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RUSSIA'S ATOPIC NOTHINGNESS

ungrounding the world-historical whole with pyotr chaadaev

Moscow, 1836. In the prominent social-literary journal *Telescope*, a curious piece appears, unlike anything that had been published there previously. Immediately following its publication, the author, Pyotr Chaadaev – a nobleman, war veteran, and philosopher who spent some years in Europe after the Napoleonic Wars and corresponded with Schelling, among others – is officially declared a madman by Emperor Nicholas I. The journal's editor Nikolai Nadezhdin, a literary scholar and university professor, is exiled from Moscow, and the journal itself shut down. At a time when state ideology was declaring Russia to be a powerful nation, politically and culturally independent of and even superior to the European powers, the text's provocation could not have been greater. An epistolary meditation on Russia, *Philosophical Letters to a Lady: Letter One* offered a ruthless indictment of all preceding Russian history and life and entailed a radical displacement of the country's territory into a world-historical void:

> We [Russians] have never moved in concert with other peoples; we do not belong to any of the great families of humankind; we are neither of the West nor of the East, and we possess the traditions neither of one nor of the other. Situated as though outside of time, we have not been touched by the universal education of mankind. This admirable interconnection of human ideas over successive centuries, this history of the human spirit, which has led it to its present state in the rest of the world, have had no effect

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> upon us […] Look around you. Does not everyone have a foot in the air? It seems that everyone is *en voyage*. No one has a fixed sphere of existence; there are no proper habits, no rules at all for anything. Not even a home – nothing that attaches, nothing that awakens your sympathies, your affections; nothing that lasts, nothing that remains. Everything passes, flows away, leaving no trace either outside or within you […] We have nothing of our own [*d'individuel*] to serve as a basis for our thinking […] isolated by a strange destiny from the universal movement of humanity, we have taken in nothing of the traditional ideas of humankind […] Our memories reach back no further than yesterday; we are, so to say, strangers to ourselves. We move through time in such a singular manner that, as we advance, the past is irretrievably lost to us. (89–92/323–26)[1]

Despite Nicholas I's efforts, it was too late for the explosive force of Chaadaev's text to be neutralized by the sovereign decision; if anything, the emperor's intervention served only to fuel the uproar resulting from the publication. The *Philosophical Letters* established a conceptual problematic that proved to be at once provocative and decisive. They inaugurated a period of increased intellectual intensity in Russia and became the haunting background for all subsequent debates on Russia's past and future, as well as its status vis-à-vis the West. They irreversibly escalated the division among Russian intellectuals between what came to be known as the Westernizers and the Slavophiles, adherents of, respectively, the Western and the unique, non-Western vision of Russian national identity and future.

To declare Russia a non-place in both space and time, a singular nothingness without history, topos, or footing, was a bold move on Chaadaev's part not just politically but also theoretically. It introduced, and forcefully insisted on, a negativity completely without relation to the logic and laws of history, and thus to historical possibility itself; a negativity that indexes, as it were, "withoutness" as such. This paper aims to rethink the peculiar conception of nothingness at work in Chaadaev's key writings, the *Philosophical Letters* and the 1837 *Apologia of a Madman*, in which this nothingness, unbound by tradition, turns into a total, even revolutionary, ungrounding of the world-whole.

The body of this paper elaborates the central elements comprising the decisive logic of Chaadaev's utopian and immanent nothingness, a nothingness without relation or ground, which uproots the logic of providence as well as historical succession, reproduction, and accumulation, and refuses participation in the world-historical whole save by way of its ungrounding. Chaadaev, on our reading, theoretically subverts the concept of tradition itself – rather than any particular philosophical tradition – challenging the Western, Christian-modern-Enlightened world *as* the world of tradition. His thought ungrounds the way this world reproduces and legitimizes itself through accumulation in time, continuity, familiarity, topos, inheritance, the promise of a future universality to be achieved, or any combination of these conceptual maneuvers. What is, consequently, at stake is a counter to the very logics of tradition and futurity as they ground and justify the world of modernity – to the philosophical presupposition of (the possibility and necessity of) tradition as such, which Chaadaev diagnoses in the West.

What follows, in other words, is less a hermeneutic engagement that seeks to summarize Chaadaev or compare him to other thinkers than a speculative attempt to uncover and constructively develop the radical thread in his thinking – to trace a conceptual framework that not only marks Chaadaev's position as unique among nineteenth-century philosophies of history but importantly prefigures and reconfigures some of the key problematics at the heart of current debates in the theoretical humanities. This paper works with and through Chaadaev's texts to expose his conception of immanent nothingness or the void of the Real that completely annihilates or empties out the mechanisms of history and tradition, thereby radically imploding the machinery of modernity. It is our hope that, as a result, Chaadaev's position appears not only as a neglected genealogical

element to contemporary critiques of modernity and its logic of reproduction *through* tradition and futurity but also as a contribution to the ongoing critical rethinking of this logic in contemporary theory.[2] *Can one think that which is without tradition or topos, a refusal of tradition as such, and what are the theoretical stakes thereof?* – a question arising from this rethinking – is one of the key questions our paper identifies in and thinks through Chaadaev. In this, our approach methodologically converges with Roberto Esposito's engagement with Italian thinkers in *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*[3] – i.e., we revisit (in this case) a Russian thinker using the apparatus and problematics emerging from contemporary theory in order to bring out his (genealogical and conceptual) contribution to thinking some of the conceptualities central to contemporary theory itself.

Accordingly, we contend, although Chaadaev's conception of the void was introduced in the Russian context – and this original context is, to an extent, necessary for the comprehension of this figure – the import of this conception is by no means limited to the questions of Russian identity or intellectual history. The name "Russia" and the adjective "Russian" in this article, as in Chaadaev himself – not unlike the adjective "Italian" in Esposito – do conceptual and not only national-historical work, theoretically indexing the immanent nothingness foreclosed by the logic of tradition and the utopic thinking ungrounding that logic. By equating Russia with the void, Chaadaev is thinking not in terms of identity or nation but uncovering a form of thought that challenges the entire modern *oikonomia* of the West. In keeping with that, our paper will raise the question of Chaadaev's Russian (non-)identity precisely in order to philosophically subvert the modern nation-based conception of historical identity itself. Our aim in what follows is less to dwell with the fact that the non-historical void is, in Chaadaev, named "Russia" than it is to traverse the problematic of this *terra nullius* in order to make visible its aporias and ambivalences, as well as its real utopian force.

