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## A Conversation Among Five Travellers Concerning Life's True Happiness\*

*Hryhorii Skovoroda*

ATHANASIOS: In their lives people labour, scurry about, and pile up treasures, but to what end many of them do not themselves know. Upon reflection, all the thousands of varied human enterprises are seen to have but a single end—the *heart's* joy. To this end we choose friends according to our inclination in order that we may take pleasure in sharing our thoughts with them; we achieve high rank in order that our self-esteem may be gratified by the respect of others; we devise various kinds of drink, food, and snacks to please our taste; we seek out different kinds of music, composing a multitude of concertos, minuets, dances, and contredances to delight our ears; we build fine houses, plant gardens and orchards, and weave gold brocades and fabrics, embroidering them with pleasingly coloured silken threads, and deck ourselves out in such garments to give pleasure to the eye and provide softness to the

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\* This translation of “Razgovor piati putnikov o istinnom shchastii v zhizni” is based on Skovoroda’s *Povne zibrannia tvoriv u dvokh tomakh* (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1973), 1: 324–56. Page references to this edition are given in square brackets. An abbreviated version of this dialogue, translated by George L. Kline, appeared in *Russian Philosophy*, ed. James M. Edie, James P. Scanlan, and Mary-Barbara Zeldin with the collaboration of George L. Kline (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965; reprinted Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976, 1984), 1: 26–57. That translation was completed by Taras D. Zakydalsky. We would like to thank the University of Tennessee Press for permitting us to use the earlier translation.

Skovoroda’s biblical quotations have been checked against the King James version of the Bible. All footnotes are the translators’.

body; we concoct fragrant spirits, powders, creams, and perfumes to gratify our sense of smell. In a word, we try to cheer up our spirit with every means we can devise. Oh, how great is the gaiety of the high-born and prosperous in this world! In their houses the spirit lives, dissolved in joy and satisfaction. Oh, how precious you are, joy of the heart!

Tsars, princes, and people of wealth pay uncounted thousands for you, while we who are poor and not prosperous nourish ourselves, as it were, from the crumbs that fall from their tables. Just think of the triumphant splendour of the renowned cities of Europe.

JAMES: It is truly great. I have heard that nowhere are there more diversions and delights than in Paris and Venice.

ATHANASIUS: True, there are many over there, but until you bring them to us from Venice we shall perish here of boredom.

GREGORY: Stop talking nonsense, dear friends. High rank, a pleasant setting, various games and diversions, and all your many enterprises are powerless to bring joy to the spirit or to drive away the boredom that has taken possession of you.

JAMES: What then can do it?

GREGORY: Only one thing, and that is to discover in what true happiness consists and then to acquire it.

ATHANASIUS: That is true. We are born for true happiness, and we travel toward it; our life is a road that flows like a river.

JAMES: I have long sought happiness, but nowhere have I been able to find it. [325]

GREGORY: If you truly wish to find it, unravel this question for me: What is best for man?

JAMES: Heaven knows, but why do you ask us about something that the great sages were not able to see and on which their views diverged like travellers on different roads? For what is best is highest, and what is highest is the head and crown of all. The ancient philosophers called this the chief good, the final end, and the supreme good. But who can unravel for you what is the limit and haven of all our desires?

GREGORY: Softly, my dear sir! You have risen very high. Let me put it to you more simply: What do you desire most of all in life?

JAMES: It is as though you had stirred up an anthill with your staff—so greatly has your question agitated our desires.

ATHANASIUS: I should like to be a man of high rank and have underlings who are as sturdy as Russians and as virtuous as ancient Romans; I should like a house such as those in Venice and a garden such as those in Florence; I should like to be intelligent, learned, noble, and as rich as a bull in furs.

GREGORY: What nonsense are you speaking?

ATHANASIUS: Stalwart as a lion, comely as Venus—

JAMES: I recall a she-dog named Venus.

GREGORY: My dear sir, please continue.

JAMES: With a tail like a lion, a head like a bear, ears like a donkey....

GREGORY: It is doubtful that such foolish wishes could reach the ears of God. You, with your enterprises, are like the tree that desires at one and the same time to be an oak, a maple, a linden, a birch, a fig tree, an olive tree, a plane tree, a date tree, a rosebush, and a rue—both sun and moon, both tail and head. The babe in arms often reaches for a sharp knife or a flame, but *Nature*, our most merciful mother, knows better than we do what is good for us. Although we weep and struggle, she feeds us all, as is seemly, at her own breasts and clothes us. The good child is satisfied with this, but the bad seed stirs up both itself and others. How many millions of these unhappy children complain day and night, content with nothing? If you place one thing in their hands, they cry for something else. We cannot fail to be unhappy.

