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Vladimir Solov'ev and the Ideal of Prophecy

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Я в пророки возведен врагами,
На смех это дали мне прозвание
Но пророк правдивый я пред вами,
И свершится скоро предсказанье.

I have been elevated to the prophets by enemies,
To make fun of me they gave me this name,
But a true prophet am I before you,
And my prediction will soon come true.

Vladimir Solov'ev, 'A Modest Prophecy' (1892)

THE ideal of prophecy is central to the life and works of the religious philosopher and poet Vladimir Solov'ev (1853–1900). Although its importance is generally acknowledged, little attempt has been made to analyse the way in which Solov'ev constructed his ideal and came to be regarded as a prophetic figure in his own right. And yet this subject is of profound interest, not only for our understanding of Solov'ev, but also, in a wider context, for the key contribution which it has made to the view of art as prophecy in the development of the Russian literary tradition.

The image of the writer as a divinely inspired prophet, responsible for shaping the spiritual and moral destiny of the nation, began to assume central importance in Russian literature at the time of Romanticism.¹ The Decembrist poets' widespread adoption of this

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¹ It is interesting to note that the image of the poet as prophet arose at the same time as the closely linked image of the poet as Demon. For a discussion of the context and development of this parallel tradition, see Pamela Davidson, 'Divine Service or Idol Worship? Russian Views of Art as Demonic' and 'The Muse and the Demon in the Poetry of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Blok' in Pamela Davidson (ed.), *Russian Literature and Its Demons*, New York and Oxford, 2000, pp. 125–64 and pp. 167–213, respectively.

image in their verse created a context which determined the mainstream tradition of reading Pushkin's 'Prorok' ('The Prophet', 1826) as a key text, referring primarily to the *poet* as a prophetic figure, rather than just to the prophet. This approach inevitably rubbed off on to the image of Pushkin himself; it was further developed by Belinskii and Gogol' in their essays on the writer, and reached a climax in Dostoevskii's celebrated speech of 1880, which elevated Pushkin to the status of national prophet and thereby prepared the ground for Dostoevskii's own assumption of this role.

Solov'ev inherited this tradition and played an important role in determining its future development. He was the first Russian writer to make a serious study of the Hebrew prophets, and to establish the Russian attitude to prophecy on a new, historically grounded, religious and philosophical footing. After his contribution, the idea that the Russian writer was a prophet, continuing or completing the task of the biblical prophets, became firmly ingrained in the worldview of the religious symbolists. Blok, for example, who regarded Solov'ev as his main teacher, juxtaposed the artist 'in whom is revealed the heart of the prophet' with the figure of Moses on Mount Sinai: in his view, both 'prophets' heard the words "Search for the Promised Land".² Blok actually maintained that the writers of his generation 'had been "prophets"', but 'wished to become "poets"' (instead of the other way round, as might have been expected).³ Through the symbolists' verse and essays on aesthetics this vision of the artist's role directly entered the work of the acmeists and the futurists, and later, albeit in distorted form, even found its way into certain forms of Soviet 'neo-religious' art.⁴

Solov'ev was therefore a key link in a chain which runs from the early nineteenth century through to the twentieth century: together with Dostoevskii, he translated the literary-civic image of the poet-prophet, which prevailed among the Decembrists and their successors, into the central tenet of a system of religious aesthetics and philosophy, which subsequently gained wide currency among the symbolists and post-symbolists.

This essay will seek to demonstrate that Solov'ev's early conception of his mission led him to construct a prophetic ideal and tradition, which could serve as a supporting framework for his vision of his own

² 'Pamiati Vrubelia' (1910) in Aleksandr Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. V. N. Orlov, A. A. Surkov and K. I. Chukovskii, 8 vols, Moscow and Leningrad, 1960-63, v, pp. 421-24 (423).

³ 'O sovremennom sostoianii russkogo simvolizma' (1910) in *ibid.*, v, pp. 425-36 (433).

⁴ On this link, see Irina Gutkin, 'The Legacy of the Symbolist Aesthetic Utopia: From Futurism to Socialist Realism' in Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman (eds), *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*, Stanford, CA, 1994, pp. 167-96.

role in Russia. In investigating the way in which he built up this tradition, we shall follow a roughly chronological approach and focus on three particular issues. Our intention is not to suggest that these issues are the only ones worth considering, or that they constitute a rigid, logical progression in Solov'ev's thought, but rather to highlight their central importance for consideration of this topic. First, we shall explore the role of the prophetic ideal in the context of Solov'ev's desire to reconcile his mystic leanings, most evident in his poetry, with his rational side, expressed in his philosophical writings. Secondly, his delineation of the Russian prophetic tradition as it manifested itself in literature with particular reference to Dostoevskii will be examined. Thirdly, we will investigate his attempt to validate the Russian prophetic tradition by grounding it in the biblical tradition of Hebrew prophecy. Finally, we shall conclude with a brief survey of the reception of Solov'ev's prophetic image among Russian writers. Although Solov'ev's handling of these complex issues engendered a wide range of tensions, in the main his construction of a prophetic tradition and his own place in it were accepted by subsequent generations.

Early Goals: Poetry, Philosophy and Prophecy

The summer of 1873 marked a significant turning-point in Vladimir Solov'ev's life. After completing four years at Moscow University, first as a student of natural sciences and then of philosophy, he decided to embark on a new course of theological studies at the Theological Academy in Sergiev Posad. During this period of transition he wrote a lengthy letter to his cousin and first love, Katia Romanova, setting out a vision of his aim in life and defining the method by which he planned to reach this goal. In his view human beings fall into two categories: practical people, who accommodate their lives to the existing social order despite its defects, and idealists, who cannot reconcile themselves to world evil, regarded by them as inevitable and eternal, and who consequently either despise reality or curse it 'à la lord Byron'. Solov'ev finds that he belongs to neither category, for his recognition of the imperfection of reality has led him to the realization of its necessary transformation. He therefore declares his intention to dedicate all his life and strength to bringing about this fundamental transformation. His success will depend on his ability to change people's inner convictions, a goal which he sets out to achieve by presenting the 'eternal content of Christianity' in a 'new, appropriate to it, i.e. rational, of course, form'. This will require nothing less than a complete study of 'everything which has been worked out over the last centuries by human intelligence', including 'all philosophy'. Without flinching, he adds 'this is what I am doing and will continue to do'. He ends his letter by recognizing that such convictions and plans must make him

appear quite mad; this does not worry him, however, as “divine madness is more clever than human wisdom”⁵.

Solov'ev was only twenty years old when he wrote this letter, and this undoubtedly to a large extent accounts for its tone of youthful idealism, unbounded energy and confidence. However, the underlying vision of his vocation which it presents remained with him all his life. It is plain that from an early age he adopted the self-conscious stance of the lone individual, working towards the distant goal of transforming society in the light of Christian truth, and prepared to meet with incomprehension, even with the charge of madness.⁶ This conception of his mission is close to that of the prophet, who pursues his spiritual goal at the price of social alienation.⁷ And yet, paradoxically, the method adopted to reach this goal is quite the opposite of the prophetic. Solov'ev lays no claim to divine inspiration; on the contrary, and despite his professed preference for divine madness over human wisdom, he makes it clear that he intends to operate with the tools of human logic and rational discourse. This discrepancy between prophetic mission and rational means gives rise to a fertile paradox, which informs the dynamics of Solov'ev's cultivation of the prophetic image in several different spheres.⁸

Solov'ev's early plan to dedicate himself to philosophy in order to provide a rational justification of Christianity was followed almost immediately by his discovery of a parallel calling: the poetic vocation.⁹ In August 1874 he wrote his first poem, 'Prometeiu' ('To Prometheus'), describing the final revelation of divine unity which will take place at

⁵ For the quotations from Solov'ev's letter to E. V. Romanova of 2 August 1873, see Vladimir Solov'ev, *Nepodvizhno lish' solntse liubvi . . .*: *Stikhotvoreniia. Proza. Pis'ma. Vospominaniia sovremennikov*, ed. Aleksandr Nosov, Moscow, 1990 (hereafter *Nepodvizhno lish' solntse liubvi . . .*), pp. 173–75.

⁶ Solov'ev confirmed his readiness to be regarded as mad in a slightly later letter to E. V. Romanova of 10 August 1873: 'I for sure will not see the living fruit of my future work. For myself personally I do not foresee anything good. At the very best I will be taken for a madman. I think about this very little, however. Sooner or later success is certain — that is sufficient.' *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁷ This was already recognized by those close to Solov'ev at the time. See, for example, E. M. Polivanova's characterization of Solov'ev in 1875 as a prophetic thinker: 'When he spoke about this future, he was totally transformed. His grey-blue eyes would somehow darken and shine, they would gaze not in front of him, but somewhere into the distance, ahead, and it seemed that he could already see before him the pictures of these miraculous coming days'. Quoted from S. M. Luk'ianov's biographical materials in S. M. Solov'ev, *Vladimir Solov'ev: Zhizn' i tvorcheskaia evoliutsiia*, afterword by P. P. Gaidenko, Moscow, 1997 (hereafter *Vladimir Solov'ev*), p. 89.

