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Ivanov-Razumnik: The Remembrance of Things Past

There is nothing startling on first consideration in the observation that much of Russian culture is built around a cult of the past, a deliberate invocation of nostalgia. Obviously the Revolution brought a sharp break in the conscious line of historical development. It created, among other things, a "culture in exile" that quite naturally took its primary form in the world of the memoir, reminiscence, and self-justification. It is also understandable that many critiques of the Revolution in some way tend to turn back to the pre-revolutionary past, and that contemporary Russian dissidents look back to pre-revolutionary figures, especially of the so-called "Silver Age" before the Revolution. In adversity, or in protest, one looks back.

But further pursuit of this nostalgic theme produces the not-obvious conclusion that pre-revolutionary Russian culture was itself concerned with an obsession for things past. The Russian intelligentsia of the early twentieth century saw its intellectual (if not its political) Golden Age in the nineteenth century, and much of its energy was devoted to an exploration of that history. The writings of R. V. Ivanov-Razumnik were both a major source for and an example of this self-examination.

The tone of "recreation, recalling, reliving" is the most characteristic note of Ivanov-Razumnik's great work, The History of Russian Social Thought. For a reader in the 1970's, part of the explanation lies in the familiarity of the material; after all, as historians we have all learned about the nineteenth century, directly or indirectly, from this very book. But the tone of familiar pattern is due to more than the coincidence of the popularity of the book as a history of Russian literature in its time and ours; it was deliberately written as a biography, an autobiography, "A Life of the Russian Intelligentsia Written by Itself." Ivanov-Razumnik has recreated the century in his book for himself and for his readers, and he and they later went on to live out the pattern.

The History was Ivanov-Razumnik's first book; it appeared in two volumes in 1906. For the next thirty years he continued to fill in the outlines: critical studies of Belinskii, Herzen, Tolstoi, Saltykov-Shchedrin, the temporary euphoria of the "Scythian movement" which he built around the genius of Blok, Belyi, and Esenin during the early revolutionary years. And then there came the break, his arrest in 1933. Having so often been caught up in the nineteenth-century Russian drama of prison and exile, part of the heritage of the Russian intelligentsia, he went on at the end to write his own biography in terms of the archetypal theme. Ivanov-Razumnik's prison memoirs (Prisons and Exiles), built as they are around the theme of continuity with the past, become the memorial litany for the Russian Intelligentsia. And, appropriately enough, the book turns out to have been only a beginning, in some undefinable way a pattern-book for the Amalriks and Marchenkos and Gorbanevskaias who are continuing the chronicle of the Russian Intelligentsia.

Of course, the theme of continuity has its pitfalls. The nostalgic approach, the deliberately historical context of Ivanov-Razumnik's literary work, has a "dated"
quality to it also. It reveals a preoccupation with Time and Time Past common to the age of Bergson and Proust. It is not only Ivanov-Razumnik who sees contemporary problems of self-definition in terms of past history, but also Ovsianiko-Kulikovskii, Gershenzon, Berdiaev... The entire epoch is filled with a self-conscious examination of the nature of the Intelligentsia in its past and present, a historical searching which was only encouraged by the three-hundred year Romanov jubilee which was being prepared for 1913.

The theme of consciousness—or, more properly, self-consciousness—is a major fin de siècle motive, and is fully exploited by Ivanov-Razumnik in his writings. Consciousness and subjectivity is the philosophical thread of his analysis of Sologub and Shestov; subjectivity in history is the theme of his discussion of Populism. He finally lives the theme in the flesh during his prison years; and the Observer triumphs decisively over the banality of the observed phenomena. This kind of intense self-contemplation has enormous advantages in a phenomenal world of horror; control over self is a form of control over an obnoxious reality. To recognize the phenomenal dimensions of a prison cell is to make self-damaging concessions to it. Hence, Ivanov-Razumnik's retreat into Time Past is an enormous victory.

One can argue, of course, that such "control" is merely illusion, an illusion of command over events which are out of hand. And while no one can question the necessity of the process in Ivanov-Razumnik's later life, there is some question surely about the success of the operation within the Russian Intelligentsia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Such, at any rate, were the arguments of his Marxist critics at the time.

Ivanov-Razumnik's biography has a typicality which is so perfect that one might suspect him of having made it all up; it has seized on itself in his portrait of the Russian Intelligentsia.

He was born "Razumnik Vasil'evich Ivanov," and as Ivanov he lived his whole life. The typicality of "Ivanov" is obvious; his pen-name "Ivanov-Razumnik" is, of course, another matter—he has added to the stereotype the particular stamp of his intellectuality and self-consciousness. Moreover, "Ivanov-Razumnik" was not a neologism (Neonomen?); it was simply good old "Ivanov" in another form. When he is checking into prison in 1937 (the phrase is not accidental; he manages to suggest that, by 1937, the process is so familiar, through repetition, to him and to us that it is almost like checking into a hotel), the interrogator asks:

"Name?"
"IVANov."
"IvanOV?"
"No. IVANov."
"Why IVANov? IvanOV."
"Stepan—StePANov, Demian—DemIANov, Ivan—IVANov; so why IvanOV?"

My interrogator was so struck by the unexpectedness of this argument that he did not argue the point, my philological reasoning having evidently convinced him. At all events, when the 'black raven' came to collect me late that evening,