ATHANASIUS: Why is that?

GREGORY: Because we cannot find happiness.

JAMES: For what reason?

GREGORY: Because we do not desire it and cannot desire it. [326]

ATHANASIUS: But why?

GREGORY: Because we do not understand in what it consists. The chief thing is to discover the source of desire. Desire leads to seeking something and then getting it. This is well-being, that is, the getting of what is good for you.<sup>1</sup> Now you should understand what *wisdom* means.

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1. There is an untranslatable play on the words “poluchenie” (‘receiving’ or ‘getting’) and “blagopoluchenie” (‘well-being’ or ‘welfare’).

JAMES: I often hear the word “wisdom.”

GREGORY: It is the task of wisdom to understand what happiness consists in—this is the right wing,<sup>2</sup> and virtue labours to find it. For this reason, the Greeks and Romans called it “manliness” and “strength” (*arete, virtus*)—that is the left wing. Without these two wings you can never rise and fly to well-being. Wisdom is like the sharp and far-seeing eye of the eagle, and virtue is like manly arms joined to the nimble legs of a deer. This divine union is vividly depicted in the following fable.

JAMES: You have taken it out of my mouth. For surely you mean the story of the two travellers—one legless, the other blind.

GREGORY: Indeed, you have grasped my very thought.

ATHANASIOS: Will you set it forth more fully?

GREGORY: A traveller, in passing through many countries and kingdoms, lost his legs. He then thought of returning to his father’s house. Supporting himself with his arms and hands, he made his way back, but with enormous labour. Finally, when he had crawled to the top of a mountain from which he could see his father’s house, he lost his arms and hands as well. From that spot his sharp eyes gazed with merry desire across the rivers, forests, and cliffs, across the summits of the pyramid-like mountains, at the castle, gleaming from afar, that was the house of his father and of his whole peace-loving family—the end and crown of all his traveller’s labours. But the misfortune was that our Seer, having neither arms nor legs, merely tormented himself, like the rich man in the Gospel story as he looked upon Lazarus.

However, glancing back, he unexpectedly glimpsed a strange and pitiful sight. A blind man was stumbling as though he were drunk along the road, listening intently, probing with his cane now to the right, now to the left and straying off the road. As he came closer he sighed: “Our days are spent in vanity.... Oh Lord, tell me of Your paths.... Alas, of my wanderings there is no end!” And he spoke other words of this kind to himself, sighing as he repeatedly stumbled and fell.

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2. Probably a reference to the Owl of Minerva, traditional symbol of wisdom, frequently alluded to by Skovoroda in other works.

“My friend, I fear that I may frighten you, but who are you?” asked the man of clear vision.

“This is the thirty-fourth year of my journey, and you are the first to cross my path,” answered the man whose eyes were darkened. “My journeying in many parts of the world has turned into exile. The extraordinary heat of the Arabian sun deprived me of my sight, and I am returning blind to my father.” [327]

“And who is your father?”

“He lives in the mountain castle which is called *Mirgorod*.<sup>3</sup> His name is Uranus and mine is Doer.”

“Good heavens, you don’t say! I am your brother,” cried the sighted man. “My name is Seer.” Extraordinary happiness always finds expression in tears. After copious shedding of tears, the blind man, his eyes still damp, spoke to his brother as follows:

“Dearest brother! I have heard about you, and now I see you with the eyes of my heart. Take pity on me, put an end to my sorrows, be my teacher. In truth, labour gladdens me. But this constant stumbling drains away all my strength.”

“I am sorry,” said the man of radiant eye, “that I cannot serve you, my beloved brother. As a traveller I have traversed the whole circuit of the earth on my own two legs. They carried me everywhere without mishap, but the craggy mountains that I encountered on my path took them from me, so that I had to continue my journey on my arms and hands. At this place I have lost them as well. Now I can neither walk nor crawl upon the earth. Many people have wished to employ me, but since I am unable even to crawl, I could be of no use to them.”

