The streams of light exuded by this world do not reach it and when it finally does decide to recognise a plan, intention, and reason within the stream of events, subjugate the human mind to them and accepts all the resulting consequences to general moral order - it finds this impossible to do".⁸⁸

3. Another Hegelian trait in Chaadaev's thought is his recognition of the supra-individual subjectivity of the historical process, his anti-individualistic - or perhaps we should better say: supra-individualist - attitude. Here is a vivid example of Chaadaev's thoughts on the matter: "The seed of higher awareness lives in us in the most vivid way; it constitutes the core of our nature; our present "I" is by no means determined from above by some inescapable law, we ourselves have placed it inside our souls. People will understand that Man has no other mission in life than to work towards the liquidation of his personal existence and its replacement by an existence that is completely social or non-personal (...). This constitutes the sole foundation of moral philosophy (...), and should also be the basis of historical

⁶⁶ P. Chaadaev, *Filozofičeskije pisma* (Philosophical Letters) in: M. Gershenzon, *P. Ia. Chaadaev*, p. 228.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 230 (cf. also A. Walicki, *W kręgu konserwatywnej utopii. Struktura i przemiany rosyjskiego słowianofilstwa* /In the Realm of Conservative Utopia. The Structure and Transformations of Russian Slavophilism/, Warsaw 1964, p. 78-30).

⁸⁸ P. Chaadaev, *Filozofičeskije pisma* (Philosophical Letters), p. 230-231.

thought".⁹⁹

4. The above statements ultimately result in Chaadaev's criticism of historical sentimentality in all its forms. Led by a vision of historical progress, he - like Hegel - arrives at a concept that in a way neutralises evil in that it assumes that the forces of progress and the human energies driving civilisation and spiritual growth will collar evil, incorporating it into history's march towards perfection (rationality, freedom). Chaadaev says: "Let superficial philosophy clamour at will over religious wars and pyres raised by intolerance - we can only envy the fate of those nations which through ideological battle and bloody struggle for the truth have created a whole world of ideas which we are not even able to imagine, let alone transfer ourselves there in body and spirit, as we would wish to. Once again, I say: certainly not all in Europe's countries is permeated with reason, virtue and religion - that no. However, everything in them is mysteriously obedient to this force, which has imperiously ruled over them for centuries; all was born from this long-lasting continuity of facts and ideas, and it is what has conditioned society's current state".¹⁰¹⁰

5. The crowning of this lies in a concept which Hegel called "the cunning of reason." It explains the relation between reality's supra-individual sphere and the sphere of individual actions. The supra-individual subject would not be able to function, exist or develop without the actions of individual human beings; in fact, the supra-individual is a direct resultant of the force of human tradition on the one hand and counter-traditional undertakings by contemporary individuals on the other. Hence it seems justified to say that in Hegel's and Chaadaev's understanding the subject of history is supra-individual and thus not really transcendental. Chaadaev expressed this non-transcendence of the Absolute in the following words: "Christian immortality is a life without death and not, as is usually imagined, a life after death".¹¹¹¹

6. Both Hegel and Chaadaev strove to overstep the boundaries of theory, convinced as they were of the insufficiency of theory that has not been set against non-theoretical realities. Neither of them believed philosophy to be alive only in philosophers' heads nor that only the

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 254.

¹⁰¹⁰ *Rosyjska myśl filozoficzna i społeczna (1825-1861)* (Russian Philosophical and Social Thought. 1825-1861), p. 113-114. The first of the *Philosophical Letters* was translated into Polish by J. Walicka and published in this collection.

¹¹¹¹ P. Chaadaev, *Filozoficheskiye pisma* (Philosophical Letters), p. 279.

inner cohesion of an idea or theory was important. Equally, perhaps even most important was its confrontation with reality, its usefulness in shaping society and its further development.

In summing up the above according to textbook definitions of German thought, for which Schelling's philosophy is predominantly mystical, naturalistic and ethics-based, and Hegel's mainly concentrated on the mind and history, we will doubtless have to classify Chaadaev as a follower of the Hegelian tradition. And in light of his rank in Russian philosophy, we could also put forward another vitally important - and perhaps slightly provocative, albeit appealing - hypothesis: namely, that if we were to try to define Russian philosophy by setting it against the European philosophical tradition, we would have to conclude that Russia's entire philosophical and social thought is built around issues posed by Hegel and embedded in the Hegelian tradition.

