In 1920, after a harsh winter, Viacheslav Ivanov found a temporary refuge in a sanatorium for imperiled writers in Moscow. During June and July he shared a room with his old friend, the cultural historian Mikhail Gershenzon. Inevitably, their conversation turned to the cataclysmic events unfolding outside their precarious asylum. Russian culture had been put on trial by the Revolution and the magnificent tapestry of its Silver Age, shredded in the civil war, was now abandoned to fate in the clash of blind, brutal forces.

On the question of culture the two interlocutors were sharply divided. Gershenzon noted: “You and I dear friend, are diagonal not only in this room, but in spirit too.” By common agreement, they decided to record their debate in a formal exchange of letters. The resulting text, A Correspondence from Opposite Corners (Perepiska iz dvukh uglov, 1921) consists of twelve letters, six by each correspondent. The dialogue runs for fifty pages, initiated by Ivanov’s letter of June 17 and closed by Gershenzon’s on July 19.

“I know that you are overtaken by doubts about man’s immortality and the person of God,” begins Ivanov, casting a vertical line of transcendence to vault the problem of culture above the historical reality that weighs so heavily on his friend. Unwilling to follow this lead, Gershenzon returns the question to the existential plane, speaking for the here and now with a flash of metaphoric brilliance. He writes:

For some time I have been finding oppressive, like an excessive load or too heavy clothes, all the intellectual conquests of mankind, the entire treasure of notions and knowledge, of values collected and crystallized for centuries…. It must be a great happiness, I think, to dive into the river Lethe, cleansing one’s soul within its waters, clearing away the remembrances of all religious and philosophical systems, of all wisdom and doctrine, of poetry and the arts, and land again on the shore, naked as the first man, light and merry, freely stretching and raising one’s naked arms, remembering of the past but one thing, how one felt burdened by those clothes, and how one feels easy and free without them.

Gershenzon had devoted his life to the interpretation of the intellectual and literary culture of the Russian nineteenth century and even in the emotional immediacy of his self-divestment, culture pulls back at his mind as he notes the imprint of Rousseau’s dream of primitive innocence in his own musings: “I am not judging culture, I merely witness that I suffocate within it. Like Rousseau, I see in my
dreams a condition of bliss, of perfect freedom, where the unburdened soul lives in an Edenic thoughtlessness.”

Before launching into his defense of culture, Ivanov gently chides Gershenzon on his notion of freedom: “You experience culture not as a living treasure of gifts, but as a system of the subtlest restrictions.” The freedom of the unmemoried primitive man, whom Rousseau conjured out of his radical opposition to the tyrannical artifice of French aristocratic society, is not true freedom, he argues. A notion of freedom defined by negation is mere licence, grounded in authority, from which it is derived.

At the crest of the dialogue Ivanov, the subtle dialectician, yields to the voice of the poet-philosopher about to reveal his deeply held doctrine of cultural memory; “For me, it [culture] is the ladder of Eros and the hierarchy of reverence…my reverential offerings are freely given and each of them brings joy to my spirit…culture is memory, not only the recall of the earthly and outer faces of our fathers, but also the recall of all their sacred achievements.” Among the latter he includes not only the monuments of human creation, but also the spiritual initiatives that shape it. Having designated memory as the spiritual ruler over human culture, Ivanov offers a definition that restores the etymological, long buried meaning of the debased word. “Culture is the cult of memory,” he affirms, in an ontological formula that encodes his understanding of the spiritual mystery of death and resurrection. “Culture will become again the cult of God and earth. There will be an epoch of a great, joyful, all embracing return…. That will be the miracle of Memory-Mnemosyne, the eternal, universal Memory.”

The utterance I have quoted echoes a couplet from a poem Ivanov wrote years before: “He forever triumphs over death/ in whom a living memory lives.” (“Nad smert’iu vechno torzhhestvuet / v kom pamiat’ vechnania zhivet.”)² As a classical philologist, Ivanov understood theoria in its original sense as the faculty of panoramic sight. In his creation, poetry and theory are twins, two pillars of fire from which rises his singular, passionate vision.

Ivanov and Gershenzon, two friends conversing across the invisible diagonal bisecting their room, both understood that their debate about culture was at heart a dialogue between reason and faith. Gershenzon, the intellectual skeptic who linked culture to necessity, concluded that ideas, like all things merely mortal, are born to die. The endless repetition of the cycles of human mortality made Gershenzon’s mind weary.