“That is not the end of the matter,” said the blind man, “you are a light and precious burden to me: I shall carry you, my treasure, on my back. Let your clear eyes be the eternal masters of my body and a head to all my members. Put an end to the torment of this primordial darkness that hounds me inhumanly along the empty path of the body’s distractions. I am your steed; mount upon my shoulders and guide me, dearest brother and master.”

“I shall mount up willingly, my brother, in order to show the truth of the word of God written by the author of *Proverbs*: ‘Brother

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3. *Mirgorod* means ‘city of peace.’

helped by brother is like a firm and tall city, strong like a well-founded kingdom.’<sup>4</sup> Now, look at God’s wondrous work: two men are made one. One traveller is created from two kindred souls, without any fusion of the two, but also without division into each other’s servants. This unprecedented traveller follows the central path, turning neither to the right nor to the left, readily crossing rivers, forests, crevasses, and cliffs, passing over sheer mountains, and climbing with joy to the height of the peaceful city. There he is surrounded by radiant and fragrant air; an orderly crowd of inhabitants, breathing peace and love and clapping their hands, await him at the gate; and within the gates Uranus himself, ancient of days, receives him into His holy embrace.”

JAMES: What then shall I say to you?

GREGORY: Declare your chief desire.

JAMES: Our sovereign desire is to be happy. [328]

GREGORY: Where have you seen a bird or beast without such an aim? Tell me where and in what is the happiness you seek? Until you can say that, my dear friend, you are like the blind man: he seeks his father’s castle but he cannot see where it lies. He seeks happiness but, not understanding where it is, he falls into unhappiness. Most merciful Nature has opened the path to happiness to all souls without exception....

ATHANASIUS: Stay! I think these words smell of heresy—“all souls without exception”!

JAMES: Please, do not interrupt, Mr. Orthodox Superstitious; each and every one is born into the world for a good end. And a good end means happiness. How can one say that Nature, our universal Mother, has not opened the path to happiness for every creature that breathes?

ATHANASIUS: Nature too smells of idolatry: it were better to say that God has opened the path—not your heathen Nature.

JAMES: All hail the doltish theologian! If I, in calling God Nature, am a heathen, you have long since been an idolater.

ATHANASIUS: How is that?

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4. Cf. *Pro.* 18:19: “A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle.”

JAMES: Because this name (God) is a heathen name.

ATHANASIUS: That may be so, but Christians have by now made it their own.

JAMES: But why do you fear to call God Nature, since the early Christians adopted the heathen name (God)?

ATHANASIUS: You have certainly learned how to chatter.

JAMES: Is it possible that you have never heard that the Supreme Being has no proper name of His own?

ATHANASIUS: No name? But did He not have a name among the Jews? It was Jehovah; do you understand what it means?

JAMES: I do not.

ATHANASIUS: Well, here is the problem, you don't understand.

JAMES: I know only that in *Isaiah* it is written in many places: "I am, I am, I am he who is."<sup>5</sup> Sir theologian, leave the glossing of words to the Hebrew glossators, and yourself lay hold on what is meant by the name I am. There is no great need to know the *origin* of this word: does bread come from grain or from our efforts.<sup>6</sup> The point is to know what it *means*. This is the source of temporal life—if one could only grasp it.

ERMOLAI: May God help us! What are you quarreling about? I have been listening for a long time.

ATHANASIUS: Greetings, dear friend!

JAMES: Would you be the judge of our quarrel?

ERMOLAI: Gladly, but what is it about?

JAMES: They consider it idolatry to call God Nature. [329]

ERMOLAI: In the Bible God is called fire, water, wind, iron, stone, and countless other names. Why then should He not be called Nature? In my own opinion it would be impossible to find a more important and more seemly name for God than this one. *Natura* is a Latin word; in our

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5. Cf. *Is.* 41:4, 43:10, 43:13, 46:4, 48:12, 52:6: "I am he." God defines Himself as "I am that I am" and "I am" in *Ex.* 3:14. In the Elizabethan version of the Church Slavonic Bible, which was available to Skovoroda, in *Ex.* 3:14 God calls Himself "Az esm syi" (I am he who is) and in *Is.* 41:4, 43:10, and 46:4, He calls Himself "Az esm" (I am). Skovoroda often combines quotations from different sources.

6. "Khleb—ot khleba ili ot khlopot."

language it is *priroda* or *estestvo*. This word refers to everything that is born within the machine of this world, while what is unborn, like fire, as well as what in general is born is called the world. For that reason...

