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PETER CHAADAYEV
— FATHER OF PROVIDENTIALISM IN RUSSIA

Andrzej Walicki, when he referred to the philosophical system of Peter Chaadayev, described it as “immanent providentialism”:

Chaadayev’s views are separated from traditional providentialism by a significant theoretical difference: Chaadayev regarded the supra-individual power that filled the plans of Providence as immanent with respect to history, as one that worked through people even contrary to their will (just like “the cunning of reason” in Hegel’s historiography).¹

In Chaadayev’s works there are several passages that could formally confirm this general intuition of Zenkovsky and Walicki. However, since, while writing his *Philosophical Letters* Chaadayev did not know Hegel at all (contrary to some scholarly opinions), then it could be assumed that the coincidence is only apparent. After all the thinker was convinced that “God’s action that occurs at a given time in human life” should be distinguished from “the action that occurs in infinity”:

On the day of ultimate completion of the process of redemption, all the hearts and all the minds will constitute only one feeling and one thought, and all the walls separating nations and religions will fall. But at the current time everyone is to know their place in the general system of Christian vocation, that is know what the means are that they find in and around themselves, so that they could cooperate in reaching the goal that faced the entire human society” (I, 100).²

¹ A. Walicki, *Osobowość a historia*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1959, p. 46. Cf. Vasilii Zenkovsky, who had earlier written about Hegel’s “cunning mind of history” with regard to Chaadayev’s historiography. В.В. Зеньковский, *История русской философии*, vol. 1, YMCA-PRESS, Paris 1989, p. 166.

² П.Я. Чаадаев, *Полное собрание сочинений и избранные письма*, vol. 1: *Сочинения на русском и французском языках: варианты. Показания Чаадаева. Заметки на книгах. Комментарии. Дубля: повесть в стихах*

Thus when the thinker referred to Christianity as “not only the system of morality accepted in the complete forms of human reason” but also as “God’s eternal power which works universally in the spiritual world” (I, 99–100), he, to a certain extent, anticipated the idea of Godmanhood on the Russian soil. In his sixth letter, Chaadayev wrote of God’s impact on “human reason” as the “continuous act originating from outside,” which proves the transcendent, and not immanent nature of his providentialism. When Mikhail Gershenzon wrote in this context on the “immanent presence of God’s spirit in humanity and the merging of humanity with God as the ultimate purpose of the historical process”³, then he must have had in mind only such presence that came from outside but at the same time was constant. After all, Chaadayev did write of “constant presence of God’s reason in the moral world” (*cette action continue de la raison divine dans le monde moral*) (I, 156).

In the eighth of his *Philosophical Letters*, the thinker spoke against treating man as the creature “separated and individual, constrained at a given moment.” If such a view was true, then the human being would not be any different from an “ephemeral day-fly insect,” which is born and dies immediately on the same short day. In fact, the human being should be perceived as “the being intelligently abstracted” (*l’être intelligent abstrait*) that lives in the “miraculous reality” whose glimpses are temporarily noticeable with “some special inspiration” (I, 200). From that perspective, the thinker was opposed to theories that would recognize the development of human spirit as a natural process, “without any traces of Providence, without the influence of any cause, apart from the mechanical force of human nature.” He claimed that similar theories regard human reason as a snowball that grows proportionately to the time it rolls on the ground. Depending on whether such philosophy has a pessimistic or optimistic view of the human being, it treats him once as an insect that thoughtlessly thrashes around in the sun, and another time it makes him rise higher and higher solely by the power of its improving nature. Still it always sees in him “a human and only a human” (I, 160).

“Рыбаки”, стихотворение. Чаадаевiana, vol. 2: Письма П.Я. Чаадаева и комментарии к ним. Письма разных лиц к Чаадаеву. Архивные документы. Именной указатель к 1 и 2 томам, Издательство Наука, Москва 1991. Quotations from this edition are marked in the text by referring to the number of volume and page number.

³ М.О. Гершензон, Грибоедовская Москва. П.Я. Чаадаев. Очерки прошлого, Московский рабочий, Москва 1989, p. 159.

Chaadayev was convinced that in his times all the forms and areas of spiritual life, that is reason, science, and even art, passionately moved towards “a new moral cataclysm” (*un nouveau cataclysme moral*) as had been the case at the time of the Saviour (I, 200). Thanks to the representatives of humanity, who through generations and throughout long centuries have preserved the teaching and image of the Saviour (the promise of the Crucified Christ that he would remain with the humanity for ever), the contemporary mankind has the compelling awareness of the need to bring about “the presence of Godmanhood among us.” What will result from this is the great unity of souls and moral forces of the world into one soul and one force:

This unity sums up the entire mission of Christianity. The truth is one: God’s Kingdom, heaven on earth; all the promises of the Gospel are nothing else but the prophecy of uniting all human thoughts into a single thought; the single thought is the thought of God himself, or in other words — this is the *embodied moral law*. The entire work of conscious generations aimed at achieving the final result which is the boundary and aim of everything, the final phase of human nature, the solution of the worldly drama, a great apocalyptic synthesis (I, 204–205)

Despite similar apersonal and pantheistic motives, the author of *Philosophical Letters* treated human freedom in the way characteristic of Christian tradition. Walicki, when he referred to this part of his deliberations, thus commented critically:

In contrast to thinkers of the Enlightenment, Chaadayev claims that tending towards individualistically conceived freedom is far from a natural human tendency — human beings aim at subjugating themselves, being has a hierarchical structure, the natural order of things is based on dependence⁴.

In 1973, his opinion became even sharper — this time the Polish scholar wrote that “in contrast to the philosophers of the Enlightenment, Chaadayev held that the aspiration to individual freedom is not natural to man [...].”⁵ It seems, however, that such a severe evaluation

⁴ A. Walicki, *W kręgu konserwatywnej utopii*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1964, p. 73.