In his conception, human memory is always shadowed by oblivion. By contrast, Ivanov conceives of memory as the prime spiritual energy that forever renews human time, flowing irresistibly between lost continents and new, pristine lands, joining peoples of diverse tongues and customs. It has its ebb and flow but even at low tide, it channels the power to break open the dark prison (temnitsa) of history. “A vertical line can start at any point,” writes Ivanov.

When the Correspondence appeared a year later in the almanac Alkonost, it was received as a twilight witness to the passing genius of the old intelligentsia and their “eternal questions” about God and the ultimate ends of history. In a recent commentary, Robert Louis Jackson compares it with the exchange between Ivan and Aliosha Karamazov in the Metropolis tavern.³ Read as a meditation on Russian history, the Ivanov/Gershenzon dialogue appears haunted by the aura of decadence, a phenomenon whose ambiguous essence was captured by Ivanov in Letter VII: “What is decadence? The awareness of one’s subtlest organic bonds with the lofty cultural tradition of the past, but an awareness tied up with the feeling, both oppressive and exalting, of being the last of the series.” Renato Poggioli, looking in

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from Gershenzon’s corner, saw his despair as a premonition of “the betrayal of culture,” a syndrome that would haunt European intellectuals in the twentieth century.\(^4\) It is a sickness that cuts both ways. In Red Petropgrad, most reactions focused on Ivanov. Andrei Belyi observed with studied neutrality that “the antinomies of our time intersect in Viacheslav Ivanov,” and People’s Commissar of Education, A. V. Lunacharsky, said that Ivanov was not “attuned to the times.” Later in Europe, this small book would have a large resonance. E. R. Curtius hailed it as “the most important statement about humanism since Nietzsche.”\(^5\)

Ivanov’s unique conception of religious humanism, with its intellectual coherence and large compass, has all the marks of a complete philosophical system. But the meaning of his theory of Eternal Memory does not rest in the intellectual articulation alone. Rather than a system, for Ivanov, it was a spiritual doctrine developed through a very personal quest that guided his life and art, commanding his utmost fidelity.

The narrative of Viacheslav Ivanov’s life (1866-1949) has been given us by Olga Deshart, the remarkable woman who was his companion in Italy from 1927 to his death in 1949. A thinker in her own right, she shared fully in his intellectual and artistic pursuits and was, to all accounts, a most beloved member of his closely knit family. Together with his son Dmitri (Jean Neuvecelle) she preserved his legacy in four volumes of his Collected Works, which are the authoritative source for all Ivanov scholars. Her Introduction (Vvedenie) presents his life, both its outer and its inner events, in loving and precise detail, while also offering a lucid exposition of his writings.\(^6\) I draw on it for my understanding of Ivanov’s spiritual path. But here I shall dwell only on the major turning points of his life.

Ivanov’s intellectual trajectory began with the study of history. When, at age twenty, he joined Professor Mommsen’s prestigious seminar on Roman History at Berlin University, he seemed destined for a brilliant academic career. He was accompanied abroad by his wife Dar’ia and their baby daughter Sasha. Between his arrival in Berlin and the formal acceptance of his dissertation on tax farming in ancient Rome, in August 1895, a revolution in his life and thought had changed everything about him, utterly. The initial spark was ignited by Nietzsche, whose The Birth of Tragedy (1871) revealed to him the psychic power of ancient Dionysos. The “collapse of the principle of individuation” spoke to Viacheslav’s deepest urges for some form of self transcendence. He plunged into the study of the religious cults of Hellenism, with their many faced divinities and the myths they generated. In London, he researched the Roman Idea at the British Museum, where he figures on the roster of illustrious readers, along with Karl Marx. Deeming himself unready, he postponed his first visit to Rome until 1892, when he enrolled at the German Archaeological Institute.

