

RADOSLAV ANDREA TSANOFF

by James Street Fulton

Radoslav Andrea Tsanoff lectured to the first class in philosophy at the Rice Institute, then two years old, in 1914. A little more than fifty years later, in the spring of 1965, he was giving a brand new course, on autobiography. In the meanwhile, Houston had grown from a brash, sprawling small city into a brash, sprawling megalopolitan center; Rice had passed from lusty infancy to confident maturity, changing its name along the way from Institute to University, in acknowledgement of the greatly increased demand for graduate and research programs; and the young Assistant Professor had become Emeritus Professor of Philosophy and Trustee Distinguished Professor of Humanities, a scholar of wide renown, almost a Texas institution.

The last phrase needs a word of explanation. His enthusiasm for everything momentous that men have achieved and can achieve artistically and intellectually and spiritually made him a cultural influence of singular force in the still provincial Southwest. Brilliant public lectures under Rice's auspices soon won him admirers far beyond the boundaries of the campus, just as his class lectures made friends and admirers of an ever-growing number of students. To this day he receives many more invitations than he can accept to speak before groups and meetings of all kinds. He has never condescended to an audience, but carefully writes out in advance what he is going to say, thereby expressing delicate ethical perception of the personal needs implied in an invitation to speak. His style, in speaking and in writing, reflects a mind at home in world literature and completely at ease in the highest intellectual company; but he talks to, never down to, his audience. Soon after coming to Rice, Tsanoff gave a series of public lectures which were published subsequently as an issue of the *Rice Institute Pamphlet* (in 1917) under the title, "The Problem of Life in the Russian Novel." Requests for copies were still being received more than forty years later. Equally outstanding, but in an entirely different context, was a talk given in the McCarthy era before a meeting called by the Rice Student Forum to consider the problem of intellectual freedom in view of certain current ideas and activities of a repressive character. While other speakers dealt with current controversies, Tsanoff

rose at once above the momentary to the abiding principles of the American faith. His statement of what our country stands for and strives to make actual was so affirmative, so direct, so simple, so artlessly eloquent that those who heard him were lifted out of their seats in spontaneous ovation. What he did at that moment revealed the philosopher; he stood with the others and joined in the ovation. It was clear to him that not he but the idea of America had inspired the outburst of enthusiasm. With humility he saw himself as the servant of this idea, the instrument through which it could speak; so he disclaimed personal credit for his utterance.

The communication of ideas outside the academic community is a natural extension of the life of a scholar. Tsanoff exerted a powerful, constructive influence on the larger community in other ways as well, as is instanced by his service for twenty-eight years on the Board of Directors of the Houston Symphony Society. Especially during early years, when it was engaged in a relentless struggle for existence, he grappled energetically with the emergencies, even helping to canvass possible contributors by phone. For eight years he was also a Trustee of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts.

While in these and other ways the duties of a citizen and neighbor were being ungrudgingly discharged, his real work was being done in the scholar's study. A bare glance at the bibliography listed elsewhere in this volume will give an idea of the fruitfulness of the countless hours spent there. Titles alone cannot be expected to reveal the erudition, the discriminating judgment, the mastery of balance and rhythm, which make one page after another noteworthy in many essays and books. By virtue of these accomplishments and the force of his personality, Tsanoff for decades personified philosophy to Rice and Rice to the philosophical world. I shall venture a little later to give a broad indication of the philosophy that inspires his writing and informs his life.

For the present I wish to emphasize that absorption in his own creative work never prevented or delayed his discharge of other duties to the institution which he served. He always carried a full teaching load, usually with large classes, and never in his whole career had the assistance of a reader. He served efficiently on committees, including the time-consuming Committee on Examinations and Standing, of which he was a member for sixteen years. And, most significantly, he for forty-two years built the philosophy holdings in the library, from two volumes in 1914 to the excellent collection that with little more than routine additions will support the research activities of a growing department throughout the future. During those years, he was also administratively responsible for Philosophy, for Education, for Psychology. Those who know the distractions of such complex duties wonder how he did so much.

Perhaps, it was because he never was supplied a secretary.