Let us now return to Chaadaev's rendering of the Russia vs. Europe issue, which we intend to view not as a collection of clever remarks, surprising observations, fascinating associations and colourful, inspiring metaphors, but as a theory. We will try to extract all its consequences in order to find out whether such a theory (and not such a collection of observations) is possible at all and then define its costs and prospects.

First, let us turn to the most renowned analysis of the Russia - Europe confrontation, that contained in the *Philosophical Letters*. For Chaadaev, Europe's basic features are its traditions, formed through inheritance of the attainments of earlier generations, and its constant accumulation of new achievements. Europe is continuously improving, growing and overcoming natural barriers to shape a new reality based on spiritual values - a reality which confirms Man's superiority among creatures and is evidence of God's Kingdom on Earth. The organic bond between past and present is expressed in the existence and dominance in Europe of general ideas and values, and the existence of a morality and customs that accept and confirm these ideas. Even a superficial glance at Europe immediately brings to light the discipline, regularity and continuity ruling its everyday life. Everything there is organised around the concepts of duty, justice, law and order, which constitute a pivot for all individual and collective action. Moreover, these ideas, these general concepts are not externally imposed on the lives of Europeans but deeply embedded in them - one can even say, "socially inborn" - having been acquired in the course of their first, unconscious acts. As Chaadaev says, "This is more than history, more than psychology. It is the Europeans'

physiology".¹²¹²

What is the origin and driving force of Europe's mobility, growth and harmony? Here, Chaadaev points to the Christian idea of unity as the source of Europe's positive values and achievements and the strength and energy of its people. At the same time it is also in a way a "common denominator" for these actions, a guarantee of their part in humanity's general, common history. It was Christianity which changed Europe's social life into an uninterrupted stream of events and ideas and lasting, unhindered progress. And it was thanks to Christian ideas that nations which were frequently alien and hostile to each other became allies and functioned as complementary factors in the process of Europe's development. "Please see what a variety of natures, what countless forces it sets in motion, what a diversity of elements serves one and the same goal, how many different hearts beat to the same idea!".¹³¹³

We have to note at this point that Chaadaev's concept of Christianity is of a dual nature. First of all, there is its subjective side, directed at the individual mind and emotions; but there is also an objective side, which influences the course of history and is evident in social realities. "Those who fail to see that Christianity has a purely historical aspect, which constitutes one of the basic elements of its dogma and, one may say, comprises its entire philosophy by bringing to light all that it has given humanity and will give it in the future, are totally incapable of understanding Christianity. From this standpoint the Christian religion is not only a system of moral values contained in Man's mortal mind, but an eternal, divine force operating universally in the spiritual world, a force whose visible impact should serve us as constant instruction".¹⁴¹⁴

The most striking effect of Christianity's unifying force is the astounding and enchanting frugality and effectiveness of Europe's social organism, in which no idea, action or achievement is squandered, but rather intensified and developed by appropriate cooperation and organisation (or, as we would say today, through efficient organisation).

One could well assume that restrictions on the individual, his subjugation to social norms, would be one of the characteristic effects of Europe's social and economic efficiency. In fact, however, the opposite is true: it is in Europe that the human spirit enjoys absolute

¹²¹² P. Chaadaev, *List Filozoficzny* (Philosophical Letter), transl. by J. Walicka, in: *Rosyjska myśl filozoficzna i społeczna (1825-1861)*, ed. by A. Walicki, Warsaw 1961, p. 102.

¹³¹³ Ibid, p. 117.