In his second year in Rome, in July, he met Lydia Zinovieva-Gannibal and the instant of their mutual recognition was a seismic event for both. A born aristocrat with a distinct literary talent, whose maternal lineage led back to Pushkin, Lydia was rebellious and generous, with a commitment to social justice. But after years of dedication to revolutionary causes, she was in spiritual despair. She was married but alone, traveling with her two sons and a small daughter. A striking figure with her aureole of sun-drenched hair and a deep, sibylline gaze, Lydia awakened the poet in Viacheslav and he, in turn, awakened the slumbering Maenad within her. Dionysos was “the hidden morphological principle of her being” writes Deshart.\(^7\)

The first line of the sonnet “Love” (Liubov)—“We are two tree trunks ignited by the storm” (“My dva grozoi zazhenye
“stvolna” — in Pilot Stars (Kormchie Zvezdy, 1903) Ivanov encapsulates the transformational passion generated by their encounter. From that premise, the sonnet develops the idea of sexual union in a cascading flow of metaphors, until the sudden upward soar of the fourteenth line — “We are two hands of a single cross.” (“My dve ruki edinogo kresta.”)8

The emblematic poem of mutual definition testifies to what Ivanov himself and his biographer after him would state in plain prose. The transformational power of Dionysos, discovered in the uniquely concrete being of a beloved woman, is what led him beyond Nietzsche to Christ. There is a paradox at work in this crossing over from the philosopher of European nihilism to the Crucified, thus named by Nietzsche to mark his status as a failed god. But a philosophical paradox is an intellectual formula that defies linear logic by playing on the unresolved tension between contradiction and identity. And it contains a core of mystery. On the mystical circle of meaning the questor touches back at the point of his origin when he has traveled furthest away from it. That form of paradoxicality is the very core of the Dionysiac experience. Heinrich Stammler, in his essay “Ivanov and Nietzsche,” cites the contemporary classicist Walter F. Otto: “Those who are close to Dionysus experience the blend of life and death, mortality and eternity, in a wondrous fashion.” Stammler is right in noting that, unlike the misogynistic Nietzsche, Ivanov highlighted “the prominent position of woman in the life-giving sacrificial cult of the suffering god.”9

It was Ivanov’s passionate love for Lydia that opened him to the meaning contained in the inscription ei (ty esi in Russian) inscribed above the portal of the Delphic sanctuary. Like all messages, the two-lettered word requires a two-way communication to be delivered. At Delphi, the human querent was enjoined to acknowledge the divine essence of the sacred answerer before being admitted to his presence. In Ivanov’s Christian reading, the formula ty esi commanded him to affirm the divine basis of his own being in the new-found interiority of a spiritual experience.

Deshart describes Ivanov’s initiation into that mystery, which took place in the Roman cemetery at Campo Verano in March 1895. On a sunny spring day Viacheslav wandered in alone, carrying his burden of moral guilt. Among the graves of the unknown beings who had preceded him on that soil, his transgressional passion loomed for him like tragic fate, with the stark choice between two sacred values — his marriage to Dar’ia and his commitment to Lydia. The tragic ordeal, as Aristotle has codified it, inevitably leads to the reversal of the hero’s fortune (peripeteia) and, in the best tragedies, that moment of fall is accompanied by enlightenment (anagnorisis). Suddenly, Viacheslav fell to the ground and began ecstatically kissing the earth. He rose from it morally and emotionally transformed — no longer a transgressional lover but a bridegroom consecrated to Lydia by his communion with the Mother Earth.

Deshart has drawn the parallel between Viacheslav’s ecstasy at Verano and Aloshka Karamazov’s epiphany of faith after the mortal doubt inspired by the dread stench of Zosima’s decaying body. Ivanov’s spontaneous enactment, on Roman soil, of the Russian ritual of cosmic bonding, anticipates by many years the imaginative synthesis of Hellenic myths and Russian spirituality in his interpretation of Dostoevsky’s novel-tragedies.10

In 1909, in the essay “Ancient Terror” (“Drevnii uzhas”), Ivanov would expound the theoretical paradigm of his Verano experience. In this erudite essay, his syncretic thinking about the metamorphic transference of religious myths in human history is displayed in panoramic view.11 The ostensible subject of Ivanov’s medi-
tation is the contemporaneous painting designated in the subtitle, “On Leon Bakst’s Painting ‘Terror Antiquus,’” now hanging in the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg. Ivanov sees three interlinked ideas in Bakst’s symbolic image, superimposed upon each other on the flat canvas: the idea of cosmic catastrophe, the idea of fate, and the idea of immortal Femininity. The cosmic catastrophe is portrayed by Bakst with a bolt of lightning from heaven that splits the canvas in two, tearing continents apart. Above the sinking Atlantis, the upper half of an archaic Greek statue of a female figure is foregrounded, as if rising from the primeval waters to confront the viewer with her unblinking gaze.