⁵ A. Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism*, translated from Polish by H. Andrews-Rusiecka, Stanford University Press, Stanford (California) 1979, p. 82. The original Polish version of the claim (here backtranslated) is even stronger: “contrary to the Enlightenment thinkers he argued that aiming at freedom is far from a natural tendency of man”. A. Walicki, *Rosyjska filozofia i myśl społeczna od Oświecenia do marksizmu*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1973, p. 128.

cannot be applied to Chaadayev himself only, but is a consequence of the scholarly attitude that questions traditional Christian understanding of human freedom as the value that is derivative from truth. The Russian thinker rejected the Enlightenment understanding of freedom, but one could not claim that his doctrine was generally opposed to freedom. It is not very convincing to claim that “Chaadayev in his *Letters* attacked the moral and intellectual autonomy of the individual.”⁶ Between the individualism of the Enlightenment and pseudo-medieval coercion there is still room for such understanding of freedom that follows from the statement of Jesus, known in Christian tradition: “Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8, 32). It is this statement that Paul of Tarsus referred to, when he convinced Galatians that they had all been called to be free (Gal 4, 12). It is in this way, and in opposition to the Enlightenment, that Chaadayev tried to grasp human freedom:

Everywhere where the name of Christ is pronounced, it by itself inevitably draws people whatever they would be doing [...]. With this approach to Christianity, any statement by Christ becomes a comprehensible truth. And then one can clearly perceive the working of all the levers that his omnipotent right hand sets in motion in order to direct man towards his destiny, not infringing his freedom, not constraining any of his natural powers [...] (I, 103–104).

The Russian thinker was convinced that after the fall of Adam, “as one of us, who got to know good and evil” (I, 115), mankind needed the help of Providence. The basic task of Chaadayev’s second letter was to establish mutual relations between human nature and God’s grace — all the good that man does is the direct result of his ability to yield to “an unknown force” (I, 114). Man seems to believe then that he has rejected his own power (I, 113), while this only implies situating himself in God’s context, against the philosophers, who limit the world to closed contacts between people: “[...] philosophers are capable of understanding man through man: they separate him from God and impose on him the thought that he is allegedly dependent on himself” (I, 125).

⁶ Cf. The entry „Chaadayev” in: *Słownik filozofów*, vol. 1, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1966, p. 148. The scholar based it mainly on the third *Philosophical Letter*, in which Chaadayev included a few thoughts like: “it would be a higher level of human perfection if man could bring his dependence to the total deprivation of freedom” (I, 126). Yet this opinion should be understood against the background of Chaadayev’s whole approach to providentialism as presented in all the eight letters.

Meanwhile man needs God in order to understand the nature of the general and universal good, morality and truth (I, 125). In the reception of Chaadayev's thought and in the scholarship on it since the moment of publication of his first letter, its historiosophic focus, without a connection to metaphysics, had been regarded as prevailing in this worldview, with the special emphasis on passages concerning Russia. This was the reason why Chaadayev was often considered the father of Russian historiosophic scepticism.⁷ This interpretative position was objected to first by Gershenzon, who — in the first ever attempt at a reconstruction of Chaadayev's worldview in scholarship — argued that his historiography is derivative from his religious vision of history ("social mysticism"), and the sceptical vision of Russia from his first *Philosophical Letter* does not play a major role in this system⁸. A similar position was represented by Zenkovsky, who labelled Chaadayev's system "providentialism" and argued against the claim of the thinker's "historiosophic scepticism":

While summarising Chaadayev's teaching, his assessment of Russia's past is usually brought to the fore. This is no doubt the best known or, perhaps, the most colourful and salient of what Chaadayev has written. Nonetheless, his opinions concerning Russia are not in the centre of his teaching, but on the contrary — they constitute a logical conclusion from his general ideas on the philosophy of Christianity. The focusing of attention on Chaadayev's sceptical attitude to Russia not only does not explain his worldview, but on the contrary — it disturbs the appropriate understanding of it.⁹

Walicki argued against this claim of Zenkovsky's, and stated that it was Chaadayev's "perspective on Russia that led to such philosophy of history."¹⁰ In order to answer the question who was right in this debate, one should first establish the actual subject of discussion of the above-mentioned scholars. Both Gershenzon and Zenkovsky referred to Chaadayev's system as a worldview model and from this point of view they rightly argued against the scholarly position that looked on this thought from the point of view of its historical origin and function. In Chaadayev's vision of God and history the most general element that was the foundation of all other theses was the belief in the divine origin of man and in the constant presence of Providence in

⁷ The author of this view was Aleksander Rypin. Cf. М.О. Гершензон, *Грибоедовская Москва. П.Я. Чаадаев. Очерки прошлого*, p. 163.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 145, 161, 188.

⁹ В.В. Зеньковский, *История русской философии*, vol. 1, pp. 162–163.

¹⁰ A. Walicki, *W kręgu konserwatywnej utopii*, p. 81.

the history of mankind. If we do not recognize that it is the claim that history is a return of Fallen Man to the Creator that is in the centre of discussion, then the whole metaphysics of the thinker will become a superfluous load in his historical and sociological argument. For in what way could the belief in the non-Christian nature of the history of Russia be recognized as the primary idea, and the belief that Providence has custody of the whole history of mankind as secondary? It surely does not follow from this that Chaadayev would deduce from this general metaphysical model any specific claims concerning the history of Russia and the West — that is why he could so fundamentally change his opinions on specific issues. However, he has never rejected the belief in the providential dimension of history, which is to end with instituting God's Kingdom on earth — this final aim for him was closely linked with the principle of universality of Christianity (I, 103, cf. II, 176).

Yet Walicki was right in the area of genetics and psychology, that is as much as he referred to consecutive empirical moments in developing Chaadayev's worldview. For example, in 1842 the Russian thinker wrote:

There [in the West — G.P.] the peasant has reached freedom from the coercion of serfdom, while with us he has passed from freedom to the dependency of serfdom; over there slavery was abolished by Christianity, with us it was born with Christendom looking at this (II, 162).

The two empirical facts (the existence of social slavery in Russia and its abolishing in Europe) exerted a decisive impact on Chaadayev's assessment of the history of individual nations in universal history. Since Chaadayev was convinced that the one who looks for the truth always finds freedom and prosperity (cf. I, 101), he was forced to admit that the reverse was also the case. Who has not found freedom and prosperity probably was not looking for truth itself. This is one of the principal claims of the first *Philosophical Letter*. "Truth" in this context is the return of the creation to God, while prosperity and freedom have social nature and they are generally obtained "in passing." All the claims, however, are already metaphysical (model-generating) and not empirical, thus it is recommended to consider Chaadayev's historiography to be derivative from his providentialism.

