

Pachmuss, Temira

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ANCIENT MYTH IN MEREZHKOVSky'S NAPOLEON

Temira Pachmuss (University of Illinois)

In the Proustian sense, the novel *Napoleon* by D. S. Merezhkovsky is a "spiritual act," in which Napoleon is a man aloof from the events of his time whole at the same time being at the center of them. In the words of Proust, in reference to his own writing, a "spiritual act separates the 'real surroundings' from reality,"¹ leaving the innermost essence of things untouched. *Napoleon* is a unique work among biographies because it possesses a philosophical perspective that endows it with immense breadth, which the reader grasps "with amazement". The titanic life of Napoleon, who attempts to control revolutionary chaos in France and to subdue the upheavals of many other countries, is presented with the suggestion that there is a link between Napoleon's fate and that of Russia. "Perhaps the Russian people," Merezhkovsky muses, "who have experienced the hell of Communism, will learn much more about Napoleon [from Merezhkovsky's volume] than from many other existing books." Merezhkovsky emerges from his study of the life of Napoleon as a rare biographer, not only drawing comparisons between the events of the past and of the present, but through these, predicting the inevitable future. Such a vantage point gives to Merezhkovsky's writings the breath of life and lends to them the timelessness of great art.

Against the turbulent background of the late eighteenth century, Merezhkovsky placed Napoleon, portraying him as more splendid than ordinary mortals. Napoleon looms grandiose, spiritual, and heroic. All the human traits of Napoleon are sublimated and transposed into artistic symbol.

The first volume of *Napoleon* is a hymn to a savior, one who "guarded holy Europe from the Red Devil." Napoleon is depicted as the "embodiment of the eternal world soul," an "incarnation of the Sun God," "the voice of Universal reason," and the last great hero of the West.

In Merezhkovsky's novel, Napoleon is the focus of the battle between good and evil. He is characterized by irreconcilable antinomies, such as war and peace. He is at the same time executioner and victim, servant and leader. These contrasts are revealed by Merezhkovsky in all aspects of Napoleon's personal and military life.

1 Heinrich Stammler, "D. S. Merezhkovsky, 1865-1965: A Reappraisal," *Die Welt der Slaven*, XII, No. 2, pp. 148-9.

Merezhkovsky believed that Napoleon was the man who embodied the great aspiration of all mankind – the brotherly union of all nations, the kingdom of God on earth, a kingdom Merezhkovsky expected would ultimately reign over the future. Inspired by the personage of Napoleon and the ideas which Merezhkovsky perceived that Napoleon represented, Merezhkovsky ventured into the past in order to discover in the familiar the unexpected and the “astonishing”. Through this experience he found definition for himself in the values of another, inserting both the old into the new and the new into the old.²

In his single-minded purpose, that of preventing the “kingdom of the vulgar” from taking possession of the entire world, Merezhkovsky studiously substantiated his own philosophy of religion by investigating the Bible, the apocrypha, the lives of the Saints and religious teachers, pre- and non-Christian mythology, cosmogonic legendry, religious poetry, ritual symbolism, ancient sacred documents, and the sagas of the distant past. His hope that mankind would foster the kingdom of God on earth intensified, becoming especially apparent in his works written in exile. His perusal of the works by Joachim of Floris, prophet of the kingdom of the spirit and the Third Testament of the everlasting gospel, and those of St. Augustine, Dante, and others, strengthened Merezhkovsky’s belief in the advent of Heaven into the world. As a result of his breadth of learning Merezhkovsky’s novel-biography represents a curious amalgamation of historical, interpretative, philosophical, religious, and artistic approaches.

In Heinrich Stammler’s words,³ Merezhkovsky’s novel-biographies are about the struggle between Christ and the Anti-Christ. Merezhkovsky’s Anti-Christ is that force, transcendental, which he saw as incarnated in various historical phenomena, which through the ages has countered and thwarted biblical prophecy, that which speaks of the arrival of the Comforter, the Intercessor, who will appear, to lead into the second advent of Christ, the third realm of the Holy Spirit, a new heaven and a new earth, the kingdom of the everlasting gospel of freedom and peace. Merezhkovsky always emphasized, reiterated, and magnified this envisioning of the kingdom as a prophecy of events anticipated and destined to happen.

It is impossible to draw a clear line of demarcation between Merezhkovsky’s philosophy and his literary form. The method of developing an argument in the way Heraclitus and Hegel did – their dialectical method of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis – suited Merezhkovsky perfectly. He used this

2 Modest Gofman, *Kniga o russkikh pisatelyakh poslednego desyatiletia* (Moscow, 1909), p. 200.

3 Stammler, “Russian Metapolitics: Merezhkovsky’s Religious Understanding of the Historical Process,” *California Slavic Studies*, 9 (1976).

dialectical system in order to find an exit from his own contradictions and conflicting views. His antitheses were illustrated and supported by appropriate citations, which he knew well how to employ. In Hegelian philosophy he found his religious and philosophical procedure, literary approach, and style. This method enabled him to probe the personalities of his literary subjects, their religious views, and their conflicts and entanglements. All of this he did with a coherent and entertaining narrative manner, within a well-defined historical and literary framework, constructing his works with the sophistication and skill of an experienced artist. Moreover, he was not an abstract philosopher *per se*, but sought to involve himself directly in the lives of his contemporaries, loving them when they chose the path of spiritual pursuit, and disapproving, when they frustrated his hopes and expectations for them. Mikhail Tsetlin said of Merezhkovsky: "Passionately aspiring to do good for them [his readers] and to achieve truth, he [only] evoked in them a hatred and animosity."⁴ This is one of the finest assessments of Merezhkovsky as a Russian religious thinker and writer and one of the most instructive in explaining why he has been acclaimed by some and castigated by others.