Ivanov’s reading of these visual symbols, with the uncanny sense of terror they generate, proceeds from his conception of the ancient struggle between primordial matriarchy and the patriarchal order imposed on it in later history. His views were influenced by Johann Bachofen’s (1815-1887) path-breaking study of the unwritten laws of matriarchy, which he cites.12 The essence of Ivanov’s argument is that in overthrowing the ancient “Mother Right,” patriarchy summoned the phenomenon he calls the “ancient terror” or alternately the terror of fate (terror fati) into being. Born of violence, the male illusionistic individualism is fated to death, whereas the Feminine force, rooted in the ruthless energy of procreation, is immortal. In its attempt to tame what it perceives as female despotism, patriarchy unleashes the nemesis of female wrath, generative of cosmic guilt.

Terror fati, with all its theogonic, mythological, and social manifestations, found its supreme artistic expression in Attic tragedy. Ivanov notes that “antiquity adored tragic myth” and that its culture constantly recreated the mask of terror. His fellow classicist Nietzsche drew on the same source for his understanding of the Apollonian/Dionysiac dialectic in Greek tragedy. In a passage resonant with a Nietzschean echo Ivanov writes: “We all feel that we live at a time of the waning and taming of the world’s elemental forces and humanity’s elemental energies, but we still hear, somewhere below the level of conscious and superficial life, a distant, deep song of native chaos.”13 Nietzsche’s response to that tremor had been to conjure the ancient terror back into modern Europe and, embracing it, transform meaningless suffering into the enlightened tranquility of amor fati. Trapped in a historical time that offered no other form of self-transcendence, he experienced the Apollonian gift of healing in the aesthetic enjoyment of supreme lightness.

Here it is where Ivanov parts company with Nietzsche. In his own diagnosis, Christianity is not dead for modern culture; it is we who have forgotten what made it alive. In proposing to recall the “anthropological principle” of Christianity, Ivanov relies on what he considers to be its two revolutionary ideas—the Christian understanding of self-affirmation and the Christian view of the World Soul. Working together, these twin revelations created a new religious consciousness by harmonizing masculine energy with the nascent feminine spirituality.

Christ’s descent into human form made whole the ancient rupture between Heaven and Earth, raising each individual, man or woman, to the dignity of divine filiation. In the new intimacy of the Father/Son relationship, the kingdom of God, which Christ promised on the Cross, can be found within man. No longer need humans fear the terror of fate. And the fear of the divine power (timor dei), taught by the Hebrew Law of eternal obedience to God, has been replaced by the sole injunction to love. Only if the human I utters the sacred word “thou art” (ei—tyesi) to another I, will the human self achieve reality as the vessel of the Divine Father’s will.

In Ivanov’s gendered conception of
human individuation, that ontological formula translates into a new hierogamic paradigm. In the freely offered act of their mutual recognition, both genders are released from the shackles of necessity that had doomed their union to violence. The new cosmic woman, still rooted in Earth, is no longer identified with blind Fate. Ivanov sees her as the long-suffering Mother or a widow weeping for her lost Eden. In both aspects, the female archetype embodies the generative power of spiritual latency and receptivity. The real object of her longing is the divine Logos, who resides with the Heavenly Father. But the mystery of divine filiation, made incarnate in the historical being of the Christ, has implanted the spiritual seeds of divine Logos within man, so that each male individual can become the consecrated bridegroom of Mother Earth. The advent of Christianity has renewed primal Nature by giving birth to a profoundly creative myth of the World Soul.

No less than the essays he published in the yearly almanac *The Golden Fleece* (Zolotoe Runo), “Terror Antiquus” marks the peak of Ivanov’s cultural influence. In the preceding year, “The Two Elements of Contemporary Symbolism” (“Dve stikhii v sovremennom simvolizme”) created a great stir. It remains an indispensable resource for any student of the period. For those poets and thinkers who participated in that great wave of Russian creativity, Ivanov’s essay articulated a coherent theoretical response to their need for a unifying world view.

Like all cultural manifestations born of the great matrix of European Romanticism, Russian Symbolism was much more than a literary movement. A deep utopian impulse at its core called for nothing less than a total renewal of Russian life, a transformation that would make good at last on the old dream of bridging the gap between the intelligentsia and the people. Like Nietzsche before them, Russian Symbolists yearned for the return of choric art, infused with the imaginative potency of myth. Valerii Briusov, having attended Ivanov’s lectures on the Dionysiac cult in Paris in 1903, hailed him as the arcane master who could bring the Greed gods and their myths to play freely with the newer Muses of Russian Symbolism. Merezhkovskii, who published the lectures in Novyi Put’, 1904 (The New Path), admired Ivanov’s synthesis of Hellenism with Christianity. But not unlike Nietzsche before them, these two pioneers of Russian Symbolism were haunted by the aporia of Decadence, unable to find the vehicle for their passage into the realm of divine myth.