Many specific phrases from *Philosophical Letters* should be interpreted only against the background of the whole system of Chaadayev's. It had not been possible for a very long time, since the

eight *Letters* needed one hundred years (1836–1935) to see the light of day. In the third letter Chaadayev stated, for instance, that great accomplishments of mathematical analysis and physical observation result from the fact that they have excluded the “considering will” from their method. In this context he even draws on Bacon’s claim, according to which “the only way to rule over nature open to mankind is the very path that leads to the kingdom of heaven: one can enter there only as a humble child” (I, 123).¹¹ Nonetheless, this did not mean that the Russian thinker wished to apply this method to construing other sciences, the evidence of which are suitable extracts from the fourth letter. Chaadayev, in contrast to the Enlightenment, which dreamt of applying laws of physical nature to the moral sphere,¹² undertook the task to separate the method of hard and empirical sciences from the method of metaphysics and moral teaching. What can be concluded from the fourth letter is that “there is nothing better than the perfect truth” and “mathematical perfection, consequently, has its limits too.” The analytical deduction could not be tantamount to “divine *fiat*,” since then “it would not be faith that would move mountains, but Algebra” (I, 131):

Constant, motionless, geometrical considering, as surveyors usually understand it, is something deprived of reason and godless [...]. For we see in nature something beyond numbers, we believe in God with full awareness, but when we dare to put the compasses into the Creator’s hand, we behave mindlessly [...]; transforming the Supreme Being into a surveyor, we deprive him of the eternal nature that is proper to him and we reduce him to our own level (I, 132).

Protesting against such anthropomorphism, Chaadayev regarded it as “one thousand times more harmful that the anthropomorphism of people of simple hearts” (I, 132). Hard sciences, which deal only with limited objects, that is with amounts, cannot describe the spheres that have their primary cause beyond the category of num-

¹¹ The reference to Francis Bacon’s *The New Organon Or True Directions Concerning the Interpretation of Nature* – “[...] the entrance into the kingdom of man, founded on the sciences, being not much other than the entrance into the kingdom of heaven, whereinto none may enter except as a little child” (LXVIII; transl. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, Boston by Taggard and Thompson 1863), http://www.constitution.org/bacon/nov_org.htm (13.08.2018).

¹² The most classical attempt at such synthesis was the lecture by Jean Antoine de Condorcet delivered at the French Academy in 1782, entitled *Avantages que la societe peut retirer de la reunion des sciences physiques aux sciences morales*.

bers. One such field is morality, which cannot be demonstrated in the surveyor's manner:

Philosophy [...] always mixed the finite element with the infinite, the visible with the invisible, that which undergoes reception through the senses with the one that does not. Even if, on occasion, it said something different, in the depth of its thoughts it never doubted that the spiritual world can be cognized in the same way as the physical world: studying it with compasses in hand, deducing, measuring spiritual entities in the same way as material ones, pursuing experiments with the rational being in the same way as with the dead being. It is astonishing how lazy the human reason is! (I, 134).

The Russian thinker did not know how one can attain precision in the science of man (I, 133), although he stated that in morality teaching one should avoid the “principle of unconfirmed coercion.” He rejected the view of mechanical philosophers, who, following Newton — one-sidedly understood — or the French Enlightenment, saw the inevitable operation of the law of gravity not only in the material sphere, but also in all the spiritual ones. Chaadayev, however, saw in the material sphere the operation of not only the law of gravity, but also — after Newton — the creative presence of the so called Primary Impulse (I, 136). He thought that the founder of mechanics could only have made his astonishing discoveries in natural science, because he was a religious nature. It was no accident that Newton, in Chaadayev's view, was also a prominent commentator of the Book of Revelation.

Chaadayev's thought on the existence and permanent operation of the Primary Impulse, which was nothing else than the acting of God in nature and history, confirms Zenkovsky's argument on the providentialism of the Russian thinker. In his system, an attempt was made to explain history in the context of Providence and human freedom, as he wrote, “was set in its appropriate place”:

Maybe someone would think that there is no place in the system for the philosophy of our self. And here he would be mistaken. On the contrary, the philosophy is perfectly compatible with the system as it is presented: it was only placed in its appropriate place and that is all. From what we have said on the double nature of the force ruling the world, it does not follow that our personal activity has been reduced to null (I, 138–139).

At the same time the thinker was opposed to the so called “freedom of wild donkey,”¹³ which as he wrote “is the abuse of my freedom,

¹³ This is a reference to the Book of Job (Job 11,12).

and it results in *evil*" (I, 140–141). Since evil is capable of unleashing "horrible mayhem in the depth of creation," Chaadayev repeated the classical question of theodicy — why did God allow it to exist? The answer was equally classical as the question:

Such is the spectacle which we present to the Supreme Being. Why does he bear this? Why doesn't he wipe out the creation that has rebelled from the space of the world? And what is even odder — why did he equip man with such a huge force? Because this is what he wanted. We shall make man in our image and likeness, he said. The God's image, the likeness is our freedom (I, 141).

From Chaadayev's providentialism it could have been concluded that human freedom that does not act in accordance to the plan of Providence might bring poisoned fruit. The claim that man is truly free only when he does good has been present in Christian tradition for a long time. The Russian thinker was not a determinist though — it is not without a reason that in a letter to Schelling in 1842 he condemned the "fatalist logic" of the Hegel doctrine that sees the "inevitable necessity" everywhere and almost completely excludes the working of human free will in history (II, 145).

So far we have drawn upon Chaadayev's oeuvre as the most straightforward formulation of tenets of providentialism in the history of Russian thought in the first half of the 19th century. However, the expert examining the system should also refer to the context in which the reception of Chaadayev's thought developed over many years after the publication of the first *Philosophical Letter* (1836). Then the greatest attention was paid to Chaadayev's "anti-patriotism," his apology of Catholicism and his alleged contempt of Orthodoxy. And yet Chaadayev's aphorisms, targeted against Russian reality, should be recognized only as the main focus of Chaadayev's reception, but not as the first foundation and prevailing element of his own worldview. Hierarchically speaking, the most general idea expressed in the first letter is the belief in the working of Providence in history, followed by the claim that it is best seen in the whole history of Western Europe, and only at the end by the paradoxical statement about Russia "forgotten by Providence" (I, 96), which as a negative example should give "a great lesson to the world" (I, 93). In the seventh letter, the Chinese and Indian civilizations ("dull immobility of China" and "humiliation of Hindu nation") were recognized to be negative historical examples of the same kind too. Both of the cultures, as Chaadayev wrote, were "separated from the human family" (I, 169–170).