⁸ On an anecdotal level, a similar paradox is reflected in Solov'ev's distinctive long hair; although generally interpreted as an attribute of his prophetic temperament, it was in fact grown by him during his teenage years as a gesture of nihilist protest. See *ibid.*, pp. 38–39.

⁹ On 20 July 1874 Solov'ev wrote to another poet-philosopher, Prince D. N. Tseretelev (the nephew of Aleksei Tolstoi): 'At the present time I have started occupying myself with poetry and so far quite successfully, it seems. I will read you some when we meet.' Quoted in Solov'ev, *Vladimir Solov'ev*, p. 72.

the 'last hour of creation'.¹⁰ His trip to London and Cairo in 1875–76, accompanied by visions of Sophia in the British Museum and Egyptian desert, led to a series of intense mystic poems.¹¹ Although one of these works includes a reference to acquiring 'eternal truth' ('vechnuiu istinu') through a 'mysterious prophetic reverie' ('tainoi prorocheskoii grezoi'),¹² it is clear that these are generally poems of personal mystic vision, rather than prophetic revelation. They lack the moral, social and national dimensions of prophecy; prophets are not 'dreamers', they see, hear, and act. We should, however, bear in mind that many years later, in his essay 'O liricheskoi poezii' ('On Lyric Poetry', 1890), Solov'ev commented that poets often use the words *son* (dream) or *mechta* (day-dream) to refer to their deepest (and possibly prophetic) intuitions.¹³ Mystic experience, although obviously distinct from prophecy, provides a possible foundation and validation for the poet's prophetic status; these early poems certainly served to establish the image of Solov'ev as a mystic seer with privileged access to communion with the divine.

The outset of Solov'ev's career is therefore marked by a bifurcation between these two aspects of his personality: the inner visionary finds an outlet through a small number of intense, mystic poems, while the more public figure of the rational thinker reveals itself through a rapidly growing body of philosophical writings, composed with the express purpose of bringing about a religious revival, but couched in the essentially irreligious language of logical discourse.¹⁴ Later writers such as Rozanov and Shestov came to regard this tension as fundamental

¹⁰ Solov'ev, 'Nepodvizhno lish' solntse liubvi . . .', p. 18. Nosov's edition, which presents Solov'ev's poetry in chronological order, includes only one earlier fragment, 'Priroda s krasoty svoei . . .', a translation of four lines from Goethe's *Faust*, sent by Solov'ev to E. V. Romanova in a letter of 26 March 1872. See *ibid.*, p. 18 (text) and p. 391 (note).

¹¹ See, for example, 'Vsia v lazuri segodnia iavilas' . . .' (Cairo, late November 1875) or 'U tsaritsy moei est' vysokii dvoret . . .' (Cairo, between late November 1875 and 6 March 1876) in *ibid.*, pp. 22–24.

¹² 'Pesnia oftov' (early May 1876) in *ibid.*, p. 25.

¹³ Writing of Fet, Solov'ev commented: 'Yielding to current concepts, our poet also sometimes calls the content of poetry day-dreams ['mechtami'] and dreams ['snami']; but in such cases it is absolutely clear that these day-dreams and dreams are much more real and important for him than ordinary reality [. . .]. What for the crowd is just an idle reverie ['greza'], the poet recognizes as the revelation of higher powers, senses as the growth of the spiritual wings which carry him away from illusory and empty existence ['sushchestvovaniia'] into the realm of true being' ['bytiia']. See V. S. Solov'ev, 'O liricheskoi poezii. Po povodu poslednikh stikhotvoreniĭ Feta i Polonskogo' in S. M. Solov'ev and E. L. Radlov (eds.), *Sobranie sochinenii Vladimira Sergeevicha Solov'eva*, 2nd edn, 10 vols, St Petersburg, [1911–13] (hereafter *Sobranie sochinenii V. S. Solov'eva*), VI, pp. 234–60 (241–42).

¹⁴ On the competing claims of different discourses in Solov'ev's writing, see Edith W. Clowes, 'The Limits of Discourse: Solov'ev's Language of Syzygy and the Project of Thinking Total-Unity', *Slavic Review*, 55, 1996, 3, pp. 552–66.

and crucial to the understanding of Solov'ev.¹⁵ Interestingly, Solov'ev himself acknowledged the conflict. In one poem of the period, 'Blizko, daleko, ne zdes' i ne tam . . .' ('Near, far, not here and not there . . .'), he prays that the 'Gloomy despot, the cold "I"' ('Despot ugriumi, kholodnoe "ia"') within him should be banished by the divine female being, whom he contemplates in his mystic visions.¹⁶ This was, of course, a purely rhetorical appeal; it was in fact highly useful for Solov'ev to maintain the two distinct facets of his personality, for the mystic side, revealed in his poetry, could serve to support the claim to prophetic insight with which he invested his philosophical writings. In this sense, a combination of mystic insight and poetic inspiration took the place of the role traditionally played by divine election in the validation of the prophetic mission.

Not surprisingly, from an early stage Solov'ev attempted to construct a theoretical framework within which these twin areas of endeavour — poetry and philosophy — could be reconciled and presented as serving a common prophetic goal. This is already apparent in his early work, 'Filosofskie nachala tsel'nogo znaniia' ('The Philosophical Principles of Integral Knowledge', 1877), which, although unfinished, introduces the basic premises of his mature thought.¹⁷ In the first chapter Solov'ev sets out a scheme relating to three spheres of human endeavour: creativity, knowledge, and practical activity.¹⁸ In the sphere of creativity, regarded as the most important, he includes technical art, fine art, and mysticism, ranked in ascending order. All three levels lead to the ultimate goal of beauty and operate through feeling, using imagination or fantasy as their tool and depending on the state of ecstatic inspiration. In the sphere of knowledge, he includes positive science, abstract philosophy, and theology, also ranked in ascending order. These three levels all function through thought and lead to the ultimate goal of truth. If the scheme is read vertically, following an upward hierarchy of ascent, we can see that art is linked to mysticism,

¹⁵ Rozanov was prepared to discard the whole corpus of Solov'ev's learned works, but insisted on the importance of his personality, in which were concentrated 'the true structure of the prophet, of the prophetic spirit, even of a true heavenly prophetic mission'. V. Rozanov, 'Pis'ma Vlad. Serg. Solov'eva. Iz starykh pisem. Stat'ia (okonchanie)', *Zolotoe runo*, 1907, 3, pp. 54–62 (58). In Rozanov's view, this aspect of Solov'ev's personality was generally hidden away from the public gaze and revealed only in his poems (*ibid.*, p. 61). For Shestov's more uncompromising view, see the concluding section of this essay.

¹⁶ 'Blizko, daleko, ne zdes' i ne tam . . .' (Cairo, between late November 1875 and 6 March 1876) in Solov'ev, *Nepodvizhno lish' solntse liubvi . . .*, pp. 24–25.

¹⁷ 'Filosofskie nachala tsel'nogo znaniia' in Vladimir Sergeevich Solov'ev, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, 2 vols, ed. A. V. Gulyga and A. F. Losev, Moscow, 1988 (hereafter *Sochineniia*), II, pp. 139–288 (text) and pp. 769–70 (notes). The work was first published in a journal in 1877.

¹⁸ The scheme is set out in the form of a diagram in *ibid.*, II, p. 153.

and philosophy to theology. Art (of which poetry is the supreme form)¹⁹ and philosophy are presented as parallel, intermediate stages on the way to the attainment of two transcendent goals: beauty and truth.

On to this scheme, Solov'ev imposes a further historical perspective, based on a dialectic of organic progression through three successive phases: initial union, its subsequent disintegration and future restoration. In the sphere of creativity, he argues that the original, primitive stage of 'fusion' ('slitnost') between art and mysticism, referred to as 'a single mystical creativity, or *theurgy*' ('odno misticheskoe tvorchestvo, ili *teurgiia*')²⁰ was lost under the impact of Western civilization with its various doctrines of art for art's sake, realism and utilitarianism.²¹ This ideal union will, however, be revived by the Slavic peoples, who exhibit the necessary qualities of faith, passivity and freedom from narrow exclusivity. These traits are most fully developed among the Russian nation, which is therefore ideally suited to bring about the new union of mysticism and art, referred to by Solov'ev as a 'free theurgy' ('svobodnaia teurgiia') or 'integral creativity' ('tsel'noe tvorchestvo').²²

A number of important principles are thus established. Art and philosophy are parallel paths for the attainment of transcendent goals; true art is a form of mystic endeavour; and Russian artists in particular are uniquely equipped to take part in the revival of the ideal synthesis of art and mysticism. It also follows that Russian art and philosophy both fulfil a messianic and prophetic function, in so far as they are directed at transcendent goals beyond this world, due to be realized in the future.²³

Solov'ev's scheme even includes a retrospective rationalization of his earlier decision to dedicate himself to philosophy, announced in his letter of 1873 to Katia Romanova. He concludes his first chapter with an interesting and important *caveat*: the ultimate goals of two of the three spheres of human endeavour under consideration (the goals of theurgy and theocracy, belonging to the spheres of creativity and practical activity) depend on external, historical conditions beyond the will of the individual, who cannot therefore hasten their realization — in other words art is not a sphere in which man can *actively* bring about

¹⁹ Solov'ev classifies the fine arts in ascending order from the material to the spiritual as sculpture, painting, music and poetry. *Ibid.*, II, p. 151.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 155–56.