1 immanent nothingness, or atopia without relation

1.1 everything and nothing

In the *Philosophical Letters*, Russia's nothingness – the groundless void that the name Russia indexes – is revealed for what it is through a complete opposition to the historical and law-governed continuity of tradition, guided by providence and culminating in Christian Europe. This unity is global in its scope – providentially connecting East and West – and colonial in its logic, subordinating (and ultimately converting) the former to the latter's universalizing Christian principle. The world, this "great moral whole" (182/416), is produced through a "universal education of mankind" (89/323, 91–92/325), subject to the "universal law" (158/393). What is particularly important for Chaadaev when it comes to the world-historical (read: European) tradition is the *continuous* nature of its development. "Continuity and duration" are necessary, he asserts, for the kingdom of reason (and thus historical actuality and truth) to be established (178/413). Providence and its universal law are one mechanism of such continuity, serving to neutralize even the epochal break between the "old world" and the "new" inaugurated by the emergence of Christianity. Even what Chaadaev takes as significant setbacks on this path to all-unity – such as the Reformation with its religious division or most of Greco-Roman antiquity with its immorality – can be assigned a tacit positive role, their seeming discontinuity incorporated into the progressive development of reason and morality, the rationality of which is grasped teleologically by a true philosophy of history (158/393).

The affirmation of absolute continuity entails at once a logic of kinship and memory, that is, of succession – spanning and interconnecting generations and epochs – and that of accumulation and reproduction (of ideas and truths, across that temporal horizon). These mediational devices operate across space and time, constituting the world-historical whole. The latter is made up of "great families" composing one

"humankind," whose spiritual kinship is formed by the principles of reason, religion, and morality, forged by traditions accumulated in memory, and reproduced in a hereditary fashion:

> All societies pass through a period which endows them with their most vivid recollections, their wonders, their poetry, all their strongest and most fecund ideas […] Without these, they would have nothing within their memory to be attached to, nothing to cherish […] It is upon these traditional ideas that the life of peoples is based; it is from these ideas that their future unfolds and their moral development originates […] Peoples live only by the strong impressions which past epochs leave upon their minds and by contact with other peoples. In this way, each individual senses its relationship [*rapport*] to the entire humanity […] Peoples are as much moral beings as individuals. Their education takes centuries, as it takes years for that of persons […] [The European peoples'] character […] is nothing but history and tradition, which make up the hereditary patrimony of these peoples' ideas […] (90–93/324–27)

In the *Philosophical Letters*, Chaadaev's allegiances and theoretical framework are thus conservative, informed at once by German philosophy of history, from Lessing and Herder to Fichte, and French Catholic traditionalism exemplified by such thinkers as Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald. It is, however, precisely his adherence to the traditionalist, providential vision of the history and kinship of mankind that allows Chaadaev to annul, even annihilate, Russia by reducing it to an a-topic, ungrounded site of absolute exclusion. Paradoxically, it is thanks to (and not despite) his conservatism that the name "Russia" starts to gain, in Chaadaev's discourse, its radical force. On this account, the term "Russia" names or indexes the total *absence* of everything that "Europe," or the European tradition, is – and given that the latter is, for Chaadaev, *everything* (that is, has been or can be historically actual or possible, as will become clear), Russia can only be characterized as, literally, a *nothingness* without history, and without connection to the world-whole.[4] Chaadaev's philosophy of history is structured as an amalgam of transcendence and immanence, of providential law as transcendent order and the dynamics of historical development as immanent process[5] – and it is against the backdrop of this amalgam that the radical immanence of nothingness appears and must be theoretically apprehended.

1.2 no identity, in time or space

Without legacy, legality, or legitimacy – are "we," the we that Chaadaev deploys when speaking of Russia, even a people at all? There is an important structural ambiguity found within the position of the speaker of the *Letters*. At times, Chaadaev articulates his speech from the standpoint of world-historical tradition, exemplified by Europe, to which Russia stands opposed. The sixth and seventh letters' musings on the philosophy of history adopt this standpoint unequivocally: Chaadaev's "we" is European, the "we" of the European peoples as a collective unity, inscribed into the familiar participatory logic of particularity and universality. Within this "we," the national consciousness of a particular people participates, in contact and in concert with other peoples, in the movement of the universal education of humanity as a whole. In order to "fulfill its destiny in the world," each person and each people must "fall back on their past life and find their future in their past," developing a "genuine national consciousness" on the basis of "its memories." Only in this way, "nationalities, which have only divided people up to now […] would combine with one another in order to produce one harmonious and universal result" (163–64/397–99). At the same time, Chaadaev is writing about Russia as a Russian himself, addressing a Russian noblewoman (Ekaterina Panova, the eponymous lady of the work's title) and, implicitly, all educated Russians. His "we" is thus frequently the Russian "we," in particular throughout the first letter, where it is forcefully introduced *ex nihilo* in all its strangeness.

One may be tempted to call this a double identity on Chaadaev's part, except it is the

logic of identity that is *absent* in the Russian "we." The essence or identity of a people is, as we have seen, rooted for Chaadaev in this people's ideas and memories, their accumulation and reproduction. Russia has "nothing of the sort." The Russian "we" has "no charming memories, no gracious images in [its] memory, no forceful lessons" to constitute the national tradition that a people is supposed to have and that is required in order to give shape to its future or found its national consciousness (91/325). The "we" in Chaadaev's declarations about Russia in the *Letters*, and the Russia to which this "we" refers, cannot therefore signify an essence, a particular trait, or an idea that would determine the unity of a people or a historical trajectory.

Taking the void of the Russian past seriously entails abandoning the very logic of unity and tradition that structures not just Russian but the entire modern Western philosophical-historical thinking. The Russian "we" is for Chaadaev not a unity within a field of unities, each held together by an accumulated and reproducible memory-identity, or a particular site within a historical world order. To say, as Chaadaev does, that Russia is "outside of time" (89/323) is precisely *not* to say that it possesses a national individuality with its own proper characteristics. "We have," instead, "nothing of our own"; the Russian "we" cannot even be inscribed into a logic of national consciousness, memory, and accumulation ("our memories reach back no further than yesterday"). It is thus ever displaced, ever escaping or alienated from any identity it might be said to possess ("we are, so to say, strangers to ourselves; we move through time in such a singular manner that, as we advance, the past is irretrievably lost to us") (91–92/325–26).