This is how Chaadayev himself saw the essence of his system too; in a private letter written in October 1836 he expressed surprise that the Russian reading public had reacted with indignation to “the idea that will soon be two thousand years old, and which has been proclaimed, worshipped and believed in by great minds and thousands of saints.” Since this idea (Christianity) bore its practical fruit in the West, it is obvious that the country which “has not collected all the fruits of this religion” must have erred in assessing its essence (II, 108).

The motto of the first letter is the Latin phrase *Adveniat regnum tuum*, which reflects the belief that in the Christian world everything should “favour establishing the perfect system on earth and in fact it has done“ (I, 86, 99). This one thought should unite everyone and “the social system, that is the Church” should “establish the kingdom of truth among people” (I, 87). In the introductory part we have drawn upon the belief of the thinker, also expressed in the letter, that every nation should know its place in the general system of Christian vocation. Situated between East and West and not belonging either to one or the other, Russia has not found it so far. In various passages of the first letter, Chaadayev explained the cause of such state of affairs in a rather fatalistic vein — at one place he claimed that this resulted from the arbitrary decision of Providence (I, 96), and at another he spoke of the “will of fatal fate” that persuaded Russia to accept Christianity (“moral teaching”) from corrupt Byzantium. It was Photios that was responsible for the corruption and excluding Byzantium from the universal Christian family shortly before the christening of Rus. He thus contributed to the fatal breaking of the “life-giving principle of unity” (I, 97). In another place, Chaadayev wrote in this context of “the weakness of our faith” or “insufficiency of our dogmas” (I, 100). Somewhere else he went so far as to state that Russians “have in their blood something that makes them reject every progress” (I, 97). We do know, however, that in other places, the thinker put the blame for historical evil on human freedom, which could have successfully opposed the plans of Providence. Describing the case of Russia, Chaadayev did not resort to such explanation, but argued that “it [Providence — GP.] completely left us to our own devices, nowhere wanted to meddle in our affairs, and did not desire to teach us anything” (I, 96).

Alienating Russia from universal history of Christianity was thus not solely a free human act — it is not Russia that had forgotten

about God at its beginnings, but it was God that turned away from it. Let us add, however, that the “turning away of God” must have had an equivalent in the historical attitude of Russians themselves. For Chaadayev was convinced that God does not punish man, nor the whole nation without a sufficient reason. The whole subsequent history of Russia, which in this sense could be treated as a kind of effect of the original sin, has been the result of the parting of the ways of Providence and man. On this approach, the history of Catholic Europe looked completely different to Chaadayev, as he claimed that during the long centuries of Christianity it has worked out the appropriate model of religious civilization:

All nations of Europe, moving forward through centuries, clung to one another. Whatever they would do, their paths would converge in the same spot. In order to grasp the family resemblance in the development of the nations, one does not even have to study history: just read Tasso, and you will see all nations spread at the foot of Jerusalem walls. Recall that for fifteen centuries they addressed God in only one language, they had one moral authority and one belief; recall that for fifteen centuries in the same year, on the same day and at the same hour, using the same words they raised their voices to the Almighty, and praised him for the greatest of his graces: this is a miraculous harmony, a thousand times more wonderful than all the harmonies of the physical world (I, 100).

Chaadayev’s model of providentialism, which primarily comprised the apology of unity, clearly had a medieval ring to it. In the sixth letter the thinker wrote that the history of Christian Europe was in fact the history of only one nation, one “social body” which, in spite of being divided into separate states, was the entity of a higher level. The thinker lamented the fact that the unity was weakened by the Reformation, but added that in the 16th century there was longer anything that could move the world back from the path it had once taken. From this point of view he did not accept the criticism of the European Middle Ages with their religious wars and “stakes fired by intolerance” that was voiced by the liberal tradition of the Enlightenment — he labelled that anti-medieval doctrine “superficial philosophy.” In the sixth letter he criticised Voltaire, who was indignant that in the Christian world beliefs often led to wars (I, 167). In Chaadayev’s system, however, the historical facts and events played a providential role, because they favoured the development of “the suitable world of concepts” in the process of “bloody battles in defence of truth” (I, 102). This is a clear polemic with the claims of French Encyclopaedia and their negative image of the Middle Ages as the era of fa-

naticism and Inquisition¹⁴. In the sixth letter, Chaadayev wrote that history must not be interpreted the way that is done by “common history” (I, 155), while in the eighth he mentioned “the complaining of philosophers” (of the Enlightenment) about the times of alleged “superstitions, ignorance, and fanaticism” (of the Middle Ages). The “complaining” made man lose the sense of religion — the “dust of disbelief” has quickly disappeared, but just people still have difficulties with finding their place in society (I, 201). The thinker was convinced that history which moves in the right direction is ruled by beliefs, i.e. ideas, and not material interests of people. The opinion was Enlightenment-like in spirit (“history is ruled by beliefs”), but in its content it was medieval and Romantic (religion is the positive driving force of history). This is how Chaadayev described the eighteen centuries of western history, and not only the Middle Ages, claiming also that human interests and passions had always resulted there from religious ideas and never preceded them in the genetic sense. He believed that all the European political revolutions were in fact moral revolutions — nations of Europe “searched the truth, and found freedom and prosperity” (I, 101). What evoked a particular admiration of the thinker was modern England, whose history, in his view, had solely an ecclesiastical and religious dimension. Chaadayev described the last English revolution (1640), as well as all the events that had precipitated it, starting from Henry VIII, as “religious development” — and the English owe their freedom and prosperity to that (I, 102). In another place he pointed out the fact that until recently all Europe had referred to itself as “Christendom,” which found its reflection in general law. Chaadayev’s providential system was also strongly marked by “ideas of duty, justice, law and order,” which he considered indispensable elements of civilization based on the Gospel (“physiology of European man”) (I, 93–94).