¹⁴¹⁴ *Rosyjska myśl filozoficzna i społeczna (1825-1861)* (Russian Philosophical and Social Thought. 1825-1861), p. 109. Cf: M. Gershenzon, *P. I. Chaadaev. Zhizn' i myshlenie* (P. Ia. Chaadaev: Life and Thought), p. 79-80.

freedom in its broadest sense.¹⁵ Society, cooperation and progress provide true content and support to the individual; tradition and the continuity of development are the guarantee and source of his existence, confirming - or even affirming - his separateness, without which further development would not be possible. Not concentration on the self but the constant overstepping of the self in shaping the outside world is what gives the Westerner his characteristic steadfastness, self-assurance, and sharpness of mind.¹⁶

Chaadaev's picture of Russia does not stand in direct contrast to Western Europe - such a contrast would be rather provided by China, India or Byzantium, whose societies follow a different tradition and different values. Russia on the other hand - and this is its essence - does not form a defined social and historical whole, it is devoid of independence, tradition, and national character; Russia is an "in-between" - between Germany and China, between two traditions which, themselves independent of each other, have caused the Russian "in-between" to become not a breeding ground of development, conflict, synthesis, and permeation, but a side-track of history. "We do not belong - Chaadaev writes - either to the West or to the East, and we do not possess the traditions of the one, or the other. Placed in a sense outside of time, we were not included in the general education of Mankind".¹⁷

What differentiates Russia from the West are the lack of development and progress and the total non-existence of mechanisms enabling the amassment of knowledge and experience. True, Russia is receptive to all new ideas, and even to a greater degree than the West, but this is so precisely because these ideas encounter no resistance from tradition or heritage. New ideas readily replace old ones, but are themselves doomed to quick oblivion without leaving any lasting trace in the minds and lives of the people. Russia's intellectual life always returns to its starting-point as it is incapable of incorporating new ideas, treating them solely as objects in an intellectual game - a game that is absorbing and fascinating, but only played to while away the time and ultimately leading nowhere. "We only live in the present - Chaadaev writes - without past or future, in limp stagnation. (...) neither have we absorbed any of the ideas Mankind has passed on from generation to generation".¹⁸ Russia has not created anything that could be included in the pantheon of human attainment, nothing which - if only to a minimal degree - could be said to have furthered human development. What it more - Russia has not created anything for itself: "... no beautiful memories, no grateful

¹⁵Ibid, p. 115.

¹⁶Ibid, p. 97.

¹⁷Ibid, p. 96.

¹⁸Ibid, p. 98-99.

images alive in national remembrance, no great teachings contained in national legend".¹⁹19 Typical for Russian life is a "total indifference to Good and Evil, to Truth and Falsehood".²⁰20 Russia rather lives according to the rhythms of nature than social progress and belongs more to geography than to history.²¹21

Up to this point we have discussed Chaadaev's views in his *Philosophical Letters*, written between 1828 and 1831, and especially the *First Philosophical Letter*, which was published in 1836. Another of Chaadaev's important works - dealing with the same issues and frequently set against the *Letters* - is the *Apology of a Madman*, which Chaadaev wrote in 1837. A. Walicki believes that a basic change took place in Chaadaev's thinking between the *Letters* and the *Apology*. Having concluded that the lack of historical heritage was a crucial feature of Russia's situation, in the *Letters* Chaadaev called this Russia's tragedy, while in the *Apology* he decides that it could also be an advantage and that Russia's unique chance lies in making use of this advantage.²²22

M. Gershenzon disagrees, claiming that the *Apology* is the only true and adequate expression of Chaadaev's views. In fact, Gershenzon argues, the same ideas were contained in the *Letters*, but were unable to make themselves heard amongst the sundry reactions of surprise or enchantment over their author's radicalism and the theoretical and political scandal brought about by the publication of the *First Letter*. According to Gershenzon underlying both works is a mystic element referring to Russia's special religious mission in history.²³23

In our opinion there is no contradiction between the *Letters* and the *Apology*, but their common factor is not mysticism (from this perspective Chaadaev's views undergo no change) but a dynamic theoretical concept, whose basic idea is contained in the *Letters* and which the *Apology* specifies and develops. The need for this development results from the inner tension of the *Letters*.

The concept contained in the *Letters* is basically static and dichotomous. The author presents two separate worlds, worlds which exert no mutual influence but which nevertheless define and constitute a measure for each other - two strictly separate halves of one whole, the

¹⁹19 Ibid, p. 98.