This "we" is, one could say, more performative than essential, insofar as it indexes a collectivity without essence or *Begriff*, a paradoxical inhabitation of nothingness, an existence with(in) "nothing of our own" – a counter to every identity-based economy of history. To allow this logic an autonomous consistency is to resist apprehending this nothing as something we already know, albeit with an additional predicate. It necessitates avoiding the assumption that we recognize what it is empirically – a people, a territory, a nation, a tradition – and also, in addition to those positive characteristics (perhaps attenuated now), a nothing or a void. In other words, we must not fall into treating Russia in Chaadaev's discourse as an empirico-transcendental doublet: the two logics cannot be superimposed, because nothingness is not a predicate but the subversion of the very grammar of subject and predicate. The nothing subverts those characteristics that would hold on to Russia as a fixed positivity that would be recognizable within the (modern Western) thinking of tradition.

According to the logic of tradition, it is historical *time* – the time of continuity, narrativity, accumulation, and reproduction – that assures a people of its *place* within the world-historical whole, of a ground and destination. In Europe, memory and tradition form the ground on which a people stands, the place into which an individual is born and which provides the means of the individual's movement and connection to others. "In the old civilizations of Europe," writes Chaadaev to Panova in the second letter,

> all modes of existence have long been achieved [*réalisés*], so that there, when one decides to change one's life, one simply has to choose that new setting where one wants to settle down – *the place for you has been prepared beforehand*. (110/345–46; emphasis ours)

"Not so," however, "with us":

> You should not close your eyes to the obstacles that you will necessarily encounter [i.e., if you decide to live your life here]. In our land, there are more of them on this route than can be counted. Here there are no well-beaten paths […] on this route, one has to fight one's way through thorns and prickle, and now and then across dense forest. (110/345)

Apprehending the singular power of Chaadaev's discourse necessitates taking seriously the utterances in which he defines Russia as a nothing

or void, via operations of absence, exclusion, non-relation, and subtraction. The Russian absence of tradition and ground is, as Chaadaev will put it in the *Apologia*, "a purely material fact" (295/529), and already in the *Letters* we can witness the wild character of this materiality, forcefully resisting any topos or path. Detached absolutely from the very logic of memory and ground, can this material a-topos ever really become cultured, well-defined, and "prepared"? It is ultimately the very displaced character of Chaadaev's discourse (at once European *and* Russian, in their non-relation) that allows him, in a kind of double vision, to grasp the atopic materiality and unsituated facticity of this void. With one foot in the thicket and the other up in the air ("Look around you: everyone seems to have one foot in the air"), it is no wonder that, in Chaadaev's Russia, "no one has a fixed sphere of existence" (90/323). Ekaterina Panova, the letters' disoriented female addressee whom Chaadaev instructs in the ways of a true religious life and before whom he unfolds his philosophy of history, may as well stand in for the groundless Russian existence as such. Even Chaadaev's injunction to her – "you have to create everything, dear Madame, even the very air which you must breathe and the ground under your feet" (111/346) – exposes an individual existence without ground or air (so that, ultimately, Russian nothingness is such a vacuum that the air itself must be created before one can place one's foot there), a life of indetermination without any prepared means of navigation or communication – a suspended individual existence that speculatively coincides, via the "everyone" in "everyone has one foot in the air," with the atopic autonomy (or rather anomy) of "our land" itself.

1.3 ungrounded, ungrounding

Russia is ungrounded in time and in space. It is a disjointed, immanent Now without past or future, never coinciding with itself into a stable identity; a void where "[e]verything passes, flows away, leaving no trace" (90/324); a non-time and non-space defined solely by being without relation to the world history's temporal and spatial logics. Without participation in or relation to the universal kinship of humankind, it stands outside of time and space, outside the "admirable interconnection of human ideas over successive centuries," outside the logic of history as succession of "eras and generations," as a movement "in concert with other peoples." It is *defined* instead by total exclusion from the narrativity of history, from the development of spirit and self-actualization of ideas. Anomalous and anomic, Russia is characterized by complete and utter absence of the universal providential law governing the world:

> Providence seems not to have been involved in our destiny at all. Suspending in our case its beneficent action upon the minds of men, it has left us entirely to ourselves; it would have none of us, and it has taught us nothing. The experience of the ages [*des temps*] is null and void [*est nulle*] for us; eras and generations have flowed by fruitlessly for us. Looking at us, it seems that the general law of humanity has been revoked [*révoquée*] for us. Alone [*Solitaires*] in the world, we have given nothing to the world, and we have taken nothing from it […] We are a gap [*lacune*] in the intellectual order. (96–97/329–30)

Russia's solitude points here precisely to its blank, anomic status vis-à-vis the logic of historical actuality and possibility (always operative through the mediation of tradition and law). Russia is "alone" not merely because it lacks connection to an environment or a milieu in which others are or could be; rather, and more profoundly, it enacts a logic without otherness or mediation as such. The very possibility of historical connection is simply not there at all, "revoked," rendered "null and void." It indexes a being-without-history, and thus without a historical self, whereas every people, and humanity as a whole, are defined by having and drawing on a past. In this, the non-place that Chaadaev names "Russia" challenges modern conceptions of tradition and history.

As will become clearer below, at stake is not the overcoming of this state of withoutness, of finally integrating it into a historical whole, as

colonial logics might suggest. Or rather, this will be one possible vector – the other, and more theoretically audacious one, will entail the affirmation of this withoutness against the claims of history, exposing history's mediational networks as a violent imposition. Indeed, at stake here is the status of the entire (Western) economy of the proper, because nothingness, in its radicality, abjures all possible logics of appropriation (towards the self, towards one's own self as the proper and as a property) and re-appropriation (across the historical time of teleology). In a subversive counter-distinction to everything that is possessed as properly one's own there stands a life of nothing, a life that is "alone" and without habits or historical traditions, a life in which the "we" is less a marker of collective identity than of a state of being "strangers to ourselves," with "nothing of our own."[6] To be alone, strangers to ourselves, without a self is necessarily to be without properties or qualities, as the mystical tradition might put it, and partake in a logic of the impersonal "without a why," which disturbs the teleological machines structured around subjects, transcendences, and mediation.[7] To be "strangers to ourselves" is no longer to be at home, no longer to be dwelling and proximate; it is to be elsewhere and otherwise than through the proper, through what is (self-)possessed as one's own, as we have learned from Derrida.[8] There will be two trajectories for this state in Chaadaev's discourse: to be read as a moment of negativity destined to be sublated into the general economy of the proper and its self-adequation across the fields of the actual and the possible – or to be read immanently and autonomously, from within itself, as undercutting the mechanism of incessant re-appropriation.