All the *Philosophical Letters* (eight altogether) constituted an open polemic with the historiosophy of the Enlightenment, for which the Middle Ages were only the epoch of “fanaticism and superstition.” The Enlightenment, however, as Chaadayev wrote in 1829, was only a historical episode between two religious eras — the Middle Ages (“a wonderful move of human nature towards potential perfection”) and “the current state of societies, marked by religious reaction, that is a new impulse bestowed on the human spirit by religion” (the Romantic era, in our terminology) (I, 101–102).

¹⁴ Cf. П.Я. Чаадаев, *Сочинения*, Издательство Правда, Москва 1989, p. 576.

With regard to history, Chaadayev attributed great significance to tradition and he drew on Cicero, who had spoken of the need to connect the present with the past (I, 92). Elsewhere tradition was described as “constancy” or “consistency in the mind, that is logic” (I, 94). The syllogism of the West, which Russia does not know, is in Chaadayev’s eyes the systematicity of Europe in building religious civilization and Western constancy passed on from generation to generation. The question of passing divine knowledge from father to son was discussed by Chaadayev in the fifth letter, but already in the opening passage he wrote about the spiritual atmosphere of the West worked out throughout centuries. Every child in Europe shapes their moral nature through their mother, before they venture into the world and appear among the society. Chaadayev regarded nations as “moral entities,” just like individual persons. The process of bringing up the latter is the matter of years, while the former need whole centuries of history (I, 93).

In comparison to consistent religious history of Europe, the history of Russia appeared to Chaadayev to be a set of non-permanent and inconstant elements (anti-civilizational *panta rei*):

Does anything holds on strongly here? One can say that everything around tremors. No one has a specified area of activity, there are no good habits, nothing has its rules, there isn’t even a hearth and home, anything that connects, that arouses our good feelings, our love: there is nothing permanent, nothing constant; everything flows, everything disappears, not leaving any traces either in us or outside of us. In our homes we feel like having a temporary rest, in the families we make the impression of alien visitors, in the towns we resemble nomads, and are even worse than nomads, who herd their flocks on our steppes, as those are more used to their deserts than we are used to our towns (I, 90).

The whole history of Russia, starting from the period of “wild barbarity” (this is about the times prior to accepting Christianity), and ending in the present day, has favoured the developing of the above state of affairs. Times before the Tartar invasion were for Chaadayev the centuries of “vulgar superstition,” and he attributed the period of Tartar captivity and the age of Muscovy with a further disastrous influence on the history of Russia (“foreign rule, savage and humiliating, whose spirit was to be inherited by our own authority in future”) (I, 91). The age of Muscovy was recognized as the captivity even more vicious than the Tartar yoke, because this captivity was “sanctified by the fact of regaining independence” (I, 97–98).

The thinker reacted with aphoristic irony to the attempt of civilizing Russia performed by Peter I. The vigorous rules imposed on Russia the external “cloak of civilization,” but did not manage to civilize it at all. Chaadayev also had a negative opinion on the anti-Napoleonic campaign of Alexander I and the emergence of Decembrists as its pernicious result:

the great monarch [...] made us victors from one to the other end of Europe; having returned home from this triumphant parade across the most enlightened countries of the world, he have brought along solely harmful, destructive and false ideas, which resulted in a huge misfortune that delayed our development by half a century (I, 96–97).

The apogee of Chaadayev’s pessimism, when it comes to his understanding of the significance of Russia in universal religious history, is comprised in the passage from his first letter, in which formally speaking, he expressed a kind of timeless scepticism: “We live only in the most constrained present, without a past and a future, among shallow stagnation” (I, 91).

Elsewhere, however, the thinker spoke of the urgent necessity to animate the spirit of Christianity in Russia, since it is that spirit that has shown all the European nations their “ultimate destiny” (I, 101). It should then be accepted that the Russia–Europe opposition had some sense only with regard to the past and the then “present day,” whereas for the future the thinker — against the stylistics of some extracts — did not exclude some role of Russia in the providential plan. In the first letter, there certainly was a dichotomy of two civilizations, the first of which, brought into life in the Catholic West, was treated *en bloc* as religious¹⁵, while the second one, of Russia and the USA¹⁶, had only a material dimension. The civilization that does not take into account the fact of Redemption tends towards “the kingdom of evil” — this is how Chaadayev described the idea of unlimited perfecting of a human being in the closed historical space of the “material

¹⁵ It was only in one place that Chaadayev formally weakened the force of his claim, writing that in the West not everything is “filled with wisdom, virtue and religion.” Soon after he added, however, that everything there is mysteriously subordinated to the “power that ruled supreme through the centuries” (I, 102).

¹⁶ The United States appeared accidentally in the first letter as a representative of “material civilization” (I, 96). In the sixth letter Chaadayev added the ancient world, that is Greece and Rome, as well as India, China, Japan and even Mexico, to the “materialistic group.” All these civilizations, in his view, served solely the bodily nature of a human being (I, 173–174).

being.” He regarded the material civilization as the result of the “erring of the mind,” which raised man to a certain specified level, only to “drop him into an even greater abyss” (I, 99).

Yet the appropriate passages of the second *Philosophical Letter* prove that European “religious civilization” was not treated by Chaadayev as the ascetic space that had turned away from the world of things. On the contrary, the thinker thought that the nations that follow the plan of Providence could also correctly organize the world of “common things.” In the sixth letter he wrote that the material goods are not the aim but only the result of spiritual activity, in accordance to the words of the Saviour: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt 6, 33) (I, 174). In Russia (“our original civilization”) the thinker saw the pernicious ascetism, the reluctance towards the material sphere, as well as imprudent neglect of comfort and joy of life (I, 107).