Merezhkovsky dealt with the problem of duality in the structure of the universe – the struggle between the gods and God, man and superman, heaven and earth, the flesh and the spirit, and slavery and freedom. It was Arthur Luther who so aptly described Merezhkovsky's works as *Weltanschauungsromane*,⁵ because they portray the struggle between Good and Evil and reveal the author's attempt at synthesis. But Merezhkovsky's works, empirical studies of the eternal opposition of the flesh and the spirit, are also historical. The historical conflict between Christianity and paganism was to Merezhkovsky a clear manifestation of the dialectic of Being. His novels–biographies are generally faithful to historical fact. His extensive use of existing sources is apparent, for he regarded the factual study of historical evolution as an approach to the understanding of the mystery of Being. Heinrich Stammler is of the opinion that for Merezhkovsky "the history of mankind is essentially the history of salvation (*Weltgeschichte als Heilsgeschehen*)"

To Merezhkovsky, Napoleon was both the man of Atlantis and an Apocalyptic Horseman. He was a man "of cannon thunder and of country church bells." Like the ancient gods, he evinced both masculine and feminine elements and was, as will be shown below, androgynous.

Part II portrays Napoleon's life through the eyes of Merezhkovsky, who admired the French Emperor, to whom he referred as "a man with two souls,

4 *Novoseye* (New York, 1942), No. 2, p. 55.

5 Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago, 1949), pp. 182–190; 203. German version: *Weltgeschichte und Weltgeschehen* (Stuttgart, 1953). Stammler, "Russian Metapolitics," op. cit., p. 128.

the daylight and the nocturnal.” Within Napoleon’s nocturnal soul, the “nocturnal hemisphere of heaven,” a “constellation of the Cross” would rise above the Island of St. Helena. Taking issue with Leo Tolstoy’s ironical, even satirical, portrayal of Napoleon in *War and Peace*, Merezhkovsky asserts that the great idea which inspired Napoleon – to unify West and East in the name of eternal peace – was, in essence, Christian.

In Part II, we learn also about Napoleon’s first Italian campaign, his first battles, and his first victories. Having been introduced to the duality of his personality in Part I, the reader is now able to comprehend without difficulty the various stages of Napoleon’s panoramic life. Merezhkovsky reveals Napoleon the man, step by step, describing in rapid succession the dramatic events of his life, his swift rise to power in France and, later, Europe. But despite his genuine admiration for Napoleon as a leader, Merezhkovsky is also quick to acknowledge Napoleon’s negative traits. For example, we learn that, after the capture of Toulon in 1794, Napoleon – through cleverness and trickery – obtained a promotion in 1795 to the rank of general of artillery. And in Chapter “18 Brumaire 1799”, Marezkhovsky calls Napoleon “a coward” in the “vaudeville of revolution,” when he defeats the assembly of French deputies with the assistance of his armed regiment. At this transitional moment, Merezhkovsky declares, Napoleon initiated a new era in French history – “the power of One Man.” “Bonaparte died; Napoleon was born.” “The revolutionary soul of France moved into the body of Caesar.” Merezhkovsky observes that Napoleon, with unswerving determination, pursued the path leading to the vacated throne of France, spilling in this endeavor an ocean of blood, which, in the process, “stained the white garments of the hero,” himself. He arrested and jailed the Pope and persecuted French liberal writers, among them Mme de Stael and Chateaubriand. Thus, the revolutionary dictator became an autocratic despot, disdaining liberty and equality before the law, the very things he had promised the French people, in 1799, that he would uphold. In reaction to his tyranny, Beethoven furiously retracted his dedication to Napoleon of his third symphony, “Eroica”.

At the same time, Merezhkovsky commends Napoleon for having striven to affirm and sanctify the “kingdom of reason” with its inherent liberty and equality before the law, as well as for supporting progress without senseless destruction of old values. A number of decades before Merezhkovsky, French libertarianism, respect for the law, and the notion of *Rechtsstaat* were glorified in Pushkin’s odes and poems; for example, in “Liberty”, “In the Country”, and in “The Dagger”. In his poem “Napoleon”, written after the French Emperor’s death, Pushkin praised him as a great man who had bestowed upon Russia the conception of equality before the law.

Merezhkovsky's most sympathetic portrayals of Napoleon and his divided soul appear in Chapter "Waterloo. 1815 and "St. Helena. 1815–1821". Two contradictory feelings tugged at Napoleon's heart at Waterloo – the sensation of soaring and that of falling. Merezhkovsky presents a dramatic portrayal, gripping in its intensity, of Napoleon's last battle, the Battle of Waterloo, with its thunderstorms, downpours, betrayals; the armies of Napoleon, of Lord Wellington, and of Blücher attacking, retreating, regrouping, fortifying new positions; and then, the final retreat of the formerly proud and victorious Napoleonic army, with Napoleon protected by his battle squares, his most loyal regiments, in the face of the opposing triumphant armies.

The Battle of Waterloo decided the fate of humanity. After the section "Night. Abdication. 1815," events become accelerated. Enveloped by the grey and drizzly monotony of the landscape and climate of St. Helena, Napoleon, the man of heroic action, was reduced to entrapment on St. Helena, where he felt bored, weary, and lonely. A few of his most loyal followers advised him to escape from the island, but it is said that Napoleon replied, "No, I must be obedient to my fate." Merezhkovsky notes that Napoleon hoped that his fate would encompass release, that he would have freedom bestowed upon him by the French people, and that he would return to Paris. Merezhkovsky presents Napoleon more than once as a Prometheus chained to a rock, sacrificed for the sake of humanity. When Napoleon's hope for freedom fades, the shade of death covers him. He falls ill in 1820 and, shortly thereafter, in 1821, he dies. In his testament he requests that he be buried in Paris, on the shores of the Seine.