In articulating this impossible standpoint of nothingness, as it were, from within, Chaadaev himself loses the stability and grounding of his "European" position. His speech proceeds instead from an aporetic non-place that immanently refuses any historical articulation, but nevertheless needs to be occupied to expose and think this exclusion itself. Therefore, it can be thought only by way of absolute negation, *as* full absence of position, as an impossible – yet real – apositionality, an atopia that is "a purely material fact." This Real is always non-synchronous, always out of time, outside of "the logic of the times" (301/535). In a way, this atopic Real precedes and exceeds the entire development of history apprehended as a spiritual development. Chaadaev presents this life in nothing, "without convictions, without rules," as life of the "first epoch" devoid of racination and grounding, as "completely unconstituted" (91/325). That the atopia of this "first epoch" cannot be simply conflated with the logic of the not-yet (not yet constituted, not yet grounded, etc.) is made clear by its connection, in the same passage, to the concept of chaos and to Cuvier's theory of geological catastrophe that precedes the life of the world as such:

> There persists [in this unconstituted life] the chaotic fermentation of things of the moral world, similar to the revolutions of the globe that preceded the present state of our planet. We are still in that stage. (Ibid.)

Whether this "still" is in truth a not-yet that needs to be re-incorporated into the providential continuity of history, or something indexing a radically different logic of the future, is a question that will be considered below. For now, what is important to stress is that to think this Real necessitates, as it were, a de-creation of the world and its history. This chaotic Real must be thought of, at once, as *preceding* the world and *persisting* (instead of simply being overwritten by history once and for all). At the end of the fourth letter, Chaadaev returns to this topic: "If God were not instructing us, then could the world, we ourselves, or anything at all continue to subsist even for a moment? Would not everything fall immediately back into chaos?" (142/376). Given the structure of Chaadaev's philosophy of history, this should not be understood in an occasionalist manner; the "moment" here is a moment within the unfolding of historical time, not a direct, immediate action of God. Instead, this statement suggests the immanently transcendent providential order as the only safeguard

against the catastrophic Real, but also the latter as a persistent, always-contemporaneous threat precisely *because* it is real and outside of the continuity of time. This threat, and the nothingness it invokes, cannot even be called a "possibility," insofar as the latter already implies a distribution of possibility and actuality – something the ante-historical Real lacks.

Nor is, for the same reason, this Real something "actual," insofar as actuality is defined, in continuous, tradition-based philosophy of history, as the sum total of positivity, as something realized or fulfilled, as forming a positive cartographic and temporal order. We might recall here the Hegelian *Wirklichkeit*, standing for the present as connected to a movement of actualization that weaves together a coherent historical horizon, and discern a similar thinking of actuality in Chaadaev's statement (already quoted at the beginning of this paper): "This admirable interconnection of human ideas *over successive centuries*, this history of the human spirit, which has led it *to its present state* in the rest of the world, have had no effect upon us" (89/323; emphasis ours). This "present state" is actuality, by which the non-time and non-space of nothingness remain unaffected – and yet, if this nothingness is real, it undercuts the ontological status of actualization. The nothing becomes the kernel of the Real which constitutively cannot be metabolized by the historical apparatus, persisting within and as the reverse of history.

From the standpoint of historical order, this "fermentation of things," this nothingness remains always within itself, immanently ungrounding the whole arche-teleological structure of history named "humanity" and "the West." It is a kind of origin that does not originate a tradition and does not engender the fecundity of (the always already historical) spirit. As immanent only to itself, the nothingness that Russia indexes neither gives anything to the world nor takes anything from it. Not inscribed into the teleological historical amalgam of immanence and transcendence, Russia names the exclusion from universality not as a particularity that would be opposed to it, or a dialectical negativity arising as a moment of mediation, and not even merely a limited or partial exception that would temporarily expose the violent underside of universal history – but as *the* absolute exclusion, "withoutness" as such. The (quintessentially modern) amalgamation of national unity, providential history, and a spatial, mundane ordering is confounded by the declaration of the non-place and non-time, which ungrounds the very logic that underwrites those determinations. Considered immanently, the Russian "outside" (outside of time, outside of history, etc.) functions not as a binary but as a full suspension, ungrounding, or subversion of the logic of historical unity via the zero-point where "the experience of the ages is null and void."

interlude: what is to be done?

As *un peuple d'exception* (93/326), Russia in its withoutness is thus not so much an exceptional people but an exception *to* the logic of "the people," to the world-historical whole underwritten by the regime of togetherness or withness. Relationless and groundless, Russia nevertheless de facto (as an impossible yet material fact) challenges the entire unfolding providential ontology of humankind. In its immanent nothingness, it may not itself care about the historical world, but as an index of an atopia and achronia it cannot but antagonize the entire distribution of personae, concepts, and actualities enacted by the universalizing philosophy of history in its dominant Christian and Enlightenment variants. For Chaadaev's parallax performance, this antagonism cannot but be a problem: what is the fate of this kind of (absolute) exception in the face of the law? And what is to be done with the challenge it poses?

The *Letters* and the *Apologia* propose distinctly different answers to these questions. As a Europeanized Russian addressing an educated Russian audience, Chaadaev is concerned with the country's (absence of) destiny and destination; it is for him an abnormality that must be dealt with somehow. Moreover, Russia would otherwise remain an obstacle, if not a threat,

to the promised unity of the world and to the very pretension of universality – to everything the world-historical *oikonomia*, so important to Chaadaev in the *Letters*, seeks to reconcile, adjust, or harmonize in the ethical familiarity of the near and the neighbor.[9] As a result, Chaadaev is not content with leaving the immanence of the Russian nothing alone, to its own lack of providential devices. The imperative of "what is to be done?" remains a burning question for Chaadaev, which he bequeaths to all subsequent Russian thought, including its revolutionary branch. Furthermore, given the way he has configured nothingness vis-à-vis the world, this question cannot help being, for him, global or world-historical in scope (and not merely a question of Russian identity or domestic politics). As we will see, nothing less than the (logic of the) future of the world depends on the answer to it.

It is this question that places Chaadaev at a crucial theoretical crossroads. If the nothing is a certain absence, a subtraction from the nexus of the idea's lawful self-actualization through the unities of nations and in humankind as a whole, then it can be apprehended either as a lack to be overwritten or as the Real that ungrounds the entirety of this movement. To what degree can or must we attempt to (re-)incorporate the total exception that is nothingness into the law – to overwrite nothingness by at least an illusion of tradition, perhaps simply by way of erecting a ready-made foreign tradition on the infertile Russian soil, seeing as it cannot have one of its own? Or should we, instead, allow this exception to unground ultimately the law and its universal applicability? It may be that the law – here the law of the philosophy of history – is taken to be what carries within it the necessity and capacity of eliminating and overriding the state of the exception. Or it may be, by contrast, that the exception is not only what the law implicitly requires for its functioning but also what ungrounds its universal applicability, the force with which it narrates history.