In “Two Elements of Contemporary Symbolism” Ivanov offers the key to his doctrine of theurgic art by laying out his definition of artistic symbols.

Like a ray of sunlight, the symbol cuts through all planes of being and all spheres of consciousness, signifying different essences in each plane, performing a different function in each sphere. Truly, like all that descends from the divine womb, the symbol is also a semeion antilogomenon, “a sign which will be spoken against—or object of dispute,” to use Simeon’s words about the infant Jesus. At each of the points at which the symbol intersects the sphere of consciousness like a descending ray, it is a sign, the meaning of which is visually and fully revealed in a corresponding myth.14

Following in Plato’s footsteps, Ivanov enlisted the poet within him to convey his highest truth. Like all things divine, poetry and philosophy embrace each other in their hermeneutic circularity, as in the sign of a sacred snake biting its own tail. Myths are inherently generative and Ivanov’s doctrine of Symbolism comes in the form of a grand unifying myth of divine illumination. He proceeds to distinguish between the French practice of Symbolism, which had strongly influenced the first generation of Russian Symbolists (most notably Bal’mont and Briusov), and his own conception of
theurgic art. Under that banner, he had rallied both Blok and Belyi. Using Baudelaire’s sonnet *Correspondances* as an illustration, Ivanov interprets the first two stanzas as an expression of the poet’s desire to relate Nature to an ideal reality. In the tercets, which celebrate the sensuous magic of synesthesia, the vertical thrust of symbolic speech has been abandoned as Baudelaire embraces the “idealistic” art of illusion whose kaleidoscopic effects Ivanov considers to be the essence of Decadence.

As Ivanov sees it, his fellow Russian poets are faced with a choice: “Will the artist-theurgist become an artist-tyrant, such as Nietzsche dreamt of, an artist who will re-evaluate all esthetic values and shatter the old crystals of beauty, obeying only his ‘will to power’?” In Ivanov’s own practice of “realistic symbolism,” a choice he made long ago, poetic creation is also a *gnosis*, rising *ad realibus ad realiora* to unveil the eternal essence of being concealed under the appearances of the phenomenal world. The symbol functions as the vessel of a threefold communication, inviting the audience into the artist’s communion with his divine source of illumination. And in this mediation lie the dignity and the mission of the theurgic artist, whom Vladimir Soloviev had heralded in his *Three Speeches in Memory of Dostoevsky* (1883).

In 1904, after their wanderings between Italy, Greece, and the capitals of Western Europe, Viacheslav and Lydia, now married, returned to Russia with their extended family. Having spent a busy literary season in Moscow, the couple settled in St. Petersburg. By October 1905 they had moved to a spacious apartment on the fourth floor of a house above the Tavricheskii Garden, whose corner was built in the shape of a tower. The front rooms of their apartment, where they received their guests, were in the rotunda. Soon, the Wednesday evening symposia at the Ivanovs became famous in St. Petersburg and beyond as “The Tower” (*Bashnia*), a word that forever joined the locus and the rich inner life it harbored. For seven years the *Bashnia* rose above the imperial city as the tangible sign, the *semeion antilogomenon* of the hosts’ quest for transcendence. During the brief span of its existence (1904 to 1912), in the precarious interval between a failed revolution and the gathering storm of the Great War, “The Tower” served as an intimate stage for the spellbinding creativity of the Russian Silver Age. In the inspired presence of Lydia, whom the faithful renamed Diotima, Viacheslav presided over the play of ideas with grace and tact. A brilliant teacher, he had the gift of focusing his complete attention on each and every one of his interlocutors.

“The Tower” drew visitors from all spheres of culture, many of them famous, others less. Some attended briefly and several came to stay, notably the poets Kuzmin and Voloshin, the latter with his wife, the painter Margarita Sabashnikova. Periodically, the eclectic and tireless Briusov would arrive from Moscow to initiate another literary project. Lunacharsky, the future commissar, would sit in, to listen and to demur. Andrei Belyi wrote his novel *St. Petersburg* (1911) at the *Bashnia* and that same year the Acmeist poet Gumilev brought his young wife Anna Akhmatova to read her early poems.