In his works, Merezhkovsky employs myths, analogies, and unusual images. Myths are tales, the origins of which lie deep within the obscurity of the past, and generally involve the supernatural, revealing some otherwise inexplicable phenomena of the world. The myth of Helios, the Sun God; the myth of Prometheus; the myth of Dionysus, and the myth of Apollo, to name but a few, belong to religious mythology and were employed by Merezhkovsky as an allusive device to give the reader greater understanding.

Merezhkovsky considers both Napoleon and Dionysus to be instructors of ecstasy, as well as warriors in the name of the future kingdom of eternal peace. Within the domain of metaphysics, Merezhkovsky discusses his belief that a masculine cathode and a feminine anode reside in every human personality. If these two poles catch fire, the flame of ecstasy flares. The teacher of such ecstasy was Dionysus, the son of a god (Dio–divine; nysos – son), Zeus. According to Merezhkovsky, Napoleon strongly resembled Dionysus, the teacher of ecstasy. Napoleon's intense desire to unite East and West was motivated by an even more feverish one to achieve world domination, in the name of eternal peace on earth. Resolve, lying beneath the ecstatic expression

of Napoleon, marked all of his actions. Courage and action within him were united. He abandoned his mortal Ego and entered the realm of immortality, achieving that ultimate valor – the conquest of the fear of death.

The term *Dionysian* is generally used to express sensual and irrational impulses in man as opposed to *Apollonian*, which is used to express self-restrained and rational conduct in man, according to Nietzsche in his treatise on these two gods. Dionysus, the god of the vine, of wine, and of mystic ecstasy, also took part in the wars of the gods against the Titans. He was successful as a warrior in Cappadocia, where he repulsed the Amazons in Damascus. In India, he spread civilization. In the later cult of Orphism he was equated with Zagreus. He was seen as a god who dies and is resurrected. Here, Merezhkovsky conceived of him as a suffering god, a harbinger of Christ, a liberator who frees the human soul of the most terrible bond of slavery – the fear of death. In this respect, Napoleon is an incarnation of the god Dionysus, because, like Dionysus, he teaches his followers (soldiers) the animating effect of inspiration that alone can triumph over the fear of death. Napoleon instructs his men, when they will face danger, to enter the realm of immortality through the transfiguration of themselves. In Merezhkovsky's work, Napoleon declares: "I enjoy myself the most when confronting danger. I enjoy myself while consuming Dionysus' most intoxicating wine; that is, your divine self that transforms itself into the immortal self at the moment of danger."⁶

Merezhkovsky likens Napoleon–Dionysus also with Christ. He saw Gilgamesh, an Assyro–Babylonian hero, a semi–legendary king of Uruk, as the first shadow of Christ. Gilgamesh, the son of the Sun, traveled across the earth in search of the Ear of Corn, which would bestow on mortals immortality. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the hero traverses the path of the sun from the East to the West, finally submerging in the ocean, as did Napoleon. For Merezhkovsky, the wisdom of Dionysus is to pass from the painful Thorn of death to the intoxicating Rose of immortality, Napoleon, the last hero of the Sun, the last man of Atlantis, sinks into the ocean, as does the sun, and finds in it, through the painful Thorn of Dionysus' intoxicating Rose, immortality. Each of them – Gilgamesh, Dionysus, and Napoleon – are two–thirds divine and one–third mortal, according to Merezhkovsky. Emphasizing the similarity between Dionysus and Napoleon, Merezhkovsky suggests that Dionysus was a man who was in the process of becoming a god; and Napoleon, the man, too, is becoming a god. Dionysus was a warrior–peacemaker; Napoleon, who attempted to unite East and West in order to establish his world empire, the kingdom of peace on earth, is also a warrior–peacemaker. Dionysus was a

6 D. S. Merezhkovsky, *Napoleon* (Belgrade, 1929), I, 136.

suffering god-man; Napoléon, "chained to a cliff" on the island of St. Helena, is also a suffering god-man.⁷

However, in Merezhkovsky's mind, not only was Napoleon a god but also a werewolf. Like Dionysus, he was dual, combining both Apollo's reason and moderation and Dionysus' inspiration and extremism. In Napoleon, the great and elevating genius of Apollo was in constant conflict with the base and overindulgent nature of Dionysus. These contradictions were ever-present in the character of Napoleon. The monstrous mask of Dionysus, who descended into hell, resembles the anguished countenance of Napoleon as captive. In Napoleon's dream of the god Dionysus, wearing the fixed smile of a lunatic and trailed by a throng of frenzied maenads, Napoleon saw himself, charming his soldiers to a state of delirium. A mysterious factotum, the androgenous Sybil who appears in another of Napoleon's dreams, which involves two unhappy lovers, Therese and Julius, also resembles Napoleon and Dionysus, the werewolves. As may be seen, Merezhkovsky skillfully availed himself of the ancient myth of Dionysus in order to portray the nineteenth-century hero Napoleon, with his complex duality of feeling, thought, and behavior.

Taking up again the myth of Apollo, Merezhkovsky praises Nietzsche for his "discovery" that Napoleon was the last incarnation of Apollo, the Sun God, as well as Goethe for his assertion that "the light that dawned upon Napoleon has not faded for one single moment." According to Goethe, Napoleon's life was radiant, full of sunshine. In Greek mythology, Apollo, the son of Leto and Zeus, was one of the twelve Olympian gods, the god of prophecy, healing, archery, music, youth, the plastic arts, science, and philosophy. Shortly after he was born, Apollo slew the python dragon. Napoleon, like Apollo, says Merezhkovsky, was endowed with the same physical skill and strength and the same lucency as that of the god Apollo.