²⁰20 Ibid, p. 102-104.

²¹21 Cf: A. Walicki, *W kręgu konserwatywnej utopii. Struktura i przemiany rosyjskiego słowianofilstwa* (In the Realm of Conservative Utopia. The Structure and Transformations of Russian Slavophilism), Warsaw 1964, p. 82.

²²22 A. Walicki, *Rosyjska filozofia i myśl społeczna od Oświecenia do marksizmu* (Russian Philosophy and Social Thought From the Enlightenment to Marxism), Warsaw 1973, p. 138.

²³23 Cf: M. Gershenzon, *P. I. Chaadaev. Zhizn' i myshlenie* (P. Ia. Chaadaev: Life and Thought), p. 152.

"whole" being nothing else but their contradiction, an abstract idea failing all definition. In a sense these two worlds - Europe and Russia - are the underlying concepts of Chaadaev's theory and the initial determinants of his reflections on historical development. The *Philosophical Letters* are to a large degree a methodological work; it is no wonder, then, that Chaadaev tried to define his basic concepts as precisely as he could - in a sharp, contradictory manner. This was to be the basic guarantee of their usefulness for theory. The static character of the *Letters* is thus explained, but it is a relative stability as (in the realm of Chaadaev's theory, of course); neither of the contradicting parts can exist on its own. We can conclude that Chaadaev set Russia and Europe in such sharp contrast to each other in order to show their mutual impact all the more completely and clearly. Hence the *Letters* are potentially dynamic and contain precise queries about the future of two such evidently contradicting and mutually dependent worlds. This dynamism is also evident in Chaadaev's numerous objections, formulated at points where judgments become too unequivocal. Objections which underscore the "temporariness" and simultaneous "methodological necessity" of overtly radical statements and point to the need for a more reflective attitude towards exaggeratedly direct, hasty, and precipitate applications to history of the theory contained in the *Letters*. In his *First Philosophical Letter* Chaadaev writes: "By this I do not, of course, mean to say that we have only faults and the European nations only virtues; God forbid! All I am saying is that in order to acquire a just judgement about nations one must first become acquainted with the general spirit underlying their lives, as only this spirit - and not this or another feature of their character - can lead them onto the path of moral perfection and unhampered growth".²⁴²⁴

Chaadaev sums up the *First Letter* with a statement that is a prime example of common sense and compromise: "Despite the entire incompleteness, imperfection, and defectiveness of the European world in its present form, one cannot deny that it is to a degree an embodiment of the Divine Kingdom, as in it are contained both the principle of unending progress and the seeds and elements of all that is necessary to enable the ultimate rule of God's Kingdom on Earth".²⁵²⁵

The seemingly clear-cut picture of Europe outlined in the *First Letter* becomes more complex in the next letters - and *Letter III*²⁶²⁶ ends with a statement which constitutes a truly

²⁴²⁴ *Rosyjska myśl filozoficzna i społeczna (1825-1861)* (Russian Philosophical and Social Thought. 1825-1861), p. 104.

²⁵²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 115.

²⁶²⁶ *Letter III* in the quoted edition by Gershenzon. After the discovery of the complete *Philosophical Letters* it turned out to be *Letter VII*. Cf: A. Walicki, *W kręgu konserwatywnej*

direct transition to the *Apology*: now, the powers inherent in Russian society "have increased and its influence on the rest of humanity has expanded to such an extent that soon we will be incorporated in the stream of global progress body and soul. There can be no doubt about this and it is certain that we will not remain in our seclusion for long".²⁷²⁷

The above statements, which play down the explicit pessimism of the *Letters'* forecast for Russia, permit the assumption that the *Apology of a Madman* is no radical breakthrough, turnabout or change in Chaadaev's thinking. This will find confirmation in statements contained in the work, on which grounds we can speak of no more than a moderate optimism on Chaadaev's part about Russia's future.

The *Apology's* essence has been expressed excellently by M. Gershenzon: "Our future's guarantee is not our past, lifeless and desert-like, but our present position towards the world that surrounds us".²⁸²⁸ Not able to fall back upon a treasury of its own experiences and traditions, Russia must seek its chances in the present - and, first and foremost, outside of itself. And possibly its historical virginity will prove conducive to human progress - progress which has to-date taken place elsewhere.