Can, in this second case, the exception of nothingness without a past and a future mark the interruption and breakdown of the *narrativity* of (the philosophy of) history culminating in the idea of Europe as both Christian and modern, and thus the breakdown of the future based on this narrativity and the notion of a fulfillment of the theodicy of spirit? Can we find in it a force subverting the entire providential machine of the West?[10] Between the *Letters* and the *Apologia*, one can see Chaadaev hesitate between these two logics of futurity. Chaadaev structures a conceptual problematic that allows for both of these vectors – indeed, Chaadaev's text often works across the undecidable ambivalence between the two, a set of (not always neatly demarcated) bifurcations that subsequent Russian thought inherits from him. This ambiguity on Chaadaev's part is omnipresent in his discourse, leading to two opposing solutions to the world-historical "What is to be done?"

2 doing without history: atopia, utopia, revolution

2.1 future in the past: nothingness as lack

The first solution, the solution of the *Letters*, can be described as a conservative and traditionalist strategy of, as it were, domesticating nothingness. The Russian *lacune* in the movement of history or the unity-in-diversity of mankind cannot but appear, at least at first glance, as a lack, a particular defect, a deviation to be reincorporated into the proper movement of the universal unfolding of history. Placing radical nothingness under erasure, Chaadaev overwrites it with a positive code and endows it with the narrative safety offered by the providential law. This strategy carries with it a set of prescriptions of the mimetic sort. To follow this solution as a theoretical through-line is to read Chaadaev in the classical manner as a Westernizer, committed to the idea that Russia should develop its (historically absent) national consciousness by imitating European nations and following, however belatedly, in their footsteps and sharing in their historical destiny. This amounts to closing the Russian gap, converting – not without a conceptual sleight of hand – the

nullity of the void into the arithmetical zero and simply adding it, without much ado, to the full European body of tradition.

This solution is powerfully visible within the theoretical framework of the sixth and seventh letters. There, Chaadaev articulates not only the past but also the future as belonging, fully and exclusively, to Western Christianity as essentially the tradition of unity and harmony. Chaadaev attempts here something like a traditionalist synthesis of modernity and the Middle Ages. After Christianity introduced the principle of spiritual, moral, potentially universal unity, it was the Christian Europe of the Middle Ages that embodied it for the first time, since it is in this period that the historical *actuality* of the principle of ethical-religious unity was established in "all its reality, all its intensity." As a result, despite what Chaadaev sees as the temporary setback of the Reformation, "Europe is still Christendom, no matter what it does," ever under the guidance of the same principle (167–68/402).

Given that, for Chaadaev the conservative, all peoples must discover their future in their past, as well as his adherence to the idea of unity as the highest moral and providential law, it comes as no surprise that it is to this principle that the future belongs, too. The "special character" of the future universal society is to be found "in the great family of Christian peoples. There you will find the element of stability and true progress," as well as "all the great wisdom of history." The Christian future is founded upon the Christian past, with Christianity and Europe superseding everything that has come before. Here, a temporal horizon repeatedly metabolizes the past into a present in order to project a horizon of possible future. This tradition, moreover, has "lost nothing of its vitality" but continues its process of accumulation and expansion towards what Chaadaev calls "the new society": "every day it grows in strength, and every day new powers, even more energetic [than earlier], manifest themselves in it" (168/402–03; cf. 172–73/407). In this *inexhaustibility* lies the tradition's universality which, destined to ceaselessly generate futurity out of itself, cannot allow any exception or any other (logic of the) future. History's redemptive promises extend themselves globally over all possible exceptions – a Christian claim regardless of whether it appears in a Christian or secular guise. "Never, no, never," exclaims Chaadaev, "will the thought destined to subjugate the world halt or perish" (175/409).

The idea is *not yet* (actually) universal, and at the same time it is *already* universal (in its principle, workings, and inescapable destination). The already/not-yet is employed by Chaadaev here in an attempt to colonialize the absolute exception of nothingness. This strategy of a kind of pragmatic grafting of Russia onto Europe is at its clearest at the end of the seventh letter. Russia's connection to Europe, says Chaadaev there, may be "very weak" and purely external, "merely ornamental, not reaching the depth of our souls" – a connection that has no ground whatsoever in the wasteland of our past – but at this point Chaadaev cannot imagine any other "future destiny" for Russia other than "in connection with the destiny of European society." "Therefore," he asserts programmatically, "the more we will seek to identify ourselves with it, the better we will find ourselves" (198/433).

If, in other words, nothingness has no actuality of its own, then perhaps by imitating Western actuality it might itself become at least quasi-actual. Does Russia not want to participate in the actualization of spirit? Can it avoid that even if it wanted to, in these times when "the impact of the *supreme* [i.e., European] society's forces […] on the rest of the human species has expanded so greatly"? All this necessitates that Russia speak the universal "language" of spirit, i.e., adopt the conceptual logic of the European tradition. Since it cannot produce a particular tradition of its own …

> It is not within our power to bequeath to [our descendants] what we have not had: beliefs, a reason formed by time, a strongly defined personality, convictions developed in the course of a long, animated, active, fruitful intellectual life. (198/434)

… then perhaps it can be apprehended as a zero, but a *European* zero, and thus at least formally not be left out from the future: "Let us leave to [our descendants] at least a few ideas which, although we have not discovered them ourselves, transmitted thus from one generation to another, will nonetheless at least have a certain traditional element" – i.e., will resemble tradition in some way – "and for that reason, some power and fertility greater than our own thoughts," by themselves void. "In this way, we shall have done our posterity a favor and shall not have lived uselessly upon earth" (198–99/434) – a sublation of nothingness into zero, an artificial mimicry for the benefit of a future that is supposed to be thereby gained. It is precisely this kind of investment in the future that serves to foreclose the force of nothingness.