One morning, a few years after his retirement, Tsanoff came briskly into the corridor that Philosophy and English then shared in Anderson Hall. It could not have been later than eight-thirty. As usual he had risen early and gotten in a couple of hours of work, and now had driven eleven miles through heavy traffic, eager for the day he had planned at his desk in the library. He was even more cheerful than usual, a little excited, almost gay, when he fell upon a colleague in the English Department who specialized in nineteenth century romanticism. "Will," he said, "I don't know how it came about; but as I was driving in this morning, two whole cantos of *Childe Harold* went through my mind." That he could recite yards of Byron seemed perfectly natural to him (why, he had learned it as a schoolboy in Bulgaria); that he did so on that occasion surprised him, and he was unaffectedly delighted with the experience.

A prodigious memory may become a curse by inexorably storing trivia or by interfering with thought. Tsanoff never exposed his mind to the cheap or meretricious. He disciplined his great gift by exercising it on the highest products of human genius and by subordinating it to a controlling philosophical purpose. The vastness of his learning is focused and refracted by an active mind onto the pages of his works and built into the texture of his daily life. Affirmatively, it places at his almost instant disposal great insights of genius in at least eight languages—from simple folk wisdom to sublime religious utterances. Negatively, it forms an absolute bulwark against one-eyed wisdom, rigid factionalism, sectarian simplification. Tsanoff is too constantly aware of alternatives to be fanatic. His mind always sees a balance among claims that he knows have been passionately advanced and masterfully defended against each other, for balance is the dynamic equivalent of the ultimate stability: integrity of purpose and style, which the mind pursues as its demanding goal and satisfying destiny. This live integrity matures not eclectically by gathering this and that snippet of presumed wisdom, but teleologically by arduously respecting the superiority of the inherently superior.

One of his most recently published books, *Worlds to Know*, well illustrates the spirit of his philosophy and his life. I can do no better than quote at some length from its concluding pages, where the author is himself summarizing his guiding conviction, indeed his life's work so far:

Our modern specialized and often onesided thinking has found expression in the over-departmentalized organization of our universities. We need greater integration in our programs of higher education. Any real basic problem is bound to lead our research beyond our departmental bailiwick. In my own experience, at least, I have found that this is especially true in philosophy. In

studying the belief in immortality, the problem of evil, the ways of genius, I was again and again led from "straight philosophy" into religion, into history and literature, psychology and other sciences. Real problems pay no attention to departmental fences; they go their ways, and in following their various courses one may learn the importance of integrative thinking.

Our philosophy should not be the philosophy of a school. It must not be dictated by conformity to any preconceived formula, but must itself be the integration of various evidence and inference that leads to the confirmation or to the revision of traditional and provisional formulae. For this is always the advantage of sound philosophical interpretation, that in its critical integrating outlook many special ideas reveal significant aspects or inferences which they do not manifest when regarded solely in their special provinces. Ideas become more cultivated; their meaning expands and mellows when they enter into the stimulating society of more thorough and balanced reflection.¹

But what ideas, specifically, had "become more cultivated" in his experience? Again, he has said it himself:

The view of the World as Drama is the most characteristic outlook on the Reality of Values. Here man's intelligence—reason and feeling and spiritual vision—contemplates its own creative activity up to the verge and summit of genius. Corresponding to the factual interplay of causes and urges and reasons and purposes across the vast span of cosmic perspectives which we have been endeavoring to understand, the dramatic outlook reveals the strains in the life of spiritual aspiration, the counterplay of ideals in the pursuit of perfection and in the struggle with evil.

The perspective of the world as process at this distinctively spiritual level manifests a dynamic of values. The world as drama is a gradation of higher and lower satisfactions and purposes and ideals. Value is never simply there, to be described or explained. It enters the stage of possible realization as a challenge and an aspiration, or as a menace or an insidious lure. The entire realm of values is one of striving or relapse, achievement or frustration, perfection or degradation. For here on the highest reaches of reality, man is ever resisting the drags of his lower nature or yielding to them. In social activities progress appears dubious when so often man's reason itself is bedeviled to serve lower impulses, to make him "beastlier than any beast," in the words of Goethe's Mephistopheles. Artistic creation is so often checked or misdirected by confusion or vulgarity. The moral life is itself a dramatic contest of values and purposes, arduous in the struggle between aspiration and appetite, baffling in the tragic choice between counter-evils. These are gray and grim aspects of the spiritual life, and religion has expressed them in its emphasis on man's sinfulness and his utter need of redemption. The religious gospel of salvation is a gospel of hope, hope to contrite man. The parable of the Prodigal Son evidences this dual conviction. *The prodigal son is the son of his Father—but a prodigal son.*