While Ivanov placed poetry above theory, his reputation rested primarily on his essays. Andrew Wachtel perceptively points out that “Ivanov was a canonical writer” who used citation from his poetic pantheon as “an act of piety, as in a religious rite.”

Wachtel names Plato, Aeschylus, Dante, Goethe, Pushkin, and Soloviev among the authors who were his “pilot stars.” *Kormchie Zvezdy* (*Pilot Stars*) is the title of Ivanov’s first collection of poetry that was presented to Vladimir Soloviev...
in manuscript and was blessed by his approval. Henceforth, Ivanov considered Soloviev as the godfather of his poetry. Ivanov’s reverence for the past, his arcane diction and occasionally oracular tone were a source of wonderment to his contemporaries. The existentialist Shestov dubbed him “Viacheslav the Magnificent”; however, Aleksandr Blok, whom Ivanov loved and valued as a fellow initiate of Vladimir Soloviev’s, was growing more distant. Blok, the most elementally lyrical poet of the age was listening deeply to the music of Revolution when he addressed Ivanov in a poem dated 1912 as “you—the autocratic tsar” (“ty—tsar’ samoderzhavyi”), placing himself on a dusty street crossing, watching his royal train pass by.”

Then, suddenly, “death with its merciless ax” cleaved Ivanov’s life in half. On October 19, 1907, Lydia died in their woodland retreat at Zagor’e, of scarlet fever contracted while nursing infected sufferers in a nearby hamlet. She had lingered for a week in high fever, attended by her husband and Vera, the daughter of her first marriage. “What her death meant for me,” Viacheslav wrote in his *Autobiographical Note* (1917), “those for whom my lyrics are not a dead hieroglyph will know.” His intense intellectual activity continued, but *Bashnia* had lost its soul. In the spring of 1910, the bond between Viacheslav and Vera, forged in the vigil over Lydia’s dying, blossomed into love. They were married in the summer of 1913 in the same seaside Orthodox chapel in Livorno where Viacheslav had wed Lydia in 1899. In 1912, Vera gave birth to their son Dmitri in Nevecelle, a mountain village in French Savoy. Ivanov’s fourth collection of poetry, *Nezhnaia Taina* (*Tender Mystery*, 1913) is much quieter than the poems he gathered in *Cor Ardens* (1911) after Lydia’s death, in a volume inscribed with her words: “Ty—moi svet; ia-plamen’ tvoi” (“You—my light; I—your flame”).

In the calamitous year 1920 death once again knocked at Ivanov’s door. For all Russia, torn apart by the Civil War, the winter of cold penury had been devastating. Nature herself, perhaps offended by her feckless guardians, turned a savage face upon them. Vera and her young son Dmitri, both ill, had been taken to a make-shift sanatorium outside of Moscow, in Serebriannyi Bor. In the cycle “Winter Sonnets” ("Zimnie sonety"), composed on the cusp of 1919-20, Ivanov speaks with the universal yet intimate voice of a father and husband, evoking his journeys by snowbound trails to reach the fragile harbor of his love. Exhausted by her ordeals, Vera died on August 8. Unable to face another winter in Moscow, Ivanov renewed his request to leave for Italy with his remaining family. In spite of Lunacharsky’s support, the permission was granted only in 1924. In the meantime Ivanov took young Lydia and Dmitri to Soviet Baku, where he was appointed Professor of Classical Philology at the University. He continued his research and defended his thesis on Dionysos and Pre-Dionysianism in 1923. His brilliant teaching transmitted his vision of the Classics to a gifted group of students, who would preserve this subterranean flow of culture, submerged but alive under the rigid surface of Soviet academia.

In 1924, leaving Russia for good with daughter and son, Ivanov told his friends, “I am going to Rome to die.” He was destined to live for a quarter of century more in Italy, not really an exile but rather a wanderer returning to his spiritual home. Rome re-awakened the poet in him. “The Roman Sonnets” ("Rimskie sonety," 1924) are a cycle of nine sonnets commemorating his “great return.” The initial sonnet, always read as Ivanov’s salute to Rome, is a masterpiece of “realistic symbolism”; its formal clarity and firm diction conceal a hermetic core of multilayered meanings that have often been misunderstood.