As mentioned earlier, Merezhkovsky especially admired in Apollo his sense of moderation and harmony, two characteristics of the god conspicuously lacking in the make-up of Napoleon. Indeed, Merezhkovsky judged Napoleon as one who often resembled not so much Apollo as Apollyon (the destroyer), the angel of the bottomless pit (Revelation 9: 11). In *Napoleon*, Merezhkovsky clearly makes the association of the French Emperor with the Apocalypse. In early Christian literature, Apollyon is a name for the devil, an evil monster, whereas in late Christian writing, Apollyon is frequently identified as the angel of death. In *Napoleon*, Apollyon appears as a gigantic spider, clutching the world in its four pairs of legs, slowly consuming it as if it were but a mere fly. Fierce and devoid of all sense of restraint,

7 *Ibid.*, I, 134-135.

Merezhkovsky's Apollyon is akin to an infernal machine invented by the devil in order to destroy the world, or to the apocalyptic beast emerging from the abyss. Merezhkovsky says, unequivocally, that it was the devil, himself, who led Napoleon to the summit of a high mountain where he displayed below all the kingdoms of the world that existed at that moment, announcing to Napoleon, "You can rule over these and enjoy the glory." Merezhkovsky reveals Napoleon's dichotomy and emphatically rejects Napoleon as a precursor to Christ or a forerunner of the Anti-Christ. In Merezhkovsky's opinion, Napoleon was the *unknown*, the mysterious.

Merezhkovsky asks: Who was Napoleon – a messenger from God, a martyr for mankind, a new Prometheus, crucified on the rock on the Island of St. Helena, a new Messiah? Or, was he the apocalyptic beast, the Anti-Christ? This cleft in Napoleon's personality is bridged in such a way that Merezhkovsky finds it impossible to provide a clear answer to his being. In an attempt to discover an answer for himself and for his readers, Merezhkovsky introduces other myths. To Merezhkovsky, the myth was not a contrived fable but a symbol, a prototype of concealed truth. In order to be able to penetrate to the essence of the myth, Merezhkovsky believed that one must lift the shroud. "Through one's own soul and then through the soul of the people," Merezhkovsky asserts, "one must proceed to the soul of the national hero: through the myth of Napoleon to the mystery of Napoleon." According to Merezhkovsky, "The Sun myth about the suffering God-Man-Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, Attis, Mithra – an ancient myth of entire mankind from time immemorial – is but a veil hiding the Christian mystery."⁸ Prometheus on the rock meant to Merezhkovsky Prometheus' sacrifice for mankind. "Here the 'history' of Napoleon ends, and the 'mystery' of Napoleon beings," Merezhkovsky continues. "Whose fate, whose personality in centuries and in nations resembles more this ancient Titan?"⁹ To Merezhkovsky, Prometheus was an appealing mythical figure, the personification of the invincible will opposing a greater force, forever chained and suffering and yet confident of ultimate triumph.

Prometheus was a benefactor of mankind. He stole some sparks of fire from the sun's "wheels" and brought them to earth concealed in a hollow tube. As punishment for this theft, Zeus had Prometheus bound with steel chains to a rock in the Caucasus and sent an eagle to him to consume his liver, which continually renewed itself. Heracles, passing through the region of the Caucasus, shot the eagle with an arrow and set Prometheus free. Zeus then forced Prometheus to wear a ring made from the steel chains and to carry

8 *Ibid.*, I, 18.

9 *Ibid.*, II, 244.

a piece of the rock to which he had been attached: a steel bond thus continued to unite the Titan and his rock. Later, Prometheus accepted the immortality of the Centaur Chiron. It was the indomitable willpower of Prometheus that most attracted Merezhkovsky to this myth, and it was that characteristic that he employed when making an analogy between Prometheus and Napoleon, to Napoleon's mysterious and charismatic character.

To delineate further the character of Napoleon, Merezhkovsky avails himself of the myth of Orpheus, a legendary Greek poet and hero, the son of Apollo and the Muse Calliope. Orpheus was a musician so great that he was said to have tamed wild beasts. When his wife Eurydice died of snakebite poisoning, Orpheus descended into the underworld, where his lyre "drew iron tears" from Hades, god of death. Orpheus' grief for Eurydice, upon having lost her for the second time, led him to despise all women save her. In revenge he was torn to shreds by women during the excitement of a Dionysian orgy. To Merezhkovsky, the intellect of Napoleon was like that of Prometheus, who possessed powers of prophecy and who was the father of all the arts and sciences. However, as stated above, according to Merezhkovsky, Napoleon was in many respects a werewolf who was able to slip in and out of a variety of shapes and characters, and thus transformed himself as well into a new Orpheus. Napoleon's profound spiritual inspiration indicated the influence of a poetic Muse upon him. Merezhkovsky argues that Napoleon's imagination made him a great poet, one in statue equal to Aeschylus, Dante, and Goethe, and made him a new Orpheus, one who composed a "universal historical symphony." Orpheus' song commanded stones to arrange themselves into the walls of a city; the elements of Napoleon's music, its notes and rhythms, create a sound, a symphony, symbolizing the universal union of all nations.