And yet, even in the seventh letter, the following appears: "How can one identify oneself with that which has never taken place? How can one establish one's connection with nothingness [*le néant*]?" (183/417). Even in the middle of laying out his Westernizing-colonial program at the conclusion of the letter, Chaadaev does not shy away from proclaiming that in reality the Russian "we" does not belong anywhere in the universe, in its cosmological exclusion from morality (198/433). The possibility of reincorporation seems to be precluded by Chaadaev's understanding of this nothingness in terms of the ante-historical Real of chaos and geological upheaval, as well as by the absence, in the Russian atopia, of the mechanisms of memory and kinship. In a life where "the familial thread," the thread of kinship, has been "torn," the only solution, as Chaadaev admits in the first letter, would be "for each of us" (since, as we saw, no communication or community is given in this inhabitation of nothingness) "to attempt to mend" the broken thread. Yet, in the absence of the possibility of recollection, reproduction, accumulation, and national consciousness, when "our memories reach back no further than yesterday," "new ideas sweep out the old […] falling to us from where I know not" and "we move through time in such a singular manner that, as we advance, the past is irretrievably lost to us" (92/326), this kind of individual mending simply cannot solidify itself into a tradition, even an imitated or borrowed one.

There is a certain ambiguity to be found even within Chaadaev's Westernizing position. Sometimes, as at the conclusion of the seventh letter, he seems to present the Russian void as a mere Lockean blank slate on which anything can be written. Hence his call there to simply borrow and develop "at least a few ideas." But the assumption of such a blank slate is, in Locke and more generally, that it at the minimum does not resist being written on; on the contrary, for the concept of the mind as a blank slate to function as intended, it must be conducive to its inclusion into the universal mechanism of memory and reason.[11] However, the forgetfulness by way of which Chaadaev defines Russia in the first letter – a forgetfulness of the Real preceding and exceeding the narrative of memory – is much more than a mere blank slate, as it undercuts and subverts the very logic of re-collection and re-mediation. In the first letter, Chaadaev himself seems to realize this, leading to the more violent image of *enforcing* the overwriting of the blank: "What is habit and instinct in other peoples must be forced into our heads with hammer blows" (ibid.). The only solution is, in other words, to close the gap by force, to perform a colonial (or auto-colonial) police function of continuously hammering down the lid so it stays closed.

The idea of translating immanent nothingness into a site within historical continuity entails not only a destiny of imitation and incorporation, or a project of violent overwriting of (universally historical) memory and kinship onto nothingness, but also a necessary failure insofar as it avows a perpetual lag and perpetually ongoing erasure of the always already existent gap, a turning away from the void that, despite any attempt to disregard it, is bound to *persist* as real. This persistence of the void encodes an ontological belatedness – a constitutive failure of equating oneself to the historico-ontological ideal established by the West.[12] As a result, in any attempt to ground and mediate it, the immanent logic of the nothing is bound to lag behind the fantasy of

redemptive synthesis. How can, after all, a tradition even take root in nothingness? Perhaps it is, rather, this rootlessness or groundlessness that should be affirmed as such, not to foreclose or suture it but to free up its immanent logic? To speak of the immanent logic of this nothing is to decouple it from whatever historical and ontological determinations or narrative arcs that would determine it as lack. To think, instead, *from* this nothingness is to see in it not a negativity to be sublated, a gap to be sutured, but the force of complete rupture and ungrounding.

2.2 beginning with nothing: chaadaev against tradition

Written in the aftermath of Chaadaev being declared mad by the emperor, the unfinished *Apologia of a Madman* remains within the conceptual space of nothingness, history, and tradition. However, instead of seeking to foreclose or overwrite this nothingness, Chaadaev now articulates its anti-traditionalist, subversive implications. Whereas the *Letters* employed the solidity of the European providential tradition as a lever to expose the groundlessness of Russian life, the *Apologia* uses the latter not only to unground the world-whole by way of a sort of underground, by way of the nothing that cannot be mediated, synthesized, or metabolized – thereby exposing the historical world's violence and destabilizing its claims to universality – but also to break down the logic of the world-whole altogether. The *Apologia* suggests the temporality of a future that would proceed immanently, not out of tradition but out of nothingness. In this case, nothingness is not overwritten by the historical trajectory but becomes the zero-point of a new logic, one that instead overturns the tradition itself. Here, there is a question not of a temporal horizon weaving together a determined past with a present and towards a future but of a revolutionary future made real *from within* the immanent nothing. The Russian non-place will thereby turn into a "good (non-)place," atopia into utopia.

Chaadaev's move here is no longer to convert Russia into a regularized world-historical site but to affirm it *in* its absence of topos, tradition, and history. There is no "turn" in the *Apologia* with regard to the emptiness of Russian life and Russian past; if anything – unlike the Slavophiles – Chaadaev embraces it here more decisively than in the *Letters*. If the Russian "we" has no history, then, says Chaadaev, what "we" need to do is not to cling to the dream of a lost history in order to re-connect with it, nor to become a negligible part of the already-existing world history. Instead, in a move that undercuts at once Slavophile and Westernizing logics, if we have no history we must simply "do without history" altogether: "Every member of the historical family, however obscure and insignificant, carries [history] within the depth of its being. *Precisely this history is what we do not have. We must learn to do without it* […]" (294/527–28; emphasis ours).

We never, says Chaadaev echoing his earlier pronouncements in the *Letters*, freely developed any ideas or historically significant facts of our own. Our past is empty. But, he adds as a matter of fact, "if that is true, it must be accepted, that is all" (293/527). Russian (in)existence is a "purely material fact" (295/529). Nothingness and being-without-history must be simply and immediately affirmed. Having to do without history becomes here not merely a forced, negative scenario – something to be superseded and overcome – but instead the only true way forward vis-à-vis a world entangled in its own history to such a degree that tradition has become a *hindrance*. This marks a radical change in Chaadaev's attitude to the historical ontology of tradition, which remains in the background of the *Apologia*, but now no longer as something ever-productive, inexhaustible, and infinitely new. Instead, Chaadaev programmatically declares the nothing as a liberation or disburdenment from tradition:

> It should not be doubted that a great part of the universe is oppressed by their traditions, by their memories: let us not envy the constricted circle in which it flounders. It is

> certain that, in the heart of most nations, there is a deep sentiment of accomplished life which dominates present life, and obstinate memory of days gone which fills the days of today. Let us leave them to struggle with their inexorable past. (301/535)

Thereby Chaadaev intensifies the discourse of the Russian absence of tradition. In fact, this is exactly one of the most subversive things about the *Apologia*: its complete undoing of traditional philosophy of history *from within* the exact same paradigm in which it was affirmed in the *Letters*, via precisely the (impossible yet real) immanence of nothingness. "I find," proclaims Chaadaev, "that our situation is a fortunate one, provided that we know how to appreciate it" (300/534). Just like in the *Letters*, this appreciation consists in an impartial look at one's own (absence of) past and tradition. Interestingly, even the logic of finding one's future in one's past remains intact in the *Apologia* – however, given the (absolutely void) nature of the Russian past, *the future becomes devoid of tradition, too*, decoupled from any historical ground. The Russian belatedness becomes here not a belatedness *within* the unfolding historical ontology of humankind but a way of acting without being bound by any preceding tradition – or by tradition as such. "I think," asserts Chaadaev, "that if we have come after the others, it is in order to do better than the others, in order not to fall into their mistakes, into their fallacies, into their superstitions" (300/533–34).