²¹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 168.

²² *Ibid.*, II, p. 172–74.

²³ For a discussion of Solov'ev's scheme in relation to his messianism, see D. Strémooukhoff, *Vladimir Soloviev and His Messianic Work*, trans. from the French by Elizabeth Meyendorff, Belmont, MA, 1980, pp. 126–31.

the goal of transformation.²⁴ Only in the sphere of knowledge can the goal of 'free theosophy' ('svobodnaia teosofia') or 'integral knowledge' ('tsel'noe znanie') be actively realized by the individual — this is an obligation which Solov'ev is therefore undertaking.²⁵

So far, we have considered how Solov'ev first established himself in the twin fields of philosophy and poetry, and then provided a theoretical justification of both as parallel paths of enquiry, defending his personal choice of philosophy on the grounds that this approach was more attuned to the active task of social transformation. This set up a certain framework within which the artist and the philosopher could both be seen as prophetic figures, whose differences complemented rather than contradicted each other. Solov'ev appears to be moving towards a position where the inner, contemplative and passive mystic, linked with the poet, could be seen as nurturing and 'validating' the outer, public figure, represented by the philosopher, who takes on the task of active transformation. The ideal of prophecy, nourished by inner mystic vision, poetic in its manner of expression, and yet eminently practical in its task of social transformation, was able to play a vital role in reconciling and integrating these various strands.

The Prophetic Message and the Model of Dostoevskii

Two factors enabled Solov'ev to espouse the prophetic ideal more fully: his acquisition of a clearly defined prophetic message, and the emergence of Dostoevskii as a figure who could serve as a model of this ideal.

From childhood Solov'ev experienced numerous mystic intuitions and visions.²⁶ His early interest in spiritism, which reached a peak in 1872–73, left him with an abiding tendency to practise mediumistic writing, examples of which are scattered among his manuscripts throughout most of his life.²⁷ He also attached great importance to his dreams, as can be seen, for example, from the detailed daily record which he kept of them in 1880.²⁸ However, although it is clear from these examples that Solov'ev possessed many of the raw ingredients of prophetic self-awareness from early on, it was not until he found his

²⁴ Later, in 'Obshchii smysl iskusstva' (1890), Solov'ev expanded on the reasons for this, suggesting that art depends on ideas which come from history, and cannot in itself therefore be the source of transformation, only a vehicle for its anticipation or expression. *Sobranie sochinenii V. S. Solov'eva*, v1, pp. 75–90 (90).

²⁵ Solov'ev, *Sochineniia*, II, pp. 177–78.

²⁶ Semi-autobiographical fictionalized accounts of these visions are given in Solov'ev's short story 'Na zare tumannoi iunosti . . .' (1892) and in his long poem 'Tri svidaniia' (1898).

²⁷ Solov'ev, *Vladimir Solov'ev*, pp. 54, 191.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 188–89.

own 'message' that he was able to channel his vague mystic intuitions into a clearly delineated sense of prophetic mission.

A number of factors combined to bring about this shift of awareness. On 28 March 1881, a few weeks after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, Solov'ev gave a controversial public speech in which he spoke out against capital punishment and recommended that the new tsar should pardon his father's murderer in a spirit of Christian love.²⁹ This daring address to the state in the light of ethical religious ideals was very much in the prophetic tradition; it could certainly be seen as a turning-point, marking Solov'ev's transition from private mystic and academic philosopher into the role of public preacher. Solov'ev himself seems to have regarded it in this light; in his brief autobiography of May 1887, he noted a telling sequence of events: soon after delivering this speech, he left his job at the Ministry, gave up his academic position and turned to concentrate on religious questions, particularly on the union of the churches and the reconciliation of Judaism with Christianity.³⁰

The way in which Solov'ev received his 'message' is described by E. N. Trubetskoi, who gives a detailed account of one of Solov'ev's 'prophetic' dreams and its subsequent fulfilment. In 1882, Solov'ev dreamt that he was travelling along an endless series of Moscow streets. Eventually, he reached a house where he was met by a highly placed Catholic prelate. After some initial reluctance, the Catholic was persuaded by his visitor's exposition of the mystic unity of the universal church to give him a blessing. One year later, after recovering from a serious illness in the spring of 1883, Solov'ev undertook a similar journey; on the way, he recognized the identical streets which he had seen in his earlier dream, and, upon arrival, the same Catholic prelate gave him a blessing.³¹ Trubetskoi accords this dream particular significance as a watershed in Solov'ev's development. For our purposes, it illustrates the move from an early, open-ended mystic intuition (the dream) to its fulfilment and interpretation in the light of a prophetic, ecumenical message.

Solov'ev records his awareness of a similar transition in a letter of December 1884 to his friend, the Slavophile publicist, A. A. Kireev. He first develops an eloquent description of his vision of the union of the churches as a type of chemical fusion, through which two previously

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

³⁰ The text of the autobiography is published among Solov'ev's letters to F. B. Gets in E. L. Radlov (ed.), *Pis'ma Vladimira Sergeevicha Solov'eva*, 3 vols, St Petersburg, 1908–11 (hereafter *Pis'ma V. S. Solov'eva*), II, p. 185–86.

³¹ Solov'ev, *Vladimir Solov'ev*, p. 183 (for Sergei Solov'ev's quotation of E. N. Trubetskoi's account of the original dream) and p. 194 (for Sergei Solov'ev's account of its later fulfilment).

distinct bodies can produce a third, qualitatively different new body. With the help of God he hopes to succeed in bringing about this new chemical union. He then adds that he is only now able to understand the import of the message communicated to him previously by 'voices' which he has heard insistently since 1875, both in his dreams and when awake, commanding him to take up the study of chemistry.³² As in the previous example, the crystallization of the message serves to define retrospectively the earlier intuitions as 'prophetic'.

The theoretical ideal envisaged in Solov'ev's early scheme of 1877, although presented as a goal for imminent realization, was extremely abstract and entirely lacked any relation to practical life. The acquisition of a clearly focused message was one step towards its fulfilment; however, it was naturally also important for Solov'ev to find an example from real life which could be seen to embody his ideal and would thereby confirm its validity. In this matter, a crucial role was played by the figure of Dostoevskii. Already in 1873 Solov'ev had exhorted Katia Romanova to read all of Dostoevskii, explaining to her that he was 'one of the few writers who have still preserved in our time the divine likeness and image'.³³ Both men had subsequently enjoyed a period of spiritual closeness following their joint visit to Optina Pustyn' in the summer of 1878,³⁴ and many of Solov'ev's ideas later found their way into Dostoevskii's Pushkin speech of 1880 and novel *Brat'ia Karamazovy* (*The Brothers Karamazov*, 1880).³⁵ When Dostoevskii died in late January 1881, Solov'ev gave a public speech in his memory. This was followed by two further speeches, delivered in 1882 and 1883 to mark the anniversary of his death. As we shall see below, this retrospective assessment of Dostoevskii's legacy served as a catalyst to Solov'ev's construction of a Russian prophetic tradition, based on examples which could be presented as supporting his theoretical ideal.

In 1884 Solov'ev turned down a pressing invitation from Dostoevskii's widow to give a fourth speech, resolving instead to publish a

³² V. S. Solov'ev, 'Pis'ma A. A. Kireevu', ed. Aleksandr Nosov, *Simvol* (Paris), 27, 1992, pp. 191–254 (207).

³³ Letter of 19 June 1873 in Solov'ev, '*Nepodvizhno liš' solntse liubvi . . .*', p. 169.

³⁴ 'The extent to which at that time they both lived a common spiritual life is evident from the fact that, when writing about the foundations of his world view, Dostoevskii in 1878 expresses himself in their joint name'. E. N. Trubetskoi, quoted in Solov'ev, *Vladimir Solov'ev*, p. 180.

³⁵ For a discussion of this line of transmission, see *ibid.*, pp. 179–81, and the chapter "'Russkii inok" Dostoevskogo' in V. Kotel'nikov, *Pravoslavnaia asketika i russkaia literatura (Na puti k Optinoi)*, St Petersburg, 1994, esp. pp. 168–71. For a succinct comparative assessment of both writers' views, see 'Fyodor Dostoevsky and Vladimir Solovyov' in Jonathan Sutton, *The Religious Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov: Towards a Reassessment*, Basingstoke and London, 1988, (hereafter *The Religious Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov*), pp. 185–93. For a broader analytical study of the relations between both writers' ideas, see Marina Kostalevsky, *Dostoevsky and Solovyev: The Art of Integral Vision*, New Haven, CT and London, 1997 (pp. 28–34 discuss Solov'ev's three speeches on Dostoevskii).