This grandiose plan, however, ended in fiasco, and Merezhkovsky likened Napoleon to Sisyphus, who was punished for his trickery with interminable labor in the underworld. Sisyphus, who had been an avaricious king of Corinth, was required, as a symbol of futility, to incessantly roll a marble block to the summit of a hill only to have it plunge back down again to the bottom. Napoleon, the new Sisyphus, megalomaniacal emperor of France, had failed to realize his giant scheme, which was that of creating a unity of nations, a new paradise on earth. Toward the end of Napoleon's life he found himself locked in a hell. The Eumenides, the three Furies, the avenging deities of Greek mythology, who pursued the outragers of custom, pitiless both in life and in death, and who tracked down those who had wrongfully spilled blood, entered the house of Napoleon. Merezhkovsky remarks that though their daggers were more sharp than any dagger of any murderer, they did not stab Napoleon, literally, but figuratively. St. Helena became for Napoleon the

punishment of Sisyphus, for whatever Napoleon endeavored to do on the island of St. Helena failed.

Here, Merezhkovsky introduces the myth of Oedipus, the son of Laius, King of Thebes, and of Queen Jocasta. Oedipus unwittingly kills his father and unconsciously marries his mother. After learning of King Laius' and Queen Jocasta's identities, Oedipus blinds himself and begins a wandering existence, finally arriving at the grove of Colonus near Athens where the Eumenidies release him from earthly existence. Shortly thereafter, Jocasta, having also learned the truth, hangs herself. Napoleon identified himself with the Revolution, supposedly having announced, "Je suis la Révolution." He fell in love with "her" profoundly, and in so doing mixed his blood, as her son, with hers, as his mother; he dishonored her as Oedipus dishonored his mother. In contrast to Oedipus, however, Napoleon was acting consciously and, therefore, was shocked when the shadow of the eternal dagger of Nemesis-fate fell over him. According to Merezhkovsky, both Oedipus and Napoleon had to relive in their personal human tragedies the divine mystery. Dionysus, the son of Earth and heaven, conceived by his mother Semele (the earth), continually was reborn from one eon to the next, as the second Dionysus, Ixion, the shadow of the coming Son. Napoleon conceived from his mother, the Revolution, was born from temporality into eternity. Bonaparte gave birth to Napoleon, the man gave birth to Man. Merezhkovsky concludes: "This is the sun rising from the maternal bosom of ancient night, of ancient chaos - the Revolution (Napoleon, the man)."¹⁰

Merezhkovsky believed that people were attracted to Napoleon because he served as the representative of an ancient dream about paradise on earth (a paradise since lost), about the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven, the people's kingdom of freedom, brotherhood, and equality. To Merezhkovsky, the soul of Napoleon was the soul of the Revolution, which Merezhkovsky both admired and hated. Again, Merezhkovsky availed himself of an ancient myth, the myth of the Gorgons, in particular the myth of one of the three Gorgon sisters, Medusa. Merezhkovsky continues to delineate Napoleon's personality, making reference to Medusa. The Gorgons had snakes for hair and those who dared to gaze upon them were immediately turned to stone. Medusa was transformed by Athena into a winged monster. The hero Perseus slew Medusa by taking the precaution of not looking at her directly but only at her reflection in his shield. Merezhkovsky states that Napoleon saw distinctly this terrible, infernal face of Medusa in the Revolution and considered it one of the greatest of all calamities sent to earth by heaven, loathing it both physically and metaphysically. Napoleon viewed the Revolution as destruc-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 95.

tive chaos, yet at the same time, considered it morally purifying, a purging that revealed Truth. Napoleon was proud, vainly viewing himself as the first soldier of the Revolution, its one and only great leader. Merezhkovsky was deeply disturbed by the fact that Napoleon's goal – that of creating a universal brotherhood of nations, a new Atlantis, a retrieval of the paradise lost – had not been achieved. He uses the myth of King Atlas of Atlantis as an analogy to Napoleon and the Revolution, reaching the conclusion that Napoleon was correct in stating, "J'ai porté le monde sur mes épaules." (He is supposed to have said this.). According to Merezhkovsky, Napoleon still, even today, holds Europe on his shoulders, as did the giant Atlas hold the vault of the sky on his, as a punishment of Zeus for having taken part in the struggle between the gods and the giant Atlas, son of Iapetus and the sea-nymph Clymene, belonged to the generation of unbridled divinities who had preceded the Olympians.

Merezhkovsky compares Napoleon with yet another mythical figure, the Assyrian God of the Sun, the winged giant bull that was endowed with enormous virile strength. Merezhkovsky employs giant ceremonial bulls and bull games also in his other works; for example, in *The Birth of the Gods* (1925), where the action takes place in Crete in the first half of the XIV century B. C., the time of the reign of Amonophis IV. Dio, performing the secret ritual of the Earth Mother, dances with the wild bulls, swinging herself between the animals' sharp horns to mount them and dancing on their sturdy backs. In *Napoleon*, Merezhkovsky uses the image of the bull to suggest that the French Emperor was a divinity, another god of the Sun.

The idea that Napoleon was a leader, attempting to bring his beloved humanity to a new paradise – the kingdom of freedom, equality, and brotherhood – is continued in *Napoleon*. Merezhkovsky draws Napoleon as a new Adam. God had planted His garden, His paradise for Adam, but this paradise was lost through the sin of Adam and Eve, at which time suffering and death entered the world as a result of their fall. Now, the new Adam, Napoleon, head of the human race, will recover this lost paradise. "This is Napoleon's cross on earth, an apocalyptic sign of the times,"¹¹ according to Merezhkovsky. The Paraclete, the new Adam, will return the lost paradise to the ancient Adam, which is mankind. Of importance to Merezhkovsky was the medieval Christian belief that held Adam to be a forerunner of Christ, Jesus being the first spiritual man as Adam had been the first physical man. Thus there is in Merezhkovsky's argument an implicit identification of Adam–Napoleon with the coming Christ. Another medieval Christian belief held that Eve, the first woman, foreshadowed the Virgin Mary. These medie-

11 *Ibid.*, II, 155.

val notions were of interest to Merezhkovsky, who always linked the past to the present, and extended both into the future of mankind and his spiritual and religious culture.