Have we presented the dramatic perspective of the world of values in a dour pessimistic regard? It has also its vistas of more positive and sublime achievement. In our other views of the world—as cosmic mechanism, or evolution or history—we have been considering the varieties and the complexity and the limits of available knowledge. Now we contemplate man's paths towards wisdom, so frequently uncertain, unmarked and untrodden, so limitless in their forward reach, onward and upward. Here man's creative spirit surpasses itself,

so often by not being subservient to cautious reason, but not by an initial dismissal of reason. How wisely St. Thomas Aquinas counselled his theological doctors: Go with reason as far as it takes you, in its right direction; faith will then take you the rest of the way. In many fields of spiritual activity this same basic wisdom has been expressed. So Pasteur affirmed that the great creative ideas come to minds that have been prepared for them by thorough inquiry. And Poincaré: After having tried really hard, stop trying, and it will achieve itself. From scaling the ideal heights, will some of my readers turn to plain mountain climbing? On the slippery trails inexperienced foolhardiness may prove fatal. But repeatedly the seasoned climber comes to a step of precarious outcome, where only a resolute leap can sway the possible odds between success and disaster. The lower ramparts of achievement may be reduced by plodding reflection, but eventually genius must storm the citadels of perfection. The fuller truth, however, requires that we write this last sentence also in the reverse order, so as to include the recognition of the superlative capacity for hard work.²

The bare facts of Tsanoff's academic biography are hardly a respectable shadow of the vital substance, but may be included for the sake of the record. He was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, January 3, 1887. His father was an author, educator, and newspaper editor, and young Radoslav grew up in the security of a strong family, which shared and prized the high literary and intellectual heritage of all Europe. When at fifteen he looked for further education beyond the borders of his Balkan homeland, he did not turn, as one might expect, to the powerful nations of Europe or to England, but to the United States. In this he was following his father, who had studied at Cornell University as a young man. The fifteen-year old prepared for America by spending a year at Robert College, the American school in Constantinople. In 1903 he entered Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, completed his undergraduate course with distinction in three years, and proceeded to Cornell University for his doctor's degree, which he received in 1910.

With the exception of the first two years, spent at Clark University, in Worcester, Massachusetts, a strange interlude at Shrivensham American University in Berkshire, England, in 1945, several visiting professorships, and, after retirement, two years as M. D. Anderson Professor of Philosophy at the University of Houston, Tsanoff's entire professional career is identified with Rice, where since 1961 he has held an appointment as Trustee Distinguished Professor of Humanities.

His marriage in 1912 to a Cornell co-ed, Corrinne Stephenson, was enduringly a spectacular success, yielding two talented daughters, four handsome grandsons, and, at last count, two great-grandchildren. Mrs. Tsanoff, in addition to the myriad activities of wife, mother and grandmother, hostess, and leader in community service, has typed all her husband's manuscripts and staunchly assisted him in the dreadful chore of seeing book after book through the press.

Let that suffice.

I hope I shall be forgiven a final, very personal indulgence. I cannot close this piece without acknowledging my gratitude to Radoslav Tsanoff for his friendship, his selfless support, his unfailing encouragement, his remarkable example. In twenty years of constant close association I have known him indignant but never ill-tempered, hurried but never impatient with persons in need of him, always courteous but never *merely* courteous, always generous, never mean. After running the Department for more than forty years, he has shown almost superhuman restraint in not offering his successor a single piece of unsought advice; but he has always been ready instantly to drop whatever of his own he was doing if I sought his help and counsel. Radoslav Tsanoff, the man, has taught me more than he will ever put in books.

Not only on the lives of his friends but on the character of Rice University he has left his indelible signature. He has solved, in practice if not theory, the problem of a significant "objective immortality."

NOTES

1. Radoslav A. Tsanoff, *Worlds to Know: A Philosophy of Cosmic Perspectives*. (New York, 1962), pp. 215-216. (English edition entitled *Science and Human Perspectives* [London, Routledge & Kegan Paul].)
2. *Op. cit.*, pp. 213-215.