In 1915, the poet Osip Mandelstam wrote that Chaadayev had managed to understand the West, whose essence did not express itself through “swept paths of civilization”¹⁷. Chaadayev, as the poet wrote, saw history as “educating of nations by God,” i.e. “Jacob’s ladder, which angels use to descend from heaven to earth”, but not as “mechanical movement of the clock”.¹⁸ Yet this generally correct statement contains one important understatement, that is the nation that shapes its history in accordance to God’s plan has the “paths [of civilization] swept” too. When Chaadayev compared the achievements of the West and Russia so far, in his second letter, he used a salient dichotomous metaphor. He called the first reality (Europe) “a paved road along whose worn ruts the circle of life rolls on,” while the second world (Russia) was for him only the “path along which one has to cut one’s way through prickles and thorns, and sometimes through a thicket” (I, 110). The history of Russia, which Chaadayev had denied any actual contribution to the “sacred history” of Christianity already in his first letter, was depicted in the second letter as the modern continuation of the pagan and slave-run ancient era. This time the thinker directly referred to the principle of slave serfdom put into effect during the rule of Tsar Boris Godunov and the Shuyskis, the boyars, identifying it as the cause of all the current misfortunes

¹⁷ О. Манделштам, *Петр Чаадаев*, in: *Idem, Египетская марка*, Издательская группа Лениздат, Санкт-Петербург 2014, p. 176.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

of Russia (I, 112–113). He also recalled that the abolition of serfdom in Europe took place thanks to the efforts of Christians and at the same time asked the Orthodox Church why the Russian nation fell into slavery just when it had become Christian: “Let the Orthodox Church explain this phenomenon. Let them say why it has not raised its maternal voice against the abhorrent violence of one part of the nation over the other” (I, 112).

In this context Chaadayev pointed out that slavery was inextricably connected with the ancient world. Not one ancient philosopher could imagine a society without slaves, and Aristotle (“the recognized representative of this whole wisdom which existed in the world prior to the arrival of Christ”) even wrote that some people are born to be free, and others to “bear chains” (I, 112). The modern world, in which similar principles still exist, is not worthy of the name of the Christian world.

In the second letter, which we have partly discussed already, Chaadayev tried to show the connections between human individual freedom and God’s omnipotence. He saw the roots of such connections in the fact of man’s creation by God and in the fall of Adam. Lack of clarity and precision of all metaphysics that dealt with the questions of God and man was, in his opinion, inevitable in the world marked by the stigma of the original sin: “The whole human wisdom is comprised in this terrible irony of God in the Old Testament: ‘Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil’” (I, 115).

In the fifth letter, Chaadayev ironically commented on this epistemological and metaphysical matter mentioning the “human school wisdom,” which treated man as if he had just come out of the hand of the Creator and never abused the freedom awarded to him. The mind of such a pure and immaculate creature was regarded as “the blue emanation that had come from God himself” (I, 151–152). From his further discussion, it seems that this is both the criticism of the sensualism of the Enlightenment and Cartesian rationalism, which disregarded the emergence of Christianity and remained locked up in the terms of the ancient world, seeking the essence of reason in the sphere corrupted and spoiled by man’s licence (I, 152–153). Human senses and reason, as Chaadayev wrote in the second letter, could only get to know natural phenomena (physical world), but even here they are not able to get at the first foundation of things on their own (I, 115).

Meanwhile the life of man as the spiritual entity unveils between the two worlds — the human reason cannot on its own discover the law that rules either one or the other world. This is why the law has been transmitted to him through “such reason for which only one world and one order of things exist” (I, 117). The nature of the reason, as it could be concluded from the fifth letter, is not subordinated to the constraints of time and space, since it unites the past with the present and future. The reason, once lost, will be regained by man in the future only thanks to the fact that “the person of Christ” has emerged in history (I, 152). Chaadayev rejected the view that assumed the existence of any moral laws that man would discover solely due to autonomous philosophy. He stated at the same time that there is no such human knowledge that could replace divine knowledge, and without the signs conveyed from heaven to earth, mankind would have lost itself in its freedom long ago (I, 119–120).

Both in the second and fifth *Philosophical Letter*, Chaadayev dealt with “primary revelation,” which was different and earlier than “two great revelations of the Old and New Testament” (I, 117). In the context of the quotation from the fifth letter below, the extremely pessimistic hypotheses about Russia from the first letter are considerably weakened:

It has been clearly proven that in every tribe, regardless of that how far it has strayed away from the world mainstream, there will always be some ideas, more or less distinct, about the Supreme Being, about good and evil, about what is just and what is not; without these ideas the existence of the tribe would not be possible, just like its existence would not be possible without material products of the soil which the tribe treads, or without the trees which give it shelter (I, 149).

Asked where the “ideas” come from, Chaadayev would answer that nobody knew exactly, since children took it over from their fathers and mothers. The experience of generations, that is “the set of all ideas that live in people’s memory” was divided in Chaadayev’s providential system in two parts. The first one comprised traditions transmitted by human history and science, while the second one included such ideas that “an unknown hand had put in the depth of the human soul” — the hearts of the unborn learn of their existence from the first contact with mother and father (I, 149). Every idea, before it becomes the property of humanity, must pass through a number of generations, because only tradition may partake in the universal reason (I, 148). God conversed with man on the day of his creation, and

man then listened and understood God — it is here that the thinker saw the first sources of human reason, calling them “primary revelation.” Both Plato’s archetypes and Descartes’s innate ideas as well as Kant’s *a priori* exist only inasmuch as they result from “primary revelation” (I, 154).

After the original fall, man has partially lost the ability to understand the voice of God, which “was the natural result of the gift of unlimited freedom he had received.” Still the memory of God’s word has not been lost entirely and is passed on to people via the tradition of generations:

The very word of God addressed to the first man, passed on from generation to generation, dazzles the baby in a cot, introduces it into the world of rational creations and transforms it into a thinking being. It is the same act by means of which God has led man out of the void that he uses also now in order to create every new thinking being. It is God that constantly addresses man through the beings similar to him (I, 150).

Three stages could be isolated in Chaadayev’s thinking: 1. The first essence of man consists in the fact that he is “a thinking being,” capable of accepting “enlightenment without borders” (this is his advantage over all creation) (I, 150); 2. As a result of the original sin, man has partially lost the ability to understand the voice of God; 3. This is why a new process of creation is necessary, this time long and continuous, and not one-off, as in the beginning of time (I, 151) — in this process, consecutive historical generations, better or worse, fulfil the role of God’s mediator. The human reason, after its fall, have always felt the need to reconstruct itself following an ideal pattern — this is why the essence of history is the process of regaining the ability of man to understand the voice of God across generations (I, 152).