Elsewhere, Merezhkovsky likens Napoleon to the Horseman from the Apocalypse (Revelations, 6:2, 4, 5, 8; 19:11–21), who first mounted a white horse, then a red one, then a black one, and finally a pale one. A crown was given unto him; and he went forth conquering and to conquer. In *Napoleon*, the Horseman rides high above all the European nations, atop the mountains of the West, his silhouette against the dying red sky. "Who is he?" asks Merezhkovsky, himself answering: "Who can fail to recognize in him the one who is wearing a three-cornered hat and a grey marching frock-coat? he rides pensively, gazing into the distance toward the East, holding his naked sabre, watching. Over what? Over whom? The European nations do not know, but the Russians do: He is guarding Holy Europe from the red devil."¹² In this manner, Merezhkovsky once more connects the past, with the present, and with the future. The apocalyptic Horseman–Napoleon–Stalin are brought dramatically together in this image. "Behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True and in righteousness he both judges and makes war." (Revelations, 19:11). The same apocalyptic "mysterious fear," Merezhkovsky argues, is characteristic of the entire Napoleonic mystery. The Christian eschatology of the early centuries continues in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. References to the Apocalypse recur throughout the text of *Napoleon*. Merezhkovsky states that Napoleon's monstrous goal was the enslavement of the whole continent under his despotic rule. Napoleon is supposed to have confessed on more than one occasion that his ambition was to have universal power and sway. In 1811, he asserted that in five years' time he would become the ruler of the whole world. Through the chaos of war, he aimed at the harmony of peace. Under his universal rule, he hoped to achieve the union of all nations. These were his essential passions, the spur to all his activities, which were curiously backed both by his love and his hatred of the multitudes.

Closely connected with the theme of Napoleon's duality is the notion of the androgyny. Merezhkovsky's belief that androgyny represented the perfect individual, one capable of experiencing the mystery of the "two" in the sexual act, is interlinked with his "metaphysics of love". As did Plato in his "Symposium,"¹³ Merezhkovsky probed the concept of an androgynous being, stating that in each human being there are traces of man and woman. But, whereas Plato argued that originally there had not been two sexes, but three,

12 *Ibid.*, I, 32.

13 *The Works of Plato*, selected and edited by Irwin Edman (New York, 1938), pp. 353–83.

“man, woman, and a union of the two,”¹⁴ Merezhkovsky rejected such an idea and supported Otto Weininger’s proposition that in every human there are elements of both man and woman, with one of these predominating. “The fact is,” wrote Weininger in his book, *Sex and Character*, “that males and females are like two substances combined in various proportions, but with neither element ever wholly missing.” Weininger stated, “We find, so to speak, never either a man or a woman, but only the male condition and the female condition. Any individual, ‘A’ or ‘B’, is never to be designated merely as a man or a woman, but by a formula showing that it is a composite of male and female characters in different proportions.”¹⁵ This book was read with great interest by Hippus and Merezhkovsky. As did Weininger, Merezhkovsky stressed the bisexuality of human nature and regretted that its male and female components were not harmoniously united, as he believed they were in God and in Christ. As Merezhkovsky considered bisexuality a divine state, he recognized in God the bisexual Supreme Being, Father and Mother, but Mary, the Virgin, he regarded as the embodiment of the pure feminine principle, “in Whose Divinity motherhood and virginity are merged.” As God the Father is bisexual, so is the Son, in Whom the masculine and the Feminine are harmoniously blended, because in the divine and perfect order of the universe God the Father and God the Son form One Unity, One Whole. The blending of the Masculine and the Feminine varies from one individual to another. This formula is as distinctive as one’s personality; in fact, the two are inseparable. Eros always builds a double bridge between two peoples – from the masculinity of the one to the femininity of the other, and from the femininity of the one to the masculinity of the other. Man must understand and accept only three central ideas as the basic realities of life, according to Merezhkovsky: the androgyny of his nature, the idea of the spirit and the flesh being blended within him, and the notion of his resemblance to God. Man must further be aware that his androgynous state, the mysterious blending of the Masculine and the Feminine, underlies the entire structure of the universe.

Merezhkovsky saw manifestations of duality everywhere – in the structure of the world, with its contraposition of heaven and earth; in love, with its spiritual and sexual aspects; and in the human personality, with its male–female components. He even conceived Divinity as dual, viewing God as the Father and the Mother. All natural phenomena, such as light and darkness and warmth and cold, provided Merezhkovsky with examples. In accordance with an ancient belief that man was originally the male offspring of the sun, woman the daughter of earth, and man–woman the child of the moon (which

14 *Ibid.*, p. 353.

15 Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, 6th ed. (New York, n. d.), p. 8.

itself is made up of the sun and the earth), Hippius addressed the moon as "he" and "she" in one.¹⁶

Merezhkovsky's belief in the duality of nature was interlocked with his ideas of the androgyny, the androgynous character, as a mystical entity. Like the androgynous gods, Apollo and Dionysus, Merezhkovsky considered Napoleon to be an androgyny, not only within his physical being, but also within his spirit. Allegedly, Napoleon at times was weak weeping and calling himself a "milsop." Within him were combined two distinct entities, the masculine and the feminine. The divine spark of his personality blazed only at those moments when the two poles of his nature – the feminine and the masculine – fused. At such times, according to Merezhkovsky, he was capable of performing great deeds. For example, in 1805, Napoleon transferred his army as if by magic from the shores of La Manche to those of the Rhine River. This manoeuvre, in Merezhkovsky's presentation, is conducted like Dionysus luring a dancing chorus to a bacchanal.