booklet in memory of the writer.³⁶ For this purpose, he composed an entirely new 'first' speech, revised the existing published texts of his original second and third speeches of 1882 and 1883, and added a preface.³⁷ These changes and additions were evidently introduced to bring his presentation of Dostoevskii more closely in line with recent developments in his thinking.³⁸ Between 1881 and 1884 Solov'ev had gradually moved away from his earlier Orthodox and Slavophile views and had come to embrace a more universal vision, based on a reconciliation with Catholicism (to be achieved through a new ecumenical union of the churches) and on the resolution of the Jewish question. The 'message' which crystallized around this change of orientation was projected by him on to his understanding of Dostoevskii's prophetic qualities, and was naturally reflected in his speeches on the writer. Before looking at the 'canonical' text of the three speeches as they were published in the 1884 brochure, we shall therefore first examine the less well-known, original speech of 1881, subsequently discarded by Solov'ev. It is of particular interest to our subject, as it contains Solov'ev's most explicit and powerful characterization of the writer as a divinely appointed prophet. Dostoevskii is presented as the single, most concentrated embodiment of the 'spiritual power' of his era, whose understanding of the 'spiritual ideals of humanity' enabled him to influence others most strongly through his preaching. Solov'ev accordingly confers upon him the full 'title of spiritual leader and prophet' ('zvanie dukhovnogo vozhdia i proroka'), justifying his words as follows:

In order to prove his right to the title of spiritual leader and prophet, which we have given him, let us turn to the facts of his life. The first condition for earning the right to this title is to recognize and vividly feel the injustice which prevails in the social sphere of society, and then to decide to dedicate one's life to the struggle against it; a person who can live with and reconcile himself to injustice is no prophet.³⁹

We may recall that these very same ingredients (the recognition of the disparity between the imperfect world and the ideal, leading to the decision to dedicate oneself to the task of social transformation) were

³⁶ See Solov'ev's letter of [8 February 1884] to A. G. Dostoevskaiia, quoted in the notes to Vladimir Solov'ev, *Stikhotvoreniia. Estetika. Literaturnaia kritika*, comp. and ed. N. V. Kotrelev, Moscow, 1990 (hereafter *Stikhotvoreniia. Estetika*), p. 510.

³⁷ For the text of the preface and three speeches as published in the 1884 brochure, see Solov'ev, *Stikhotvoreniia. Estetika*, pp. 166–91. The editor's detailed notes on the speeches (pp. 509–23) include the full text of the original first speech of 1881, 'Rech' V. S. Solov'eva, skazannaia na Vysshikh Zhenskikh Kursakh 30 ianvaria 1881 g. po povodu smerti F. M. Dostoevskogo' (pp. 513–15).

³⁸ S. M. Solov'ev identifies 1881 and 1882 as a time of transition, leading up to the crisis of 1883, and followed by a new burst of productivity in the mid-1880s. Solov'ev, *Vladimir Solov'ev*, p. 174.

³⁹ Solov'ev, *Stikhotvoreniia. Estetika*, p. 514.

already present in Solov'ev's earlier description of his own mission in his letter of 1873 to Katia Romanova, quoted at the beginning of this essay. In the later passage on Dostoevskii, written for the public eye, the intrinsically prophetic character of this mission is openly acknowledged; although it is ostensibly stated in relation to another writer, it undoubtedly also applied to Solov'ev's understanding of his own calling.

Later in the speech Solov'ev defends Dostoevskii's tendency to deal with the darker, sinful aspects of life by asking 'whether Jesus Christ did not also do the same'.⁴⁰ In drawing this implicit analogy between Dostoevskii and the figure of Christ, he is following the precedent set by Dostoevskii, who in his speech of 1880 compared Pushkin's message to Christ's teachings, thereby reinforcing the writer's sacred and prophetic status.⁴¹ In the closing words of his speech, Solov'ev reiterated his main point even more forcefully, referring to Dostoevskii as the 'spiritual leader of the Russian people and prophet of God' ('dukhovnym vozhdem russkogo naroda i prorokom Bozhiiu').⁴² The addition of the key word *Bozhii* is highly significant and marks the high point of Solov'ev's explicit elevation of Dostoevskii to the status of *divine* prophet in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

We should note, however, that Solov'ev's presentation of prophecy is markedly different from the biblical ideal. No Hebrew prophet would ever 'decide' to dedicate his life to the struggle against social injustice, nor could his 'right' to prophetic status be 'proven' by a human contemporary. Paradoxically, although Solov'ev is affirming the element of divine prophecy in Dostoevskii, his terms of reference are essentially human, social, and rational: the crucial element of divine selection, beyond human will or understanding, is missing.

In the later 'first' speech which Solov'ev wrote for the booklet of 1884, this style of explicit prophetic language was considerably toned down. Apart from censorship concerns, there are two possible explanations for this. One would naturally expect the language of a speech given immediately after the death of a great writer to be more exalted at such a time of heightened national emotion than three years later. It may also be the case, however, that Solov'ev's own more developed awareness of the growing rift between his changing views and

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 515.

⁴¹ See 'Pushkin (Ocherk)' in F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh*, ed. V. G. Bazanov et al., 30 vols., Leningrad, 1972-90, xxvi, pp. 136-49 (148).

⁴² Solov'ev, *Stikhotvoreniia. Estetika*, p. 515. In the brief summary of this speech which Solov'ev read on the next day (31 January) at Dostoevskii's funeral, and which was partly incorporated in revised form into the preface to his 1884 publication of the three speeches, Solov'ev referred to Dostoevskii as the 'spiritual leader of the Russian people', but dropped the reference to Dostoevskii as a 'prophet of God'. See ['Slovo, skazannoe na mogile F. M. Dostoevskogo'] in *ibid.*, p. 165 (text) and pp. 508-09 (notes).

Dostoevskii's led him to this shift of emphasis. In his later speech, he leads the reader in more subtle ways to draw the conclusion that Dostoevskii was a *forerunner* of the prophetic role, thereby suggesting that the way was now open for other writers to succeed him in this capacity.

This broader, more open-ended framework is already apparent at the outset of the later speech, which starts off with a general plea for the renewal of prophetic art:

In the primitive ages of humanity poets were prophets and priests, the religious idea ruled poetry, art served gods [. . .] For a powerful influence on the earth, in order to change and re-create it, it is necessary to attract and to apply to the earth *unearthly forces* [. . .] Artists and poets must once more become priests and prophets, but this time in a different, even more important and elevated sense: not only will the religious idea rule them, but they themselves will rule it and consciously govern its earthly embodiments.⁴³

In this later speech Dostoevskii is no longer referred to as a 'prophet'; he is now described as a 'forerunner' ('predtecha') of the religious art of the future,⁴⁴ largely because of his faith in the 'future Kingdom of God' and in the 'church as a positive social ideal'.⁴⁵ This definition of Dostoevskii's claim to prophecy in terms of a specific message (closely related to Solov'ev's own views) represents a marked departure from the earlier unqualified and absolute description of him as a 'prophet of God'.

Solov'ev concluded his speech by describing the ideal vision of the church as 'the last word at which Dostoevskii arrived, and which illuminated all his work with a prophetic light ("prorocheskim svetom")'.⁴⁶ It is clear from this closing phrase that even if Dostoevskii had not reached the level of a fully fledged prophet, as a 'forerunner' illuminated by 'prophetic light' he had certainly succeeded in preparing the way for future prophets.

In the next speech (presented as second, but in fact written two years earlier in 1882), Solov'ev moved on from the statement that poets *should* be prophets to a more cautiously voiced claim that Dostoevskii *was* a prophet. Underlining the significance of Dostoevskii as a preacher of the Christian ideal of 'free universal unity' he noted: 'People of fact

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 168–69.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 170. In Solov'ev scheme, the 'coarse realism' of contemporary art conceals the 'winged poetry of the future'.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 172, 176.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 176. In the original manuscript version of this speech, Solov'ev had written two additional words, subsequently crossed out: 'which illuminated all his work *and became* [*i stalo*] a prophetic light' (my emphasis). See the variant cited in the notes on p. 516. The deletion, evidently made for stylistic reasons, had the effect of further toning down the earlier claim for Dostoevskii's prophetic status.

[. . .] do not [. . .] create life. People of faith *create life*. They are those who are known as dreamers, Utopians, holy fools, — they are the prophets, in truth the best people and the leaders of humanity. Today we are remembering such a person.⁴⁷

Solov'ev based his claim on Dostoevskii's Pushkin speech of 1880, which had highlighted Russia's ability to 'reincarnate itself' ('perevoploshchat'sia') in different national cultures together with its 'awareness of its sinfulness' ('soznanie svoei grekhovnosti') as the salient national characteristics which would enable it to perform its mission of universal salvation.⁴⁸ The presentation of Dostoevskii is still accomplished within the framework of the 1877 triadic scheme of beauty, truth and practical activity. Solov'ev underlines that Dostoevskii merits his special status because he combined in one person the three essential aspects of 'mighty *artist*', 'free *thinker*', and '*religious man*'.⁴⁹ These qualities mirror the three spheres of Solov'ev's earlier scheme, and their interrelationship explains why Dostoevskii was able to assert that beauty would save the world.