Several times in his life Ivanov turned to the sonnet at the high tide of lyrical
inspiration. Like Dante in the Vita Nuova, he used it as his preferred vehicle for the emotion of erotic love, structured by intellectual argument. After Lydia’s death, he wrote “A Crown of Sonnets” (“Venok sonetov”) for her and placed it in Cor Ardens. A Renaissance form favored by Petrarcha, the Corona is a circular composition of fourteen sonnets, where each new poem repeats and develops a line from the lead. It survives as an archaism, an exercise testing the poet’s technical bravura. Ivanov infused it with the emotion of loss and desire, artistically generated from his old sonnet “Liubov” that he placed in the lead. By this choice, he signaled his desire to call back the instant of mutual recognition between himself and Lydia, long ago in Rome. In this context, the formal requirement of repetition works as a mnemonic device raised to the highest degree, turning the Corona into a poetic liturgy expressing the speaker’s desire to rise above death in a communion with Lydia’s soul.23

The nine sonnets of the Roman cycle are not bound together by a predetermined formal pattern. They appear to flow freely, in a meandering way that suggests the poet’s delight in naming and repossessing the familiar sights of his beloved city. The initial sonnet commands attention by virtue of its heightened diction and its generic, multilayered imagery, invoking the eternal essence of Rome. I present the first sonnet in a new translation by Ron D. K. Banerjee, which preserves the format and the rhyme scheme of the Petrarcan sonnet (abba abba cdc dcd) Ivanov has used.

Once more, true pilgrim of the ancient arches,
I greet you this late hour, my sheltering home,
With vesper’s Ave Roma, Eternal Rome,
A refuge to a wanderer who searches.

Our ancestral Troy we have ceded to fire;
Chariots’ axles crack in the thunderstorm
And the fury of the world’s hippodrome.
You watch us, Lady of Ways, as we expire.

You, too, know the flames and have risen anew
From ashes. Your deep skies are not blind,
Their remembering azure is still as blue.

The cypress, your keeper of gates, calls to mind,
In an aureate dream how once Troy grew
Strong, as Troy lay devoured by flames, ruined.

In addressing Rome, the speaker deliberately uses its Latin name Roma, thus capturing an echo of its secret anagram amor, emblazoned in Virgil’s spiritual conception of the Roman Idea in Book VI of The Aeneid. The first quatrain is notable for its rhyming of Latin and Russian words, a lexical device that defines Ivanov’s persona, uniting the classical scholar and the Roman archaeologist with the Russian mystic. He deliberately uses the Latinate word “piligrim” in place of the usual Russian “palomnik” to describe his posture in re-entering Rome as “a wanderer who searches.” In the original text “piligrim” is rhymed with “Rim,” the Russian word for Rome, a masculine rhyme on which the first quatrain comes to rest.

In his analysis of the poem, “The First Sonnet in Vyacheslav Ivanov’s Roman Cycle,” Alexis Klimoff draws attention to the original title “Regina Viarum” Ivanov intended for the poem, an appellation firmly rooted in the Latin tradition. Citing Auden’s dictum that poetry “pays homage by naming,” Klimoff notes that Ivanov’s repeated invocation of Rome is a feature of liturgical language.24 In this
poem, Ivanov’s bilingual homage to Rome harmonizes the two cultures he loves, as well as both grammatical genders.

The second quatrain moves the action from the personal to the public sphere, opening the poem to the vista of world history. Here Troy replaces Rome as the chief symbol, to which Ivanov attaches his metahistoric myth about the repeated conflagrations visited on human culture. On the most immediate level, the symbol of Troy intersects briefly with the Russian actuality of 1924, evoking the Soviet fury and its reckless ride, in full view of the “world’s hippodrome.” In his “Letter to Charles Du Bos” (1930) Ivanov will write that the goal of the proletarian hegemony is “to tear God out of human culture.”

But the reference to the chariot race in the circus draws us back to the Roman past, at the point where its pagan meaning was being overridden by the apocalyptic vision of John of Patmos. The multilayered image of axles crashing in the world’s hippodrome thus collates two historical catastrophes—the Russian Revolution and the Fall of Rome—with the advent of Christianity. In the last line of the second quatrain, which traditionally concludes the sonnet’s major proposition, Rome, reintroduced by the appellation “Lady of Ways” (“tsar’ putei” in the Russian text), figures as a distant, impermeable spectator of the current conflagration.