Continuing the theme of the androgyny, Merezhkovsky refers to his book, *The Secret of the West: Atlantis–Europe* (1930), in which he states that the of Atlantis were androgynies, the men being effeminate in the spiritual sense of the word, as were the women masculine. He writes of the enigma of the Divine Eros, concealed in ancient mysteries, and of its revelation in the Divine Trinity. The eternally masculine is the Father; the eternally feminine is the Spirit–Mother; the union of these two is the Son. The Church, the body of Christ, is the Bride; Christ, the Bridegroom. The inherent meaning of this union is contained in the manifestation of these two principles in Him, Who is eternally feminine and eternally masculine. The essence of the Mother of God is the masculine and the feminine together, as embodied in the Greek ideal. The cosmos is the phenomenon of two-sexed Eros – the Logos. In our "uterine" stage and in Heavenly eternity all of us were androgynies. The Christian dogma of the Divine Trinity implies that "two will create one flesh" (Ephesians 5:31–32). But two in one is only the beginning. The end is Three in One, the Holy Trinity. The mystery of resurrection takes place within the mystery of personality recreated in its original wholeness, combining two sexes in one. This wholeness "closes the gates of death and gives birth to resurrection." These ideas also are developed in other works of Merezhkovsky.

The Secret of the West is also an eschatological work. Merezhkovsky cautions the reader that the contemporary civilized Western European world, as the legendary superpower of antiquity, Atlantis (spoken of by Plato in his books *Timaeus* and *Critias*) is in danger of disappearance through war.

16 Ref. Z. Hippius' poems "Mesyats" and "Ty".

Merezhkovsky argues that Atlantis, a legendary island, actually did exist. According to him, Atlantis was the first "humanity"; the modern world is the second; the third is yet to be born. The symbolistic view of history – that is, that Atlantis represents antediluvian humanity – is essential to Merezhkovsky's thought, a perspective independent of whether or not he believes that that mythical land in fact once existed. Merezhkovsky links cultures of the ancient New East, an assimilation prerequisite to his mystical, intuitive search for the precursors of Christ.

According to Merezhkovsky, Atlantis' legacy to Europe has been the greatest evil of all – war. "The first humanity began, and the second continues, everlasting war."¹⁷ Merezhkovsky believed Europe, the second humanity, is, as was the first, doomed to perish. Since he saw no salvation for the second humanity, Merezhkovsky placed his faith in the Apocalypse, in the third humanity: "The fearful knot of social inequality, which especially in our time threatens to tighten into a noose of death and to strangle humanity, may be loosened only in the Third Testament – in the Kingdom of the Holy Ghost."¹⁸

In Merezhkovsky's presentation of Atlantis, we read of a great island-continent in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, the people of which – the Atlanteans – with their great military and naval power, aimed at political and economic domination of the world. This Island of the Blissful was the "Golden Age", or Paradise on earth, the Kingdom of God in the guise of a perfect republic ruled by god-like people, the "people-gods." Atlas, the first high king of Atlantis, was the eldest son of Poseidon and a Greek maiden by the name of Cleito. The ancient god-titan of Atlantis was overthrown by the Olympic gods. He suffered much because he loved people more than he loved gods. The mystery of suffering was, therefore, the result of the mystery of love. The flame of love and the suffering of the Titans destroyed the world of the gods. The high king of Atlantis suffered with the first humanity – in pre-history; Prometheus suffered with the second – in history.

The denizens of Atlantis, living in the Paradise of heavenly love and tranquility, in their conceit decided "that they had reached the summit of wisdom, knowledge, power, greatness, and beauty; in the words of Plato, these unfortunates viewed themselves as 'all-beautiful' – 'men-gods'. Each of them considered himself to be a god and each was prepared to sacrifice all to himself alone."¹⁹ As a result, war, vice, and corruption became rampant, and Atlantis, foreordained to die, perished in the great flood. Thus, the Atlanteans' destruction was self-imposed. Merezhkovsky saw modern civilization,

17 D. S. Merezhkovsky, *Tayna Zapada: Atlandida-Evropa* (Belgrade, 1930), p. 184.

18 D. S. Merezhkovsky, *Dante* (Brussels: Petropolis, 1930), 2: 120.

19 *Tayna Zapada*, op. cit., p. 190.

with its bloody wars, violence, impulse for destruction, lust, treachery, debauchery, and greed as the apocalyptic vision of a modern Sodom.

The most important law in Atlantis was never to raise arms against another. The Atlanteans began their long reign in a state of peace, but they ended in war, which they bequeathed to Europe. For Merezhkovsky, the meaning of Atlantis was the end of the first world in the West; the meaning of Christianity was the end of the second world as a union of East and West. The mystery of the East and the West in the Cross, the change from the past to the present. In times of war, Atlantis continues to be an ominous symbol for Europe. However, Merezhkovsky observes, whereas the warriors of Atlantis used their weapons against their enemies, who were their victims, we use ours not only against our enemies but against our friends, and both are our victims. Not only are we capable of murder but of fratricide. The example of Atlantis should serve as a reminder to us. "Respice finem!" as it appears in L. Tolstoy's story *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886). No one in our day, laments Merezhkovsky, heeds the message of Atlantis.