When this speech was first published in 1882, Solov'ev's elevation of Dostoevskii to the status of prophet provoked considerable indignation in certain quarters. His arch-enemy K. P. Pobedonostsev, who was at that time Procurator of the Holy Synod, immediately penned a note to E. F. Tiutcheva, urging her to get hold of a copy of the newspaper with the speech of the 'crazy' Solov'ev and pouring scorn on those who believe and preach that 'Dostoevskii created some sort of new religion of love and was a prophet in the Russian world and even in the Russian Church!'⁵⁰

In his third speech of 1883 Solov'ev expanded on the nature of Dostoevskii's prophetic 'message', moving even further away from the writer's original ideas in the process. As his nephew and biographer later commented, Solov'ev could only have written these speeches once Dostoevskii was safely in his grave.⁵¹ Solov'ev claimed support for his approach in the public reaction to Dostoevskii's Pushkin's speech, which was greeted at the time (with more than a touch of hysteria) as marking the end of the conflict between the Slavophiles and the

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 177–78.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179. As noted above, these ideas were in fact originally communicated to Dostoevskii by Solov'ev.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁵⁰ Quoted in the editor's notes to the speech, *ibid.*, p. 517 (the notes mistakenly give the date of the newspaper in which Solov'ev's second speech appeared as 4 February 1881, instead of 4 February 1882).

⁵¹ Solov'ev, *Vladimir Solov'ev*, p. 184.

Westernizers.⁵² This confusion of Dostoevskii's original message with a wishful but unfounded public response was no doubt a ploy, at least on a subconscious level, to disguise the increasingly obvious discrepancy between Dostoevskii's well-known anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic views and Solov'ev's presentation of him in the light of his own ideal of reconciliation with the Jews and Catholic Poles.⁵³

The combined effect of all four speeches was to enshrine Dostoevskii as a model of the artist-prophet, who anticipated the new religious art of the future and preached a prophetic message of universal significance. In 1877 Solov'ev had claimed that Russian artists were uniquely equipped to bring about a spiritual revival in the world; by the early 1880s he had found an embodiment for this theoretical ideal in Dostoevskii, who became the first building-block in the Russian literary prophetic tradition which he constructed. In the second half of the 1890s, Solov'ev subsequently added further writers to this tradition. Although consideration of this later development lies beyond the scope of this essay, we may briefly note that Solov'ev's preferred representatives of the ideal of the poet-prophet evidently remained, somewhat ironically, two writers *outside* the Russian tradition: the 'brilliant prophet' of the Puritan movement in England, John Milton, and the poet of the Polish 'Messianic nation' ('narod-Messiia'), Adam Mickiewicz.⁵⁴ Among Russian writers, Solov'ev singled out Fedor Tiutchev and lesser poets such as Aleksei Tolstoi and Iakov Polonskii as possible

⁵² This reaction was acknowledged by several contemporary memoirists to have been widely off the mark. See, for example, the memoirs of Gleb Uspenskii (1843–1903), who was attending the Pushkin celebrations as a representative of the editorial board of *Otechestvennye zapiski*. He comments on the receptivity of the audience, which so much wanted to believe in a message of reconciliation that it was prepared to suspend logical judgement and overlook any obvious contradictions in Dostoevskii's speech. G. I. Uspenskii, 'Prazdnik Pushkina (Pis'ma iz Moskvy — iun' 1880)' in K. Tiun'kin (ed.), *F. M. Dostoevskii v vospominaniakh sovremennikov*, 2 vols, Moscow, 1990, II, pp. 392–405 (400–01, 403–04).

⁵³ In 'Iz voprosov kul'tury' (1893) Solov'ev later openly acknowledged the clash between Dostoevskii's preaching of universalism and his nationalist chauvinism. See the extract quoted by Kotrelev in Solov'ev, *Stikhotovoreniia. Estetika*, p. 512.

⁵⁴ In 1897 Solov'ev described Milton as the 'brilliant prophet' of the leaders of the Puritan movement, who enabled the English to take over the Hebrew biblical ideal and to make it their own. See V. S. Solov'ev, *Opravdanie dobra*, introductory essay by A. N. Golubev and L. V. Konovalova, Moscow, 1996, p. 270. In his essay of 1898 commemorating the centenary of Mickiewicz he argued that the Polish poet achieved the status of 'great man' ('velikii chelovek') or even of 'superman' ('sverkhchelovek') by overcoming three major temptations: those of personal happiness (in love), nationalism and the church (in the sense of narrow dogmatic allegiance). Although Solov'ev does not use the term *prorok* of Mickiewicz, it is clearly implied in his reference to Mickiewicz's relation to his suffering 'Messianic nation' and in his direct association of Mickiewicz's role in raising the Polish national ideal on to a higher moral level with the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. See 'Mitskevich' in *Sobranie sochinenii V. S. Solov'eva*, IX, pp. 257–64 (257, 260–61).

candidates for the role of poet-prophet,⁵⁵ while expressing serious reservations, based on moral grounds, about the suitability of Pushkin or Lermontov for this title.⁵⁶

Returning to the early 1880s, the question which we should ask ourselves at this point is why did Solov'ev need to present Dostoevskii as a prophet and build such a tradition in the first place? The answer would appear to be twofold. On the one hand, Solov'ev needed to bolster the authority of his newly formed and highly controversial pro-Catholic views. By attributing similar views to Dostoevskii and bestowing on him the title of prophet, he was able to reinforce his own position.⁵⁷ More importantly, however, he was creating a precedent for a prophetic role to which he himself aspired, and into which it would then be natural for him to step as Dostoevskii's obvious successor. In this respect he was copying a lesson which he had learned from Dostoevskii, whose characterization of Pushkin as a prophetic writer in his speech of 1880 not only served to buttress his own views (which bore little relation to Pushkin's), but also directly paved the way for his own subsequent elevation to prophetic status.

This *arrière-pensée* can be discerned in the following passage from Solov'ev's concluding speech:

And in our country now, at a time of spiritual ferment [. . .] only a few people appear who, dissatisfied with external goals and ideals, feel and proclaim the need for a deep *moral* revolution and point out the conditions for the spiritual rebirth of Russia and humanity. Among these few heralds ['predvestnikov'] of the Russian and universal future, Dostoevskii without a doubt was the first, for he foresaw ['providel'] the essence of the coming

⁵⁵ For Solov'ev's references to the prophetic qualities of these three poets, see his essays 'Poeziia F. I. Tiutcheva' (1895), 'Poeziia gr. A. K. Tolstogo' (1895), 'Poeziia Ia. P. Polonskogo. Kriticheskii ocherk' (1896) in *ibid.*, VII, pp. 117-34 (133-34), pp. 135-58 (155), pp. 329-53 (339), respectively.

⁵⁶ In 'Sud'ba Pushkina' Solov'ev (following Mickiewicz) argues that Pushkin in his personal life did not live up to the lofty image of the poet-prophet described in his poem 'Prorok'; this leads him to his controversial conclusion that Pushkin 'deserved' his fate because he betrayed his own high Christian moral ideals. Solov'ev's next essay on Pushkin includes a detailed reading of 'Prorok', which argues that the poem does not describe a 'real prophet' but the 'ideal image of the true *poet* in his essence and higher calling'; Solov'ev's agenda in insisting at such length on this interpretation is clearly to reaffirm the vital and intrinsic connection between art and morality, which was coming under threat from the aesthetic camp. As before, Pushkin is presented as a poet who had a moment of high insight, but failed to live up to it. In his essay on Lermontov Solov'ev warns the current generation against the many 'demons' which threatened Lermontov in his life and poetry and prevented him from reaching his true, transcendent goal. See 'Sud'ba Pushkina' (1897), 'Znachenie poezii v stikhotvoreniakh Pushkina' (1899), and 'Lermontov' (1899) in *ibid.*, IX, pp. 33-60 (47, 58-59), pp. 294-347 (319, 321, 328-330, 333), pp. 348-67 (366), respectively.

⁵⁷ 'It is as if Solov'ev uses the name of Dostoevskii for the promulgation of his own ideas.' Solov'ev, *Vladimir Solov'ev*, p. 181.

kingdom more deeply than others, and anticipated ['predvozheshchal'] it more powerfully and more spiritedly.⁵⁸

Solov'ev's presentation of Dostoevskii as the first of a select few to promote certain prophetic ideas, which could easily be recognized as Solov'ev's own, clearly invites the conclusion that Solov'ev is next in line as prophet to the Russian nation. As we shall see below, this suggestion was subsequently taken up and developed by several of Solov'ev's contemporaries and later disciples, who were quick to hail him as a prophet.

The Model of the Hebrew Prophets

Relating his message to the example of Dostoevskii enabled Solov'ev to back up his theoretical ideal of art as a form of mystic endeavour with a practical illustration, and, in the process, to articulate his own transition from the role of artist-mystic to the more powerful one of artist-prophet. Although Dostoevskii helped him in this way to establish the figure of the writer as prophet, Solov'ev evidently entertained certain reservations about the construction of a purely literary prophetic tradition. The image of the poet-prophet had so often been invoked during the Pushkin celebrations of 1880 that it had become degraded and largely trivialized.⁵⁹ It was also in urgent need of being rescued from its reduction by civic-minded poets to a slogan for social activism. Nekrasov, for example, in a poem which first carried the title of 'Prorok' ('The Prophet', 1874), used religious imagery to convey social goals. He describes a figure who is ready for the ultimate sacrifice of death and has been 'sent by the god of Wrath and Grief / To remind the tsars of this world about Christ' ('Ego poslal bog Gneva i Pechali / Tsariam zemli napomnit' o Khriste'). This 'prophet' was in fact a thinly disguised portrait of Chernyshevskii, who was at the time languishing in prison.⁶⁰ In rather uncharitable verses written in 1885 after

⁵⁸ Solov'ev, *Stikhotvoreniia. Estetika*, pp. 184–85.