In ancient times, that is before the second and third revelation, the ideal pattern was usually found within the closed constraints of man himself. In the second, as well as the sixth and seventh *Philosophical Letter*, Chaadayev attempted to evaluate the role of the pagan world in the process of reconstructing God’s image in man and his history. In the second letter the evaluation had a fairly positive dimension — the thinker pointed out that Pythagoras, as well as Socrates and Zoroaster, and particularly Plato, observed some reflection of “the new sun,” which was to rise on earth only following them (Christ’s mission). Yet they could not fully recognize “the signs of absolute truth,” since from the moment that man had changed

his nature (original sin), the truth did not reveal itself to him in full splendour (I, 119).

In the second letter, Chaadayev argued in the aristocratic and Romantic spirit that human masses always subordinate themselves to the minority that stands on “social peaks.” Here he had in mind a small group of people (“a certain number of thinkers”) who think for the majority and in this way they specify the awareness and activity of the nation (I, 95). In the sixth letter he returned to the intuition, trying to combine the idea of “spiritual aristocratism” with the general principle of providentialism as the foundation of human freedom. He thus wrote that the presence of God in history “should make itself felt in such a way that the human reason remains completely free and can develop all its activity.” Hence it was completely understandable for him that there was such a nation and such individual people among whom the tradition of primary revelation has been preserved in its purest form:

If the nation were not there, if the chosen people were not there, then it should be acknowledged that among all nations, in all epochs of universal human life, in every individual person, God’s living thought has been preserved in its identical fullness. And this would mean forfeiting every person and all freedom in the world [...]. It is obvious that the person and freedom exist only as far as there is variety in the mind, moral forces and cognition [...]. Some nations and some individuals possess such knowledge that other nations and other individuals do not (I, 156).¹⁹

In the sixth letter, Chaadayev also tried to reinterpret the past of mankind, in contrast to the ideologues of the Enlightenment, and he recognized the first centuries AD as well as “the long period that followed them” as the most fertile. It is not difficult to notice that he had in mind the first centuries of Christianity and the long period of the Middle Ages that followed. In contrast to “superstition and philosophical fatalism” (this is how Chaadayev labelled ideologies of the Enlightenment), he regarded the Middle Ages as the period extraordinary in the *moral* sense, although he also claimed that in the *mental* sense they were the times of stagnation (“immobility of minds”) (I, 161). Then the light of Christianity directly affected life

¹⁹ Let us draw attention to the consistent manner in which Chaadayev overcame pantheistic motives in such passages, although they were doubtless present in *Philosophical Letters*. The quotation above also contradicts all the interpretations that recognize the thought of Chaadayev’s as representing anti-personalism.

and morality, but the people of those times could not create a suitable “rational” philosophy of history (I, 159). Only in modern times “in which the human mind accepted its new direction” (I, 161), not only is the appropriate assessment of the Middle Ages possible, but also the re-evaluation of the significance of pre-Christian history.

This reinterpretation, again formulated in the style polemical with regard to the Enlightenment, came into effect by contrasting the world of the Old Testament to that of ancient Greece and Rome. In the providential system of the Russian thinker, the former world directly prepared the advent of Christianity, while the latter world was only evidence of the fall of man — “man left to his own devices always tended towards an even greater fall” (I, 165). Moses was the first to reveal to people the face of true God, while Socrates was only a father of “mean-spirited and anxious disbelief” (I, 162). The apogee of the criticism came in the seventh letter, where Socrates was declared by Chaadayev as an immoral man as he had preached the apology of depravity (praise of homosexuality described by Plato in the *Symposium*), he heard voices of a “demon,” and prior to his death he expressed complete scepticism of his own teaching (I, 190). Moses on his part was a giant, whom the Russian thinker attributed with “preserving the idea of one God on earth” (I, 187). Chaadayev also objected to his contemporary tradition of looking at Moses only as “the perfect lawmaker” and “liberal,” and saw in the patriarch’s activity the harbinger of Christian supranational universalism:

He was doubtless a patriot, since how could a great soul not have been one, regardless of the mission he would have on earth! In addition, this is a general law: in order to have an impact on people, one should influence their home circle, where one resides, the social milieu where one is born. In order to speak clearly to mankind, one should address one’s own nation, otherwise nobody will be heard and will achieve nothing (I, 188).²⁰

Moses arrived at the idea of universal, supranational God via the idea of “the chosen nation” (I, 187–189). This evaluation of Chaadayev’s again was openly polemical with regard to the tradition of the Enlightenment, which looked at Moses with great reluctance as the father of blind obedience, slavery, nationalist ignorance and bloody conquests. The opinion was shared both by Voltaire and Holbach in the work *Le Christianisme dévoilé* (1757; *Christianity Un-*

²⁰ It is difficult to refrain from remarking that in the stylistic maximalism of his first letter, Chaadayev sinned against that very principle, convincing as it is.

veiled, English translation 1819). Chaadayev did not know, however, that young Hegel evaluated the activity of Moses, as well as all the history of the Jews, equally severely in his unfinished work *Das Geist des Christentums* (1799; English translation 1970).

The Jewish king David was, for Chaadayev, “the most perfect model of the holiest heroism,” while the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius seems to him a representative of “the artificial, conceited virtue.” Similarly severely he evaluated Aristotle, whose “name will soon be pronounced with certain disgust” since he was “the angel of darkness who fettered the forces of good among people for several centuries.” Homer the Greek was also taken to be “the criminal tempter, who favoured the humiliation of human nature in a terrible manner” (I, 162). In the seventh letter, the author of *Illiad* was even labelled the “Ahriman of the modern world,” just like he was in the world that he had created. His gods and heroes still want to tear people away from the influence of the Christian idea (I, 195–196).

This rhetoric of Chaadayev’s had its didactic dimension — the thinker thought that the philosophy of history²¹ should be of critical and evaluative nature. Instead of being “pure curiosity,” it ought to become “the highest court” that could indicate the appropriate direction of development to present and future times:

It would announce the relentless verdict over the pride and grandeur of all ages; it would carefully check all the reputation, all the fame; it would do away with all the mirages and all historical temptations; it would intensively start destroying false images that clutter the memory of mankind so that reason can face the past in true light and draw specific conclusions with regard to the present, as well as direct human eyes towards infinite spaces of the future (I, 164).