To Merezhkovsky, the link between the first and the second humanity has now been broken, but is still retained in the mystery of what Schelling calls "*das Ursystem der Menschheit*"²⁰; that is, in the first religion of mankind. If the second humanity annihilates itself, as did the first, without fulfilling its purpose, the third mankind will, have to accomplish this mission. It once again will make whole the parts, for the life of humanity is actually a Divine trilogy, according to Merezhkovsky – Atlantis, History, and the Apocalypse. Thus, there are three mankind in the history of the world. The first was of the Father; the second is of the Son; the third of the Holy Ghost. The mystery of the Three is taking place in these three worlds.

Endowed with a unique gift for assimilating history, understanding ancient myths, symbols, omens, visions, rites, and mysteries, Merezhkovsky concentrates on the religions of the ancients and on the historical metamorphosis of Christianity. The destruction of Atlantis he equates with the Great Flood in Genesis and the epic of Gilgamesh, referred to above.

More specifically, comparing Napoleon's likeness to the inhabitants of Atlantis, Merezhkovsky states that both were sons of the Ocean. The former created the first world empire; the latter, attempted to create the final one. Through his life, Napoleon waged war against England, the small modern Atlantis, for the sake of the great future Atlantis, the whole planet of Earth, with all of its lands and seas. The *inner* likeness between the denizens of the first Atlantis and Napoleon was even more pronounced, according to Merezhkovsky, for the religion of the Atlanteans could be summarized, he

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 190-1.

stated, in the following fashion: Mother, the Earth; Father, the Sun; Man, their Son. Napoleon allegedly said that if he could choose his own religion, he would worship the Sun that is, the true God of Earth. Moreover, he noted, the soul of the first Atlantis was "magic". Merezhkovsky asserts that Napoleon's soul was also "magic". The power of this magic was the power of hypnosis. One of Napoleon's associates is supposed to have said about the French Emperor: "Sire, vous faites toujours the miracles!" The poet Tyutchev referred to Napoleon as "an eternal Magus." The Egyptian Mamelukes called him a "sorcerer", and the Austrian field marshal Melos named him "L'homme du destin." For Merezhkovsky, those names indicated that Napoleon, with his "magic" soul of ancient Atlantis, was creating his own life and that of other nations; that is, universal history, as an unceasing and unfolding miracle. Later, the titanic nature of the denizens of Atlantis led to self-annihilation, as it did with Napoleon. Having reached the pinnacle of their authority and power, both Atlantis and Napoleon's Empire fell due, most of all, to a lack of moderation.

Merezhkovsky summarizes: "Atlantis and the Apocalypse indicate the end of the first humanity, as well as the end of the second. This is [Merezhkovsky's] reason for identifying Napoleon with both an inhabitant of ancient Atlantis and the Apocalyptic Horseman."²¹ The first Dionysus was Gilgamesh; the last, Napoleon. Both of them, having completed the path of the sun from the West to the East, like the sun, submerged into the ocean; as a matter of fact, the same ocean where once Atlantis had drowned. And both, Gilgamesh and Napoleon, finally found the Ear of Corn, the tormenting Thorn, the intoxicating and deadly Rose of Dionysus. For Merezhkovsky, Napoleon was the last hero of the West.

Merezhkovsky concludes *Napoleon* with his analysis of mystery religions in the Greek world, such a those of Samothrace and of Eleusis. The Greater Eleusinia, which took place every five years in September, appears to have had no connection with the actual disappearance and return of Kore, the daughter of the goddess Demeter, who was abducted by Hades, the brother of Zeus. Demeter, inconsolable at the loss of her daughter, would not permit the earth to bear fruit unless she saw Kore again. Kore, now named Persephone and married to Hades, returned to her mother, with whom she was allowed to live two-thirds of the year, spending only one-third of the year with her husband Hades. The goddess Demeter was appeased by this arrangement and bade the soil to once again be fertile. During the winters Persephone joined her husband; in the spring, she returned to her mother, radiant like the season.

21 *Napoleon*, op. cit., I, 71.

Demeter, pacified, and prior to her return to Olympus, instructed the kings of the earth in her divine science and initiated them into her sacred mysteries.

The Greater Eleusinia, a festival honoring Demeter, which was the most revered festival in Greece, had as its principal purpose the celebration of the mysteries of the goddess. The places the Greater Eleusinia was held were Athens and Eleusis. The meaning of these mysteries is unknown, but to Merezhkovsky they had to do with the problem of the future, of which the initiated learned, through revelation, from Demeter. Here, too, Merezhkovsky attempts to connect the past with the present and both of these with the future, and to comprehend the link between those ancient mystery religions and festivals with Christianity. The progressive revelation from paganism to Christianity was Merezhkovsky's life-long preoccupation. The Eleusinian Ear of Corn was in his opinion the symbol of the resurrection, which was revealed through the most sacred mysteries of Greece. For him, the manifest Eleusinian Trinity consists of Mother, Daughter, and Son; while the sacred Trinity consists of Father, Son, and Mother. Merezhkovsky ponders whether the sacrifice of the Son, as it appears in the mystery religions, indicates the initial stage of Christianity. Is the cult of Christ related to the ancient mystery cults? Through such questions Merezhkovsky attempts to establish the ancient mystery religions' continuity with Christianity.

In summary, to elaborate Merezhkovsky's philosophy of religion and to delineate Napoleon's complex character, Merezhkovsky used the Bible, pre- and non-Christian mythology, ritual symbolism, and the myths and sagas of the ancient past. He transformed and enriched legendry to fit his own metaphysical and religious scheme of thought, with its own code of internal rules. Coincidentally, he undertook a meticulous study of the facts of the events in the historical and religious evolution of mankind, considering these as essential for the comprehension of the mystery of Being. Indeed, Merezhkovsky's spiritual deliberations and their artistic presentations in *Napoleon* will inspire even the cynical to cogitate.