⁵⁹ See the selection of poems on Pushkin included in *Venok na pamiatnik Pushkinu*, St Petersburg, 1880, pp. 299–320. References to Pushkin as a prophet or national Messiah and echoes of his 'The Prophet' abound in the poems by Ia. P. Polonskii, N. S. Kurochkin, A. Iakhontov, I. Kondrat'ev and several others.

⁶⁰ The poem was first published in 1877 in *Otechestvennye zapiski* without a title and in Nekrasov's *Poslednie pesni* (1877) under the title 'Prorok (Iz Barb'e)'; in both publications the last quatrain about Christ and the tsars was omitted (it was first published in 1879, with the substitution of 'rabam' for 'tsariam'). The purpose of the false subtitle was evidently to distract the censor's attention from the poem's Russian content. In Soviet editions the poem has been reprinted (with the inclusion of the last verse) under the title [N. G. Chernyshevskii] or 'N. G. Chernyshevskii (Prorok)'. See N. A. Nekrasov, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh*, ed. K. I. Chukovskii, 8 vols, Moscow, 1965–67, II, p. 325 (text) and pp. 444–45 (notes).

Nekrasov's death, Solov'ev criticized 'the poet-apostate' severely for having thus degraded sacred poetry to the level of 'servile speech'.⁶¹

Solov'ev's contempt for such devalued images of prophecy is manifest in his satirical poem, 'Prorok budushchego' ('The Prophet of the Future'), published in 1886 under the pseudonym of Prince Esper Geliotropov.⁶² The absurdity of this 'prophet of the future' is already manifest in the fact that he is described entirely in the past tense. We learn that he was oppressed by a savage and stupid crowd and subsisted on a diet of sinews and eggshells. He fashioned a mantle for himself out of bast sacks, plunged into necromancy, learnt how to communicate with the transcendent world, and spent his nights in boggy marshlands. On his rare visits to inhabited places, dogs would marvel at his 'fantastic appearance'. When the local authorities discovered that he had no passport, they sent him packing.

In a cumbersome and pedantic footnote, the author coyly confesses that his goal in composing this poem was to complete the tradition of his predecessors by synthesizing the mysticism of Pushkin's 'The Prophet' with the 'living features of contemporaneity' of Lermontov's 'The Prophet'.⁶³ His poem is in fact closely based on Lermontov's celebrated verses of 1841, which it parodies in some detail.⁶⁴ Solov'ev is evidently attacking a number of tendencies prevalent in his day: false claims to prophetic status, the narrow and reductive definition of prophecy in terms of its social and contemporary relevance, and, most of all, the arrogant pretensions of the implied author (whose voice takes over in the footnote) in attempting to construct a purely literary, man-made tradition of prophecy, without any reference to the transcendent dimension.

Solov'ev clearly sought to distance himself from these tendencies, all the more so, perhaps, because of the danger that others might confuse his own position with such travesties. His concept of the artist-prophet was pitched at a quite different level, requiring an authority far higher than literary precedent. The desire to ground his own sense of prophetic

⁶¹ In January 1885, prompted by rereading a collection of Nekrasov's verse, Solov'ev wrote a highly critical poem entitled 'Poetu-Otstupniku' ('Vostorg dushi — raschetlivym obmanom . . .'). He characterizes Nekrasov as a poet who replaced the 'living language of the gods' with 'servile speech' and whose 'impotent mind' was so attached to 'earthly dust' that it was unable to revive the dream of holy beauty. For the text of the poem (sent in a letter to Fet), see *Pis'ma V. S. Solov'eva*, III, p. 111.

⁶² Solov'ev, '*Nepodvizhno lish' solntse liubvi . . .*', pp. 44-45.

⁶³ The note accompanying the poem was first published in *Pis'ma V. S. Solov'eva*, II, pp. 356.

⁶⁴ Solov'ev was followed by Polonskii, who also tried to rescue Lermontov's prophetic image from a narrow 'social' reading in his poem 'Pustye nozhny' (1893). Building on the dagger imagery of Lermontov's 'Poet' of 1838, Polonskii argued that the poet does not need an avenging blade; he is unarmed, and, like a prophet, dreams of another, higher form of salvation. Ia. Polonskii, *Stikhotvoreniia*, Moscow, 1981, pp. 409-10.

mission in a more firmly established, stronger 'validating' tradition than literary or social models could provide led him to turn to another, more ancient source, the Hebrew prophets, and to present himself as their natural successor. This was achieved in two principal ways: through his own conscious assimilation of many of the attributes of the Hebrew prophets, and through his presentation of their ideals in the light of his ecumenical goals.

The main stepping-stone in this process of assimilation was the thorough study of the Hebrew language, grammar, scriptures and Talmud, which Solov'ev undertook in the early 1880s (evidently as a continuation of his interest in the Kabbala, which dated back to his trip to London in 1875).⁶⁵ Far from being a purely academic occupation, this constituted an active means of entering into the Hebrew prophetic tradition by espousing its language, attitudes and goals. This underlying drive can be sensed in the letters which Solov'ev wrote to his Jewish friend and mentor, F. B. Gets, during the period when he was preparing the first volume of *Istoriia i budushchnost' teokratii* (*The History and Future of Theocracy*, 1887).⁶⁶ As well as making repeated references to his systematic reading of the Hebrew scriptures (detailing his progress from the Torah through 'all the prophets' to the Psalms),⁶⁷ Solov'ev stresses his constant attempt to assimilate these texts into his own vocabulary and experience. In commenting upon his own problems, for example, he quotes verses from the Psalms in the original Hebrew, and proudly reports that he is now able to incorporate Hebrew phrases from the Psalms into his own daily prayers.⁶⁸ This is in keeping with his decision to use his own translations from the Hebrew scriptures in *The History and Future of Theocracy*, despite his knowledge that this would incur the censor's disapproval.⁶⁹ His eagerness to identify with the Jewish perspective on events is manifest in his account of an incident in which he witnessed a Jew preventing a *chilul Hashem* (desecration of the Divine Name).⁷⁰ He associates his own persecution with that of other religious minorities, such as the Jesuits and the Jews, noting that his

⁶⁵ For a pioneering investigation of areas of affinity between Solov'ev's thought and the Kabbala, see Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, 'Russian Religious Thought and the Jewish Kabbala' in Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (ed.), *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, Ithaca, NY and London, 1997, pp. 75–95.

⁶⁶ In his letter to Gets of [11 April 1887], Solov'ev writes that the first volume of his book is now printed and will be sent out in May. See *Pis'ma V. S. Solov'eva*, II, p. 145.

⁶⁷ See Solov'ev's letters of [1883], [1886] and [1887] in *ibid.*, II, pp. 135, 138, 140, 144.

⁶⁸ Letter of [1887] in *ibid.*, II, p. 144.

⁶⁹ Solov'ev expressly stated that his whole purpose in learning Hebrew was to be able to prepare his own translations from the Hebrew scriptures; although he considered himself a poor Hebraist, he thought he was far better than 'those academic students who fabricated the synodal translation'. See Solov'ev's letter of [late November to early December 1886] to A. A. Kireev in Solov'ev, 'Pis'ma A. A. Kireevu', p. 211.

⁷⁰ Letter of [1886] in *Pis'ma V. S. Solov'eva*, II, p. 138.

opponents regularly accuse him of planning to become Jewish.⁷¹ Many years later, as he lay dying, he apparently asked S. N. Trubetskoi's wife to prevent him from falling asleep so that he could pray for the Jewish people, and then began to read a psalm out loud in Hebrew.⁷²

There are also numerous instances of Solov'ev assuming the voice and style of the Hebrew prophets in his own writings. In a lengthy and passionate letter to Kireev, he offers a spirited defence of his own pro-Catholic position and openly attacks the Orthodox church (not surprisingly, this letter was omitted from the 1908–11 edition of his correspondence). The arguments and the tone of this virulent invective are highly evocative of certain passages from Isaiah — this is particularly true of the way in which he condemns the ritual and institutional aspects of official religious practice and contrasts these with his personal vision of the unrealized ideal of Orthodoxy. The following passage may serve as an illustration:

So then, what is it that I am opposed to? Is it not to a disgraceful system which has made and continues to make this entire holy entity [the Orthodox church] fruitless and lifeless, which turns it into dead capital, into a useless treasure — [I am opposed] to a system which bypasses the Church, but in actual fact opposes it, which would like to make out of the universal Church an empty word or an archaeological memory, while turning our native Church into a police institution, a stooge and underling of the State. Against this godless system, which is the undoing of Orthodoxy in Russia, I am indeed struggling with all my might, and I hope in good time with the help of God to do something towards its destruction. This opposition of mine towards your 'camp' arises directly out of my love for Orthodoxy and Russia [. . .] I will take my love for the eternal Bride of God with me to eternity, but my opposition to her enemies on earth will only be extinguished with the triumph of her task or with my death.⁷³

In a later letter to Gets, published as the preface to the latter's booklet of 1891 on the Jewish question, Solov'ev made his sense of allegiance to the Hebrew prophetic tradition even more explicit by aligning himself with the prophet Ezekiel, whose words he quotes at the outset of his epistle as his model and inspiration in his struggle against Russian anti-Semitism.⁷⁴

Thus, on many different levels, as these examples indicate, Solov'ev emulated the language, style, goals and values of the Hebrew prophets. The fact that this was a deliberate, self-conscious stance was recognized by his contemporaries, as transpires from a fascinating entry in Kireev's

⁷¹ Letter of [December 1886] in *ibid.*, II, p. 142.