The identification of tradition with error and illusion is unmistakable. Not making the mistakes of others does not, for Chaadaev, necessarily imply making new ones. Indeed, "it would be a strange misjudgment of the role that has befallen us to reduce us to clumsily repeating the entire long series of follies committed by nations less fortunate than us" (300/534). One may perceive this simply as exaggerated optimism on Chaadaev's part, but there is a crucial theoretical consideration at work here. The radicality of his move consists, among other things, precisely in the fact that, for him, this arrival "after the others" does not lead to the institution of yet another, new tradition. The post-traditional logic of doing without tradition and history implies instead doing *without mediation* as such:

> We approach every new idea with virgin minds. In our institutions […] in our morals […] in our opinions […] nothing opposes the *immediate fulfillment* of everything good [*tous les biens*] that Providence destines for humanity. (300–01/534–35; emphasis ours)

A radically different logic must be discerned behind the traditional terminology of providence and fulfillment. Despite Chaadaev's use of a familiar term, providence does not function here as part of or via tradition anymore, as it functioned in the *Letters*. It becomes, rather, untethered from tradition, non- or anti-traditional, acting immanently out of the immediate, non-mediational nothingness. History, tradition, mediation – all cannot but *fail* to fulfill anything; instead, they oppress and bind. "Fulfillment" here is not a fulfillment *of* a providential process or plan, not any sort of accomplishment. The very logic of accomplishment is now rejected in favor of the immediate Now, which tradition only serves to foreclose ("accomplished life […] dominates present life"). "Providence" indexes here, accordingly, the force of immanent nothingness itself, of the ante-historical Real that persists, and can only erupt *now*, achronically. In this, nothingness ungrounds the world-historical whole and operates *immediately* and *totally* (enacting "everything good"), immanently refusing the mediation of tradition, of the accumulated historical past. The idea of a messianic destiny is, of course, by itself nothing new, but Chaadaev reframes it in such a way as to make it, literally, *groundless*. There is no ground, reason, or substance to support this kind of destiny; it is but a mobilization of the real, utopian force of nothingness. There is no prophecy to be fulfilled; nothing was promised. Indeed, it is precisely Russia's absolute exclusion from all possible logics of history that makes its immanent future out of this nothingness real.

This "fulfillment," and thus Russia's role and calling – both notions now decoupled from the

continuity of tradition – consist for Chaadaev, furthermore, in nothing less than the immediate resolution of all of the world's most important social issues:

> It is my deep conviction that we are called upon to resolve most of the problems of the social order, to accomplish [*achever*] most of the ideas that arose in the old societies, to decide on the most serious questions that occupy humankind. I have often said this before, and I will eagerly reiterate: we have been constituted, as it were, by the very nature of things, as a true jury for many trials pleaded before the great tribunals of human spirit and human society. (300/534)

Chaadaev claims he has "often said this before," and indeed, we can find similar thoughts in his earlier correspondence. Thus, his 1834 letter to the poet Pyotr Vyazemsky already anticipates the central argument of the 1837 *Apologia*:

> We find ourselves in a completely singular condition in regards to the world civilization, and this condition has not yet been appreciated. When reasoning about European events, we are more dispassionate, detached, impersonal, and, consequently, more impartial than Europeans in relation to all questions discussed. This means that we form to some extent a jury, instituted so as to consider all of the world's most important problems. I am convinced that we are tasked with resolving the greatest problems of thought and society, for we are free from the pernicious influences of the superstitions and prejudices filling the minds of Europeans. And it is fully in our power to remain as independent as necessary, and as just as possible. For them, however, this is impossible. The past weighs upon them unbearably, with the heavy weight of recollections, experiences, and habits, and oppresses them, no matter what they do. (II: 88–89)

Approaching everything "with virgin minds" means being detached in relation to all attachments, to the tradition no less than to the self. It implies having "none of the passionate interests, none of the already-formed opinions, none of the constituted prejudices" that characterize historical peoples (300/534). It is thus only immanent nothingness that is *impartial* and can therefore immediately resolve all social issues of the world, achieving without delay "everything good" for all humanity, precisely *because* this nothingness is absolutely detached from the world-historical process of actualization, from tradition itself, indifferent to and not personally invested in it. Since we are detached from the European tradition, we can treat it *without attachment* – and furthermore, since we are not attached to anything particular within it, we can judge it in its *entirety*.

In fact, Peter the Great's (1672–1725) sovereign act consisted for Chaadaev precisely in this: in recognizing and thereby freeing up the force of nothingness in the Russian past, on the one hand, and in a total ungrounding of "the West," or the European tradition, which he "passed over to us in its entirety," on the other.[13] As a result, a different logic of futurity was introduced in and through nothingness: Peter the Great "gave us all its history for the sake of history, and all its future [i.e., the future generated by tradition] for the sake of the future" – one that now started to function as decoupled from tradition (293/526). The Russian mind, in its "impartiality" and "impersonality" (II: 95) – which should not be confused with that of law or science in modernity – could now immanently treat the European tradition, so to speak, as pure material, as improper, without attachment. This indexes a different logic of totality, too: totality as *total dispossession* of the entirety of sublative appropriation that historically actualizes the spatio-temporal totality of the world.