The criticism of Europe which undoubtedly distinguishes the *Apology* from the *Letters* results not so much from a change in Chaadaev's attitude as from his attempt to describe the dynamics of Russia-Europe relations. Neither is this criticism a total reversal of judgements - more a change of accent, a "setting in motion" of the relatively static statements contained in the *Letters*. Thus when Chaadaev admits that he "perhaps spoke too approvingly" about the countries of Europe, he immediately adds that they "... nevertheless constitute the most comprehensive example of civilisation in all its forms".²⁹²⁹

Europe's strength – its tradition - is simultaneously its limitation. Currently it is a burden, stifling by reason of its richness and at the same time waning in vitality. This is evident in the European nations' constant reminiscing about their past, their memories gradually substituting for their present, filling out "each passing day" and eating up their energies. The results are narrowminded egotism, childish vanity, and stubborn separatism - features which hitherto aided Europeans to achieve social progress but now have become a

utopii. Struktura i przemiany rosyjskiego słowianofilstwa (In the Realm of Conservative Utopia. The Structure and Transformations of Russian Slavophilism), Warsaw 1964, p. 71.

²⁷²⁷ P. Chaadaev, *Filozoficheskiye pisma* (Philosophical Letters), p. 272.

²⁸²⁸ M. Gershenzon, *P. I. Chaadaev. Zhizn' i myshlenye* (P. Ia. Chaadaev: Life and Thought), St. Petersburg 1908, p. 156.

²⁹²⁹ *Rosyjska myśl filozoficzna i społeczna (1825-1861)* (Russian Philosophical and Social Thought. 1825-1861), p. 121 (Polish translation of the excerpt from *Apology of a Madman* by J. Walicka).

limitation and goals in themselves.

Russia's situation is expedient - but only against the background of this European situation. Not able to fall back on its own tradition, Russia can seek and define the boundaries of Europe's tradition and cross these boundaries, thus paving the way for European civilisation. At the same time - albeit within a framework of new goals and values - Russia can fulfill the civilisational tasks which Europe started to fulfill long ago. As Chaadaev was to write: "I believe our situation to be fortunate, if only we are able to take appropriate stock of it; it seems to me a great privilege to be able to observe and judge the world from the heights of thought that is free from uncontrolled passion and puny selfishness, which elsewhere tempt Man and warp his views".³⁰ Thanks to free thought, thanks to the non-existence of tradition, which dictates the course of development *a priori* and with iron consequence, Russia could avoid the errors and suffering that were part to Europe's growth.

The above concept, which assumes that Russia is to enter history in order to resolve the problems of Europe's development in the course of resolving its own historical tasks, is based on a general theory of human progress, according to which Europe and Russia are to fulfill specified, typical and connected tasks as phases in a uniform developmental process. This theory can be formulated as follows: history's essence and chief aim is the fulfilment of the Divine Kingdom on Earth, which calls for a permeation of matter by the spirit and the subjugation of reality to Christian social ideology - or, rather, its sublimation by this ideology. This process takes place independently of individual awareness as it is an objective process (Christianity's social aspect). Furthermore, "the world has for centuries been divided into two parts - East and West (...). These are two principles which underlie two dynamic natural forces, two ideas which encompass the entire way of life of the human race".³¹ East signifies the mind's concentration on itself, West - its development outwards overcoming all obstacles and resistance. The mind's birthplace was the East, but the nature of its activity ultimately caused it to fall asleep again. The path taken by the West, on the other hand, proved fruitful and progressive. The breakthrough, the beginning of explicit and constant growth, was the emergence of Christianity. From that moment on social life concentrated around one idea, which became the source and measure of progress. Catholicism proved to be the form of Christianity most adequate for uniting society and improving reality. The Christian idea permeated all spheres of human life and was part of all humanity's historical struggles. However, this passion for reform, development, and conquering hindrances was also a pitfall:

³⁰Ibid, p. 120.