It is in such context that Chaadayev severely criticised the great fame of ancient Greece, taking it to be a country of false hopes and illusions, the genius of the lie that has affected humanity until the present times. Among the ancients only Epicurus gained a positive evaluation of Chaadayev’s in *Philosophical Letters* (I, 192). The Russian thinker believed that the entire civilization of the ancient world followed the imperfect path, and the most important proof of that state of affairs was the fact that both “deep wisdom of Egypt” and “the charming beauty of Ionia,” both the might of Rome and the splendour of Alexandria had disappeared from the face of the earth for ever. It

²¹ In his French texts Chaadayev used the concept of “la philosophie des temps” (I, 165) or “philosophie de l’histoire” (I, 172).

was not the barbarians that demolished the old world, because it had already been a “faded corpse” before they even arrived. This refers not just to Rome, but generally to the whole ancient civilization that had earlier melted in the empire. Chaadayev spoke here both of Greece and Egypt, and even this part of Judaism that succumbed to the process of Hellenization (I, 170). Such assessment, however, included a thought of the *relative* value of antiquity, which “fulfilled its task till the end and completed an introductory education of mankind.” The period proved irrefutably that the human spirit, even though it tends towards leaving the boundaries of the earthly sphere, will never be able to set history on its right path. It can only temporarily and in the flashes of consciousness of its particular representatives reach “the true foundation of all things.” It will not manage to transform history in such a way as to turn them into consistent and durable movement towards God. Here a new activity of Providence was necessary, that is the foundation of Christianity, described by the Russian thinker as “the thought that came from heaven to earth” and “the axis around which the whole sphere of history turns” (I, 171). The establishing of Christianity was then for Chaadayev the most important historical borderline: “Is the world reason now not the Christian reason? I do not know, perhaps the line separating us from the old world is not visible for every eye, but I think that this is the essence of all my philosophy, all my morality, all my religion” (I, 171).²²

The existence of man and nations in ancient times did not have a strictly delineated objective, that is why many societies disappeared then from the historical stage. In the Christian era, as the thinker claimed, we can only observe moving historical borders of particular nations, while nations and societies already exist permanently. The Christian world will not experience any more disaster, but will consistently incorporate into its sphere of influence even the most remote non-Christian nations. There is no such place in the world that would resist the Christian idea — in this context Chaadayev heralded the imminent fall of the Ottoman Empire (I, 172).

²² Taking this opportunity, Chaadayev condemned the European Renaissance, and called its attempt to return to paganism “criminal madness.” At the same time he expressed hope that the memory of the so called “renaissance of arts” will soon be wiped out from general awareness (I, 171). The Reformation received an equally severe evaluation, as it intended to deprive the Christian world of “the elevated idea of universality and unity” for the sake of individualistic pagan disintegration (I, 178).

This is how “the circle of omnipotent operation of the holy truth” closed in *Philosophical Letters* — the space of Christendom will geographically grow, bringing people closer to “the heralded times” (I, 172–173). The sixth letter ended with the apology of papacy as “the visible sign of unity” and “the sign of another unification.” Chaadayev drew upon the suitable extracts from the High Priestly prayer of Christ for the unity of his disciples (John 17, 11), claiming that the unification of Christianity will in practice be the expiatory return of “schismatic churches” (*les Eglises schismatiques*) to the Catholic “Mother Church” (*l’Eglise mère*) (I, 179).

The final phase of human history, that is the resolution of the world drama, according to Chaadayev, was to be the “great apocalyptic synthesis” (I, 205). It is with such a metaphor that the thinker ended his eighth and last of his *Philosophical Letters*. Their foundation, as we have tried to demonstrate, was the belief in the providential and teleological dimension of history. It is from this general nature that Chaadayev’s Occidentalism derived — while writing the letters he was convinced that the plan of Providence is brought into life most ideally in the Catholic West. The history of Europe was then for him the sacred history, whose image was not destroyed either by the “pagan” Renaissance nor by the equally “pagan” Reformation, nor the “new philosophy” that regarded man as the solely natural creature.

Grzegorz Przebinda

PIOTR CZAADAJEW — OJCIEC PROWIDENCJALIZMU W ROSJI

Streszczenie

Artykuł zawiera ogólną krytykę koncepcji badawczych, które rozpatrują religijną metafizykę Czaadajewa jako pochodną względem jego historiozofii lub jako uboczny produkt rozważań na temat historii Rosji i Europy Zachodniej. Bliska jest za to autorowi pozycja Michała Gersenzona, akcentująca u Czaadajewa prymat metafizyki nad historiozofią. Dokonując na podstawie całości *Listów filozoficznych* ogólnej rekonstrukcji providencjalizmu myśliciela dochodzimy do wniosku, że centrum jego światopoglądu stanowiło przekonanie o nieustającej obecności w dziejach Opatrzności Bożej, najbardziej widocznej w historii katolickiej Europy. To zaś jeszcze bardziej uwypuklało paradoksalną tezę Czaadajewa o zapomnianej przez Opatrzność prawosławnej Rosji, która jako przykład negatywny miała stanowić przestrożę dla pozostałego świata.

Гжегож Пшебинда

ПЕТР ЧААДАЕВ — ОТЕЦ ПРОВИДЕНЦИАЛИЗМА В РОССИИ

Резюме

В статье представлено критическое отношение к исследовательскому подходу к наследию Чаадаева, предполагающему рассмотрение его метафизики как производной историософии или вовсе как побочную составляющую исторических мировоззрений российского писателя и мыслителя. В статье высказываются взгляды схожие на трактовку данной проблемы Михаилом Гершензоном. В результате реконструкции чаадаевского понимания провиденциализма на основании всех *Философических писем* мыслителя в статье утверждается в качестве центральной идеи этих писем убеждение Чаадаева о действии в истории Провидения, наиболее заметное в истории католической Западной Европы. Данное убеждение поддерживает и парадоксальное утверждение о забытой Провидением православной России, которая в качестве отрицательного примера должна играть роль назидания для остального мира.