Impersonality was a key concept for Chaadaev already in the *Letters*, and already a key characteristic of the true religious and social principle (182/417) – but there it was still identified with the impersonality of tradition. Now, however, that tradition in the *Apologia* has been broken down, impersonality gets associated with "the very nature of things," and this in turn with the immanent, utopic void of the Russian past "as it is given, as it is made by the very nature of things" (300–01/534–35). From within its nothingness, Russia simply

proceeds immanently to, as it were, do its (improperly) own thing – to follow directly *la force des choses*. This kind of immanent, non-historical (yet real) futurity cannot but suspend and overturn the regular, historical-ontological continuum. In this, its function parallels that of the chaotic and catastrophic Real from the *Letters* – and indeed, the *Apologia* again crucially invokes geological ante-history in connection with the Russian nothing:

> […] if your life has not been powerful and profound, if the law which presides over your destinies is not a radiant principle, nourished during the great days of national glories, but merely something pale and dull, shunning sunlight in the subterranean spheres of your social existence – do not, then, reject the truth, do not imagine yourself to have lived the life of historical nations, when in fact, buried in your vast grave, you have only lived the life of fossils. (298/532)

This ante-historical void cannot be (re-)mediated by history, but can proceed only by way of an immediate upheaval and ungrounding of the world. Chaadaev himself was not, politically, a revolutionary, and yet it is hard to call this logic – in its doing-without-history, its total indifference to the past, the impersonality of its force, its breaking-down of tradition, and its *immediate* solution to the world's social issues precisely by way of such a breakdown that proceeds immanently from a utopian non-place – by any other term than revolutionary, even if ultimately in a theoretical rather than a directly political register. Chaadaev's new, anti-traditionalist answer to "what is to be done?" is to begin immanently *with* nothingness and, *from within it*, to suspend all tradition and advance a radically different logic of futurity and newness – not a newness in the sense of development, or a transcendent newness to come, but a revolutionary newness in (the immanently real) excess of history. But, in Chaadaev, this never coalesces into anything as concrete as a political program – all such things remaining undetermined by the dislocation inaugurated by the *Apologia*, a text which, breaking off near the outset of Part II, never exits, neither textually nor conceptually, the void that it exposes. Further political concretization will become the task of the Russian intellectual field that arises in the wake of – and in response to – Chaadaev's momentous proclamation.

3 conclusion

To read Chaadaev in his traditional portrait as straightforwardly a Westernizer is to detect in him a savage auto-colonial thought, one that proclaims one's own territory and not the territory of the Other as *terra nullius* – without past, without law, without history. Such a perspective, however, fails to consider the fact that, as we have traced, the immanent logic of nothingness undermines the very power of providential philosophy of history and tradition: it radically undercuts, without return, the Christian-modern nexus of historicity and actuality at the ground of the colonial metaphysics of modernity. As such, it undercuts not only the colonizing logic of world spirit but also the logic that comes to be, in Russian thought, opposed to it, the Slavophile logic – which elaborates what might be called a nativist, decolonial thought, centered on the dream of an impossible return to the authentic nation as a critique of the West. In contrast to this dream of "our fanatic Slavicists," that is, of those who want to excavate and restore Russia's past, to strengthen and reinstate the specifically Russian identity and tradition – in the traditionalist sense – to make Russia a country like any other by filling this void of nothingness, Chaadaev insists that the past cannot be recovered to fill the void of the souls: "one may doubt if out of our historical soil they can ever draw something to fill up the emptiness of our souls" (294/528). Indeed, in its conservatism – its return to the past in order to reinstate it as the future – this line of thinking shares more than it imagines with its proclaimed opponents, the Westernizers, in their going back to the past (of the European tradition) in order to integrate nothingness into something, to defuse, normalize, colonize the utopic territory.

To reconstruct in the *Apologia* a trajectory that affirms the immanent utopian nothingness offers a third position: neither decolonial fantasies of kinship, identity, and mythic past to be recovered for the present, nor an auto-colonialism that grafts one's own nothingness to the West – but a nothingness, a void that ungrounds both of these as complicit logics of unity and totality. In ungrounding the fantasies of unity, it cuts off the dreams of an epistemic leap backwards and phantasmatic attachments to identity, which imagine that Russia can stand for a name of a proper unity, with a tradition and history – but also, no less, the logic of inscribing it back into a global unity under the hegemony of the West. This trajectory exposes a utopia and uchronia, without return or re-incorporation. It is the Real that ungrounds the world-historical nexus of actuality and possibility, of immanence and transcendence. This radicality of the without becomes visible if it is immanent only to itself and decoupled from any recuperation, unsettling in the process the very mechanism producing the norm that attempts to brand it as lack. In the end, Chaadaev's utopian nothingness at its most radical, in its withoutness and whylessness, at once forecloses all possible nationalisms and undercuts the standing of European modernity in its dominant form as, at once, bourgeois and Christian, providential and fulfilled.



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notes

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1 References are to the French–Russian edition of Chaadaev's complete works in two volumes (Chaadaev, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy i izbrannye pis'ma*). All citations relate to volume I unless otherwise indicated. All translations into English are our own; we have, however, consulted and adopted from two extant translations ("Letters on the Philosophy of History" and *Philosophical Works*).

2 For explorations of this logic in queer theory and Continental philosophy of religion, for example, see Edelman; Barber; Smith.

3 Esposito, *Living Thought*.

4 Appearing as if out of nowhere, "like illegitimate children, without a heritage, without any ties binding us to the men who came before us on this earth" (92/326), Russia is severed from all legitimate and legitimating mediational networks of belonging. As the illegitimate child, it is excluded from "the hereditary patrimony of ideas" that underwrites the reproduction of the world's field of actuality and possibility. Indeed, insofar as the illegitimate child is still taken to have parents, and thus a certain provenance and relation of kinship, the image itself may not be radical enough. It is the illegitimacy as such that must bear conceptual weight: "There is nothing whatsoever in our past that binds us to any people on earth […] we do not in fact belong to any of the systems of the moral universe" (198/433).

5 In this element, Chaadaev echoes a tradition spanning at least from Joachim of Fiore to Hegel, or perhaps, if one follows Agamben's genealogy, a much longer one than that. See Taubes; Agamben.

6 In this context it is worth recalling that, as Roberto Esposito has argued, European (philosophical and political) modernity can be seen as structured by the exclusionary figure of the proper. See especially Esposito, *Communitas*; idem, *Living Thought*; Bird and Short.

7 For an articulation of the theoretical stakes of this tradition, see Dubilet.

8 On the connection of the near to the proper, and the general economy in relation to proximity and dwelling, see Derrida, "Ends of Man."

9 Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* 154: "everything an *economy* can reconcile, adjust or harmonize, I will go so far as to say *present*, in the *familiarity* of the *near* and the *neighbor*."

10 As Agamben writes: "Providence is the name of the 'oikonomia,' insofar as the latter presents itself

as the government of the world" (Agamben 111). On the providential machine, see Agamben chapter 5.

11 The colonial character of the figure of the blank slate is worth remembering. See, for example, Milun chapter 3.

12 Even the effect of Christianity upon the Russian people, according to Chaadaev, was "indirect and very late" (101/334), attesting to a more general constitutive belatedness of Russia in Chaadaev's discourse.

13 We explore the significance of Peter the Great's sovereign act for Chaadaev in more detail in a companion article; see Chepurin and Dubilet.

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