³¹P. Chaadaev, *Apologija sumashedshevo* (Apology of a Madman), p. 287.

absorbed with the essence of social life, ideology (or the human mind) found it hard to return to itself, to concentrate, to gain awareness of its own doings. The West's achievements are a necessary and undeniable condition of progress and the fulfilment of historical goals - but in itself not sufficient. On the other hand, it would be difficult to hope for further progress coming from the fossilised states of the East. A chance for development can only come from a nation which has no other choice but to view the achievements of the West disinterestedly, from a distance, without prejudice or jealousy - but also without servile adulation - in order to avoid the pitfalls and mistakes of Western history. Thus Russia's chance lies in its role as an East within the West: in the mind's concentration on itself (in our terms: on its work), in a search for the values, sense, and goals of the hitherto covered path. This it will be able to do thanks to its geographical distance and rational perspective, allowing it to perceive Western development in its entirety and essence. This is Russia's chance, but also a chance for Europe and a chance to retain and further improve the West's achievements.

It is currently in the interest of historical progress for "political Christianity to make way for Christianity that is purely spiritual".³²³² Let us say here once again: the idea is not for Russia to step onto history's stage with a new truth, hitherto concealed in the depths of Russian life and only now ripe for disclosure. Russia's only wealth is the modesty and honesty of someone who wants to learn.³³³³ First and foremost Russia must learn precision of thought, as it is what will make its contacts with the West and its absorption of the West's achievements possible.

Chaadaev refrained from statements which could be reminiscent of a social or political programme, as such statements would have disrupted the duality of his theory and rendered shallow his entire theoretical concept, accentuating one or the other of this dual unity's facets according to whom it was addressed — spiritual Christianity (the Orthodox faith) in its dealings with Western Europe, and/or political Christianity (Catholicism) in its dealings with Russia. The prospects for the future, however, demanded of Russia to be the main addressee of Chaadaev's theory, hence the importance assigned to Catholicism in his writings - a fact which was to become the most spectacular feature of his scandalous, anti-Tsarist views.

³²³² P. Chaadaev, *Tri pisma k A. I. Turgyenyevu* (Three Letters to A. I. Turgenev), in: M. Gershenzon, *P. I. Chaadaev. Zhizn' i myshlenye* (P. Ia. Chaadaev: Life and Thought), St. Petersburg 1908, p. 301.

³³³³ Cf: M. Gershenzon, *P. I. Chaadaev. Zhizn' i myshlenye* (P. Ia. Chaadaev: Life and Thought), St. Petersburg 1908, p. 192-193.

Herzen was even to write about Chaadaev's "revolutionary Catholicism".³⁴³⁴

While the term "revolutionary Catholicism" is an excellent definition of the direct force, spectacular novelty, and socio-political scandalousness of Chaadaev's thought, it proves insufficient to describe its theoretical essence, wholeness, and consistence. The term refers solely to the Russia-addressed side of Chaadaev's theory - and this only in the *Philosophical Letters* - and bears no relation to his comments, objections, and ideas regarding the further development of the European nations and Russia, nor does it discern in his concepts the elements of a "revolutionary Orthodox faith".

Petr Chaadaev's social philosophy is whole and complete only when it is understood as the philosophy of its period, as a theoretical reflection of current social realities. This historical moment consisted in Europe's attainment of its developmental limits and the awakening of Russia's historical ambitions and aspirations (an awakening that for the time being was only the realisation of its backwardness). We have here, therefore, a historical crisis, the coexistence of two tendencies which are unable to continue in their present state and which, at the same time, provide for each other a chance of salvation, on condition that they overcome their limitations. In order to exist, they must become parts of a new, bigger whole.

The essence of this crisis can be described as follows: Europe has created the material foundations of a new society, but is itself unable to benefit from them - its civilisational re-shaping of the world, so successful and fruit-bearing as a means of fulfilling Christian ideas, has become a barrier to progress. Europe's historical achievements need revitalising, refreshment, a new perspective devoid of the burdens of tradition. Confronting this need are the ambitions of the Russian nation experiencing a historical awakening on Europe's sidelines; ambitions which are justified by the forces of nature and Russia's geographical location. A particularly helpful circumstance here is Russia's historical virginity, its lack of tradition. Russia cannot offer Europe any alternative experience, lasting political institutions, firmly-rooted social relations, nor its own system of values. Russia's chance lies in its assimilation of Europe's achievements, its naivete and virginity allowing it to see them in a new light and thus imbuing them with a new driving force.