⁷² S. N. Trubetskoi, 'Smert' V. S. Solov'eva' (1900) in B. Averin and D. Bazanova (eds.), *Kniga o Vladimire Solov'eva*, Moscow, 1991, pp. 292–99 (294).

⁷³ Letter of 4 August 1887 in Solov'ev, 'Pis'ma A. A. Kireevu', pp. 215–23 (220–21).

⁷⁴ *Pis'ma V. S. Solov'eva*, II, p. 163.

diary, dated 30 March 1887: 'I had a long discussion with Solov'ev, he sees himself as a person who is destined to speak the truth, without the slightest care for what his audience thinks of him: "for the prophet Jeremiah was also not listened to during his life", he says.⁷⁵ This comment provides a valuable insight into Solov'ev's deep-seated belief in his prophetic calling: although he was understandably reticent about it in public, he was evidently prepared to acknowledge it in private conversation.⁷⁶

Solov'ev's other main method for narrowing the gap between himself and the Hebrew tradition of prophecy was to adapt its ideals to mirror his own. This strategy is particularly obvious in *The History and Future of Theocracy*, where he presents the Hebrew prophets as the precursors of his own ideal of a universal church. The work is structured in such a way as to create the impression that the course of world history has flowed continuously and uninterruptedly from the Hebrew prophets through to the fulfilment of their mission in the Russian realization of their original theocratic ideal. The Hebrew prophets are invoked to provide a historical and religious underpinning for Solov'ev's vision of the universal prophetic mission of the Russian people, despite the fact that this vision is more closely based on the ideas of Mickiewicz, Tiutchev and Dostoevskii, than on any biblical sources. Defining his point of departure in terms of his final goal enables Solov'ev to create a version of the past to support his Utopian vision of the future. In the process which he refers to as the establishment of 'true sonhood' ('istinnogo synovstva'),⁷⁷ it is not the father who gives birth to the son, but the son who creates the model of his 'adopted' father. Although the book's argument is couched in scholarly language, the underlying impulse which informs it is essentially religious. This dual approach was in fact explicitly advocated by Solov'ev many years later in a critical review of a French book about the Hebrew prophets, which he concluded with the following recommendation:

True scholarliness requires one *to understand* in the Bible that which is truly important in it, namely the prophetic spirit, while true religiousness requires one *to accept* this spirit as an eternally life-giving force, which not only defined the fate of the Jewish nation in the past, but on which the creation of our own future should also depend.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Solov'ev, 'Pis'ma A. A. Kireevu', p. 247. I am most grateful to Aleksandr Nosov for drawing my attention to this entry.

⁷⁶ Solov'ev's own sense of prophetic calling is recognized (with a degree of caution) by Jonathan Sutton: 'the manner in which Solovyov treats the whole subject of the prophetic vocation' and 'his own serious and moral approach to problems [...] give one grounds for surmising that he himself felt the prophetic vocation'. Sutton, *The Religious Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov*, p. 85.

⁷⁷ *Sobranie sochinenii V. S. Solov'eva*, IV, p. 260.

⁷⁸ 'Kogda zhili evreiskie proroki?' (Ernest Havet, *La modernité des prophètes*, Paris 1891) (1896) in *ibid.*, VII, pp. 180–200 (200).

In *The History and Future of Theocracy* Solov'ev sought to demonstrate that although the Hebrew prophets were undoubtedly divinely inspired, one essential element was lacking: the universalism of their mission was not fulfilled in Jewish history. The Russian nation is therefore now called upon to complete their holy task. In connection with the ideal of universalism, Solov'ev pays special attention to the figure of Abraham, stressing the divine promise that all peoples of the earth will be blessed in him,⁷⁹ and presenting him not only as the 'father of believers'⁸⁰ but also as the precursor of Christ,⁸¹ 'founding father [. . .] of theocracy'⁸² and prophet of the universal church. The medium of poetry gave him even greater licence to develop the image of the prophets in this direction. His portrayal of Abraham in 'V zemliu obetovannuiu' ('To the Promised Land', January 1886) ends with a loose paraphrase of God's promise to the prophet:

Что из рода потомков твоих
 Выйдет мир и спасенье народов земных.⁸³
 That from the line of your descendants
 Will come peace and salvation for the nations of the world.

This is quite different, however, from the wording of the original promise given in Genesis (12:2-3; 13:15-17) — the change of emphasis has been introduced to suggest the role of Christ, Abraham's descendant, as the saviour of the nations of the world.

The theocratic ideal which caused Solov'ev to turn to the Hebrew prophets naturally led him to raise the following question: who will fulfil these early prophetic intuitions in the contemporary Christian world and in Russian society? In *The History and Future of Theocracy* this question is formulated as follows:

The ideal of a united church ['vsetserkovnosti'], universal brotherhood, the perfect Kingdom of grace and truth, love and freedom — this is *the future of the church*. Its beginning is really present among us even now, but only in the prophets. What, then, should we do so that this future is fully embodied — so that the prophecy comes true?⁸⁴

Framing the question in this way clearly invites a certain type of response. Just as Solov'ev had previously pointed to Dostoevskii as a prophet of the universal church, so now it is clear that his role as Dostoevskii's successor is to complete the task commenced but left unfinished by the Hebrew prophets. His earlier elevation of Dostoevskii

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, iv, pp. 360-62, 566.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, iv, p. 358.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, iv, p. 576.

⁸² *Ibid.*, iv, p. 363.

⁸³ Solov'ev, '*Nepodvizhno lish' solntse liubvi . . .*', pp. 41-43 (p. 43).

⁸⁴ *Sobranie sochinenii V. S. Solov'eva*, iv, p. 259.

to the status of prophet provided a precedent for this approach, which is now lifted on to a new level by being grounded in biblical tradition.

Solov'ev read the Hebrew prophets through the dual prism of Christian tradition and Russian literature, and re-created their image in the light of these traditions to lend support to his sense of their continuing relevance to the present age. His late poem, 'Neopalimaia kupina' ('The Burning Bush', 1891), opens with a statement by Moses, later repeated for emphasis: 'I am the slave of sin' ('Ia rab grekha').⁸⁵ No such words, however, are recorded in the Torah; Solov'ev evidently introduced them to illustrate the 'awareness of sinfulness', which, in his opinion (noted above), enabled Dostoevskii to attain his prophetic heights. The superimposition of Russian literary texts on biblical tradition is also reflected in the way in which Solov'ev's poem echoes the structure and imagery of Pushkin's 'The Prophet' (from the spiritual thirst in the desert to the voice which revives the prophet).

Writing this poem from the first-person point of view enabled Solov'ev to speak through the voice of Moses the prophet, and thereby to narrow the gap between his own self-image and the tradition of Hebrew prophecy. Solov'ev clearly found it easiest to convey his own sense of prophetic vocation indirectly, through the prism of other figures, whether literary (such as Dostoevskii) or biblical (such as Moses or Abraham). The fact that this approach involved considerable distortion of his sources did not present a problem to him, or, indeed, to those who later came to regard him as a member of the prophetic tradition, defined in this eclectic manner.

When it came to articulating the question of his prophetic vocation openly and directly, Solov'ev displayed considerable reluctance and ambivalence. Although the entry from Kireev's diary suggests that he did regard himself as a prophet, he was evidently ill at ease with this image in public and would often use humour as a means of distancing himself from it. This comes across plainly in his deliberately equivocal late poem, 'Skromnoe prorochestvo' ('A Modest Prophecy', 10 December 1892).⁸⁶ The poet initially acknowledges his public image as a prophetic figure, but only to disclaim it as an act of mockery instigated by his enemies:

Я в пророки возведен врагами,
 На смех это дали мне прозвание,
 I have been elevated to the prophets by enemies,
 To make fun of me they gave me this name,

⁸⁵ Solov'ev, *Neopodvizhno lish' solntse liubvi . . .*, pp. 59–60.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

The next couplet, however, introduces an abrupt reversal:

Но пророк правдивый я пред вами;
И свершится скоро предсказанье.
But a true prophet am I before you,
And my prediction will soon come true.

The prediction which follows, although prefaced by a grandiose twofold repetition of 'I prophesy' ('*Ya prorochu*'), is to a large extent undermined by its content, which amounts to little more than the fairly self-evident assertion that spring will follow winter. The light-hearted tone of the poem, tinged with romance, might seem to preclude attaching any serious import to such a prediction; however, the line

И земля воскреснет, солнцу рада,
And the earth will revive, joyful at the sun,

suggests that this seemingly slight 'modest prophecy' may in fact testify to the poet's deep inner affinity with the divine cycle of renewal which underlies history as well as nature. Within the space of a few lines the image of Solov'ev as prophet is therefore introduced, undermined, and possibly restored — a bewildering sequence which reflects the many tensions inherent in Solov'ev's relation to his prophetic role.