In the traditional Petrarcan scheme, the tercets develop the minor proposition derived from the quatrains. Ivanov seems to have reversed the sequence of the ongoing argument by introducing his major theme of memory at this turning point. The tercets, where the name of Rome is deliberately hushed in the direct address “You, too,” contain the hermetic core of the poem. The only active verb used in the present tense (“pomnit,” translated as “calls to mind”) gathers into itself all the mythical potency of the complex statement. It is attached to the symbol of the cypress. The illusionistically sensuous evocation of a mellow Roman day in the words “aureate dream” (“v laske zolotogo sna,” literally “in the caress of a golden dream”) refers to the tall, slender tree in the Roman Campagna, at the entrance to Rome. But the cypress, rooted in the soil and pointing like an arrow to the sky, is also familiar to Roman cemeteries and the association instantly recalls Ivanov’s ecstasy at Verano, creating a secret link back to Lydia. This “keeper of gates” towers above the catastrophic events of human history, forever meditating on the mystery of death and resurrection. The remembering azure of the sky above it reflects that eternal vigil of memory. By implication, the seemingly impermeable Rome of the second quatrain is no longer a spectator but a spiritual witness endowed with vision.

The concluding tercet, with the twice repeated reference to Troy, has baffled many readers. In his translation of this sonnet, which is attached to Klimoff’s essay, Lowry Nelson collapses the last tercet into a Spenserian couplet, avoiding repetition of the word Troy. His version of the final statement reads: “Your cypress, standing sentinel, remembers, / In the caresses of a dream of gold / How strong was Troy in ashes lying cold.” In his commentary, Klimoff picks up the Virgilian echo in the naming of Troy, the lost city that Aeneas yearns for all through his pre-destined journey towards the elusive, not fully comprehended goal of founding Rome. In the figural pattern of The Aeneid, Rome is the successor and the fulfillment of the values contained in Troy. For a reader seeking to find a message for Russia in Ivanov’s sonnet, the figural pattern initiated by Troy/Rome demands to be rewritten as a triadic succession that leads from Rome, through Constantinople to Moscow the Third Rome.

Nothing could be further from the spirit of “Roman Sonnets.” Already in 1908, in the essay “On the Russian Idea,” Ivanov
rejected the parochialism of Russian messianism and identified “the pathos of renunciation” as the most significant spiritual principle of Russian culture. In the last line of the ninth Roman sonnet, which concludes the cycle, the poet fixes his eye on the dome of St. Peter’s Basilica: (“na zolote kruglitsia sinii Kupol”; trans. “in the golden aura the dark blue Cupola is rounded”). Two years later, on March 17, 1926, Ivanov adhered to the Latin Credo in a side chapel of the Basilica, at the altar of his patron saint Vaclav—a Czech Holy Prince whose name translates into the Russian Viacheslav. The ritual of conversion was followed by a mass in Old Church Slavonic with a Communion in both species. Ivanov understood this act, controversial in Russian eyes, as the expression of Vladimir Soloviev’s ecumenical idea. “For the first time I felt myself to be Orthodox in the full sense of the word,” he explained to Charles Du Bos.

Moscow is never named in the sonnet, but it is gathered, along with all other Russian cities, into the Virgilian Troy, the symbol of cherished values doomed to burn throughout the cycles of history. But our guide Virgil must leave us at the threshold of the sonnet’s highest revelation. The numerological symbolism of the Roman cycle—9 as the third multiple of the sacred number 3—replicates the allegorical scheme of Dante’s Purgatorio, where the poet-pilgrim ascends to Earthly Paradise at the top of the Mountain after experiencing three dream visions. There, in Eden recovered, the pilgrim-lover must cross the river Lethe before reaching Beatrice. Having washed away the imperfections of his love in the river of forgetting, his memory is renewed in the river Eunoe.

The Purgatorio, which Ivanov was translating in 1920 while sharing a room with Gershenzon, is the key to the mystical meaning of the “great return” encoded in his salute to Rome. Within this code, human time flows backward as well as forward, commanded by the active power of anamnesis. “And we know that when man is perfected, Adam will remember his entire self in all his hypostases, in the reverse stream of time, flowing back to the gates of Eden, and primeval man will remember his Eden.”

**Author’s Note:** The source for all my citations of Ivanov’s works is Viacheslav Ivanov, Sobranie sochinenii, edited by D.V. Ivanov and O. Deshart, 4 volumes, Brussels, 1971-1987 (Foyer Oriental Chretien). Unless otherwise indicated the English translations are mine.