The above interpretation of Chaadaev's theory allows us to reject the existence of contradictions and sudden turns in his views. His opinions are consistent and the *Philosophical Letters* as well as *Apology of a Madman* are not contradictory texts, one dealing

³⁴³⁴ Cf. A. Hercen, *Rzeczy minione i rozmyślenia* (My Past and Thoughts), vol. 2, transl. by E. Słobodnikowa, Warsaw 1952, p. 269.

with Russia's and Europe's pasts and the other with their futures, but two parts of a comprehensive approach to contemporary reality. In the *Letters* Chaadaev concentrates on the European side of the contemporary moment, the *Apology* concentrates on the Russian side. The ambiguity of the judgements contained in both texts seems to point to their mutual complementarity.

As a theory dealing with the contemporary moment in history Chaadaev's theory is neither dogmatic nor speculative, but open and relative. Ordering history into a progressive process from the viewpoint of the here-and-now and formulating a vision of the future, Chaadaev subjects his entire theory to the realistic - and immediate - fulfilment of a variety of conditions. As the circumstances forming current reality will never again repeat themselves, it is a case of now or never. Now or never for Chaadaev's theory and now or never for Russia's historical opportunity.

There appears to be a theoretical inconsistency regarding visions of the past and future. Theory subjects its plausibility to circumstances which are outside it, and, although it is able to define the best-possible combination of circumstances, it is nevertheless incapable of embracing all the conditions underlying the current historical moment and cannot therefore define the chances for success of the optimum arrangement. There are too many variables, seemingly of secondary or even tertiary importance, which, however, can become of primary importance given even the smallest change. Aware of this inconsistency, the theoretician overcomes it in part by means of a subjective projection by which he defines one of the objective possibilities. This possibility expresses not only his own subjective will but also determines the best-possible development path from the point of view of the course of history till date and the values realized in it.

The foregoing reflections on Chaadaev's theory allow us to call it a theory of crisis and to define its main features as follows:

1. It is a theory of contemporaneity.
2. It views contemporaneity as dissociation or inconsistency, a temporary condition, a state of temporary balance between two dissociated elements (past and present, Europe and Russia).
3. It is impossible for theory to master contemporaneity to a degree allowing certain or even highly probable forecasts about the future. Contemporaneity is characterised by a high degree of resistance to theoretical thought, which is reflected in the inconsistency of theories and their dependence, or "leaning" on historical experience.
4. Visions of the past and future are closely intertwined and completely dependent on the current historical moment and on the abovementioned inconsistency with regard to

contemporary reality.

5. Because of this inconsistency the future does not result from the past, does not emerge from it naturally, the hitherto dominant social mechanisms and means applied in difficult and critical situation proving insufficient.

6. Radical change is the only and most effective means of protecting results already attained. Their further existence requires a reshaping and restructuring of social realities.

7. The crisis theory is to a large degree subjective, which is expressed not so much in its Utopias as in the way in which it defines the nature of the contemporary world's duality (inconsistency) and orders historical material into a vision of historical progress, which - influenced by contemporaneity's theoretical inconsistency - in turn defines future-connected visions and hopes.

8. Thus the crisis theory is "at the mercy" of historical reality and devoid of Olympian calm and metaphysical certainty regarding history's outcome. Its underlying approach is rather: "now or never".

9. It is a theory open to reality, a theory which observes the contemporary events on whose course it depends through the prism of its inconsistency. The effects of these observations and the fate of the theory may vary: the theoretician may be forced to introduce more or less meaningful improvements to his historical and philosophical concepts. If they concern crucial issues, he may adopt a pessimistic and skeptical attitude. Finally, in the name of intellectual peace - which he himself will call theoretical comprehensiveness - he can fill out the theory's inconsistency with some sort of historical or metaphysical substance (for instance a reference to a lasting social subject), thus frequently cutting himself off from observation, which in turn leads to doctrinaireism and dogmatism.