The Legacy of Solov'ev's Prophetic Ideal

We have seen how Solov'ev's espousal of the prophetic ideal enabled him to reconcile his mystic leanings with his interest in philosophy and pursuit of social reform; it also led him to construct a prophetic tradition which was initially derived from a system of philosophical aesthetics, then related to the model of Dostoevskii, and finally grounded in the biblical tradition of Hebrew prophecy. Solov'ev's particular contribution in this context was to extend the traditional 'medium' of prophecy from poetry and prose (favoured by Pushkin and Dostoevskii) to philosophy, regarded by him as the vehicle most suited to the goal of social transformation in the modern age.

It now remains, by way of conclusion, to consider briefly how Solov'ev's contemporaries and successors reacted to his creation of a prophetic ideal and self-image. This is linked to a more general problem: how does a modern literary prophet gain recognition? The Hebrew prophets were called to their mission by divine election, and then trained in special schools for the purpose; their status was openly recognized and not subject to challenge. In the modern age, when open prophecy has ceased, how is a prophet to be identified? In the absence of divine election, what is the source of prophetic validation? Clearly it cannot come from the individual himself; nor is public recognition with its devalued perception of prophecy a reliable criterion, as Solov'ev

suggested in his satirical poem 'The Prophet of the Future'.⁸⁷ How can the individual translate his intimate awareness of his prophetic calling into a public role without betraying it in the process?

In his memoir of Solov'ev, Rozanov gave a humourous account of this predicament:

He [Solov'ev] spoke on all subjects openly, loudly. But as far as the notion that he possessed the 'gift of prophecy', well even some sort of a one, — this treasure of his heart, this greatest joy of his life, his comfort, his pride — only once did he express this [. . .] in a letter to me; expressed it — and fell silent, and did not 'expand'. Could one have imagined him, arriving at a formal dinner, where [. . .] all his friends and 'admirers' were gathered, sitting down, and saying casually, loudly and clearly: 'Gentlemen, do you know? I am a prophet, there is something priestly and prophetic in me'. 'He would have died of shame', if he had said this. 'He would have turned crimson from shame', if someone, in a welcoming toast, [. . .] for all to hear, would have said this to him and together to all the guests. But 'on his own, hidden away, in a private letter' — he would have said it.⁸⁸

Rozanov recognizes the dilemma: the prophet cannot champion his own status, nor can he accept the dubious recognition of public acclaim. The true prophet can therefore only hint at his calling — in private conversations, letters, diaries or poems. Meaningful recognition can only come about with hindsight — hence the longing for historical events capable of confirming earlier prophecies. For many readers, this was exemplified by the fate of Solov'ev's poem 'Panmongolizm' ('Panmongolism', 1 October 1894).⁸⁹ Although evidently prompted by Russian disquiet over the Sino-Japanese war of 1894, at the time of its first full publication in 1905 this poem was read retrospectively as a 'prophecy' of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05. Berdiaev, writing in 1911, reflected a common opinion when he presented it as the main 'proof' of Solov'ev's prophetic status:

For Russia Solov'ev's poem 'Panmongolizm' has already proven itself to be prophetic, it predicts the Japanese war and Russia's defeat. I think that the confirmation of Solov'ev's prophetic insights will not be limited to this alone. [. . .]

Vladimir Solov'ev is a prophet of the new religious consciousness, of an apocalyptic consciousness. In the light of this new consciousness he prophesies about Russian messianism, continues the task of Dostoevskii.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ In this connection, see Sergei Solov'ev's comments on Vladimir Solov'ev's dubious entourage of mystics, hovering between religion, spiritism and the pleasures of drink, and hailing the later Solov'ev of the 1890s as a 'failed Messiah'; Solov'ev, *Vladimir Solov'ev*, p. 54.

⁸⁸ Rozanov, 'Pis'ma Vlad. Serg. Solov'eva', p. 61.

⁸⁹ Solov'ev, *Nepodvizhno lish' solntse liubvi . . .*, pp. 88–89.

⁹⁰ N. Berdiaev, 'Problema vostoka i zapada v religioznom soznanii Vl. Solov'eva' (1911) in Averin and Bazanova (eds), *Kniga o Vladimire Solov'eve*, pp. 355–73 (371–72).

Berdiaev continued in this vein, peppering almost every sentence with various forms of the word 'prophetic', until he reached his conclusion that the mistakes in Solov'ev's thought are of no consequence when faced with 'the prophetic fact of his existence'.⁹¹ The prophetic self-image put forward by Solov'ev has thus not only become accepted as a 'fact'; it also serves to exonerate him from his errors by raising him above ordinary categories of judgement.

Viacheslav Ivanov, writing in the same year, took a broader, more long-term view of what might constitute confirmation of Solov'ev's prophetic role: 'When the anticipated kingdom comes, when the dawn of the City of God begins to light up, the chosen and faithful of the City will remember Solov'ev as one of their own prophets.'⁹² In other words Solov'ev's prophetic status will only be established retrospectively, after the historical realization of his teaching about the universal church has come about.

Others, however, were prepared to accept Solov'ev's prophetic self-image quite unconditionally. Sergei Solov'ev directly followed the precedent set by his uncle in presenting him as a prophet in the light of Hebrew biblical and Russian literary tradition. On the concluding pages of his biography (completed in 1923) he states that Solov'ev was distinguished from all others by his 'right and duty, recognized by him as his own from the beginning and until the end of his life, to be a *prophet in Israel*'.⁹³ True to his subject's example, Sergei Solov'ev superimposes Russian literary tradition on Hebrew prophecy and glides seamlessly from a description of Solov'ev in terms which directly echo Pushkin's 'The Prophet' to a comparison of him with Moses on Mount Sinai.⁹⁴

These examples, although necessarily limited in number, are nevertheless broadly representative of a fairly common trend. On the whole, Solov'ev's like-minded successors tended to follow the guidelines set by their mentor fairly uncritically, presenting him in the light of the literary and biblical tradition of prophecy which he had built up, as if this were a matter of uncontested fact, rather than subjective opinion. This demonstrates how quickly and easily Solov'ev's construction of a prophetic tradition generated its own self-perpetuating dynamics, establishing him for posterity in the role of prophet.

We shall conclude, however, by citing a dissenting voice. One of Solov'ev's most perceptive critics, the philosopher Lev Shestov, recognized the considerable distortion involved in Solov'ev's presentation of

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

⁹² Viacheslav Ivanov, 'O znachenii Vl. Solov'eva v sud'bakh nashego religioznogo soznaniia' (1911) in *ibid.*, pp. 344-54 (354).

⁹³ Solov'ev, *Vladimir Solov'ev*, p. 380. My emphasis.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 381.

Dostoevskii⁹⁵ and the Hebrew prophets. Penetrating further into the heart of the matter, he argued that Solov'ev's attempt to integrate religion, based on revelation and prophecy, with philosophy, based on logic and reason, led religion (and Solov'ev with it) into the 'trap' of rationality.⁹⁶ In Shestov's view Solov'ev was guilty of putting 'his own reason, his own concept of good, without the slightest hesitation, [. . .] in the place of God', and of calling this 'religious philosophy'.⁹⁷ Solov'ev's attempt to create a philosophical 'justification of faith, by raising it to a new level of reason'⁹⁸ was not only out of place (religion does not need any philosophical justification), but lured him and his followers away from true religion. Shestov even tentatively suggests the daring thought that Solov'ev himself became aware of this tragic failure towards the end of his life and, in the figure of the prince in 'Tri razgovora' ('Three Conversations', 1900), condemned not just Tolstoi as a stooge of the Antichrist, but also himself.⁹⁹

Since the paths of prophetic inspiration and philosophical enquiry are diametrically opposed, Shestov has a crucial question for Solov'ev: what was his purpose in turning to prophetic inspiration? His sharp answer cuts uncomfortably close to the bone: 'Evidently, from the prophets only one thing is required: they have to recognize and sanctify that which *others have done without them and instead of them*'.¹⁰⁰

The mainstream approach to Solov'ev's prophetic qualities continued to develop, however, without taking much account of Shestov's reservations. As a result the issues raised by Solov'ev's construction of a prophetic ideal — including the relation of prophecy to mysticism, poetry and philosophy, and the validation of prophetic status in a modern literary context — remain unresolved to this day and are still pertinent to the development of the Russian cultural tradition as it reflects upon its past and builds its future. It is surely significant that, when some of the thoughts which inform this essay were first presented at a conference on Vladimir Solov'ev held in St Petersburg in May 1999, several members of the mixed audience of students, academics

⁹⁵ In Solov'ev's three speeches on Dostoevskii, Shestov found 'not one word about that over which Dostoevskii exercised himself all his life. In Dostoevskii Solov'ev is only interested in those ideas which he himself suggested to him'. 'Umozrenie i Apokalipsis: Religioznaia filozofia Vl. Solov'eva' (1927) in Lev Shestov, *Umozrenie i otkrovenie*, Paris, 1964, pp. 25–91 (29).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁹⁸ Solov'ev's formula, from *Sobranie sochinenii V. S. Solov'eva*, IV, p. 243.

⁹⁹ Shestov, 'Umozrenie i Apokalipsis', pp. 28–29, 38.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41. My emphasis.

and intellectuals expressed surprise verging on indignation at the notion that Solov'ev somehow *constructed* an ideal and tradition of prophecy, rather than simply *being* a prophet by virtue of his very existence.