Chaadaev adopts a viewpoint which does not allow univocal support either for Russia or Europe, either for the future or the past. Here, it is impossible to define a social subject which would guarantee the postulated changes. It is impossible because the sides to the historical conflict are not independent phenomena but mutually dependent; support for either of them would blur the comprehensive view and make it one-sided. Chaadaev's historical crisis theory does not evolve into a more or less optimistic historical breakthrough theory - as is usually the case in such situations - and this is exactly what constitutes the depth, carrying power and revolutionary character of his thought. It is also the source of his loneliness and merely indirect - although fundamental - influence on the evolution of Russian philosophy.

As a crisis theory Chaadaev's ideas are dependent on contemporary change, which

philosophy cannot fully embrace. It is these changes that will decide about the accuracy of future visions, as well as about the picture of the course of history till date. Hence, we have to be aware that if reality fails to confirm Chaadaev's expectations and forecasts, we may be forced to consider his entire theory as false - and not just its conclusions about the future. In such a case it seems we will also have consistently to reject many of his profound and well-aimed observations about the mechanisms of European development, Russia's history, and the country's present condition, as well as the relations between Russia and Europe. This, however, may not be necessary: contemporary developments may disprove Chaadaev's theory and lead to a reorganisation of his conception as a whole, but this by no means has to impinge on its individual elements. Many of his original and brilliant observations may retain their value - albeit only as observations to be discussed in essays and articles, and not as a theory. In new conditions these observations may even acquire an appealing directness and spontaneity that will make them all the more attractive to readers. In fact, Chaadaev's works seem to be mostly received as essays and articles, particularly in light of the colourful political and personal circumstances surrounding them and the very small probability of the fulfilment of many of the theory's crucial postulates.³⁵³⁵

Observing historical events, Chaadaev saw with rising clarity the futility of his hopes and expectations and the progressing violation of his postulated equilibrium between Russian and European faults and virtues. Contemporary Europe's development path - the strengthening and expansion of capitalism - was for him rather a regression than a continuation of ongoing traditions; capitalism was a sign of Europe's deep civilisational and cultural crisis, in a way a materialised reflection of its traditional shortcomings and faults. On the other hand Russia's stance towards Europe - as the year 1848 clearly showed - became one of brutal military force directed against all change threatening to disrupt the existing political alignment. An alignment which guaranteed Russia's persistence in its cultural and civilisational stupor.

There are two points on which one could disagree with Chaadaev - concerning, of course, not omissions or errors but the consequences of his assumptions: the first concerns contemporary, capitalist Europe's approach to the developments that preceded it. On grounds of his theory Chaadaev does not - and cannot - recognise contemporary European reality as a

³⁵³⁵ Using the language of today's methodology we could say that Chaadaev's theory displays a very high degree of falsifiability.

natural result, a crowning of all development hitherto. Secondly, in his analyses he does not sufficiently appreciate Russian reality - particularly the strength, autonomy, and unique tradition of the Tsarist state apparatus. In effect, Chaadaev does not realise that all hopes connected with Russia's entry onto a path of historical progress and with the role the Russian nation could play in history, have to take into account the resistance to such processes by forces whose interests, traditions, and entire *modus operandi* lie in the maintenance of the Europe-Russia relations as he described then in the *Philosophical Letters*. And precisely these two points - the roots of European capitalism and the missing identification of Russia's authorities with the country's people, spirit, and future - will be among the chief elements shaping the further development of Russian thought.

The attention we have paid to Petr Chaadaev's social philosophy arises from the belief (which we have attempted to support with evidence) that it underlies the birth of a theory composed of a broad array of more or less developed themes, which together form the framework for the entire further development of Russian philosophical and social thought. Moreover, many of Chaadaev's comments and observations as well as his crisis-oriented thinking make his theory something far more than just an interesting page in the history of Russian philosophy - and this despite the ultimate defeat of his historical-philosophical visions. Even today conflicts around Chaadaev frequently lead to surprisingly heated and emotional debates.