ATHANASIUS: Hold on. All material things were or are born, including your noble fire.

ERMOLAI: I shall not dispute it, dear friend. Let us admit that all material things were born. But why not call Him in whom the whole world with its births is concealed like a beautiful, flowering tree within the seed from which it develops, by the name that encompasses all creation, that is, Nature? Moreover, the word “nature” means not only every being that is born and changes, but also the secret economy of that ever present force which has its centre or chief mid-point everywhere and its circumference nowhere, like the sphere by which that force is graphically represented: is this not like God? It is called Nature because everything that happens on its outer surface or is born out of its secret unbounded depths, as from the womb of our universal Mother, has a beginning in time. And since this Mother to give birth does not receive [seed] from anyone, but gives birth of Herself, She is called both Father and beginning<sup>7</sup> that has neither beginning nor end and is dependent upon neither time nor place. Painters represent it by a circlet or ring, or else by a coiled serpent holding its tail between its teeth.

The action of this all-present, all-powerful and all-wise Force is called the secret law, governance, or realm that is diffused endlessly and timelessly throughout all matter; that is, one cannot ask when it began, for it always was; nor how long it will last, for it will always be; nor to what point it extends, for it is everywhere at all times. “Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name,”<sup>8</sup> God says to Moses, “if through the darkness of matter thou canst glimpse what everywhere was, is, and will be—that is my name and my nature?” The name is in the nature and the nature is in the name; the one does not differ from the other. Both are the same; both are eternal. “He who sees me through the darkness with the eye of faith knows my name. But he who seeks to know my name knows neither me nor my

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7. “Nachalo” can mean both ‘beginning’ and ‘principle.’

8. *Gen.* 32:29. God asks Jacob, not Moses, this question. The rest of the quotation is not in the Bible.

name, for both are the same. My name and I are one.” “I am he who is. I am that I am.”<sup>9</sup> If one knows God, then whatever name one’s worshipful heart gives Him is true and good. It does not matter that one person knows [bread as] *artos* and another as *panis* as long as they do not [330] differ in understanding. Moses and Isaiah call Him *I am*. Following them Paul said: “the same yesterday and to day and for ever.”<sup>10</sup> And the theologian gives Him another name: “God is love.”<sup>11</sup> What he calls love is the same simple unity everywhere, always, and in everything. Love and unity are the same. The unity of parts is alien to Him, hence, disintegration is not necessary and destruction is completely ruled out. Jeremiah calls Him a sword, while Paul calls Him the living word, but they mean the same thing. This sword cuts down everything perishable and all things become dilapidated, like garments, while the words of His law and kingdom do not pass away.

GREGORY: How long will you go on quarreling? Let us return to our discussion.

ERMOLAI: What was the discussion about?

JAMES: About what happiness consists in.

GREGORY: Nature, our most merciful Mother and the Father of all our pleasures, has opened the path to happiness to all creatures that breathe without exception.

JAMES: Are you content with this conclusion?

ATHANASIUS: Now I am.

GREGORY: But the trouble is that we do not try to find out precisely where happiness lies. We grab and clutch what merely presents an attractive appearance as though it were a firm foundation. Lack of counsel is the source of our unhappiness. It makes us prisoners, representing the bitter as sweet and the sweet as bitter. That would not happen if we took counsel with ourselves. Let us judge, my friends, and mend our ways; it is never too late to begin a good work. Let us seek that in which our strength lies. Let us take thought which prayer is sweetest to God. Tell me what you consider best. If

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9. See n. 5.

10. *Heb.* 13:8.

11. *I Jn.* 4:8.

you find it, then you will also find happiness and at the same time will be able to acquire it.

ERMOLAI: What seems best to me is to be content with all things.

GREGORY: Make your meaning clearer!

ERMOLAI: To be content with one's money, land, health, the people around one, and everything else in the world.

JAMES: Why are you laughing?

ATHANASIUS: I am glad that my foolishness has found a companion. He also desires to be as humped as a camel, as big-bellied as a whale, as long-nosed as a crocodile, as graceful as a greyhound, as appetizing as a boar, etc.

GREGORY: You have the lips but not the heart of a theologian. You speak well of God but desire what is absurd. Be not angry, dear friend, at my frankness. Picture to yourself the countless number of those who will never know plenty: the sick and the old, and call to mind those who are born with crippled bodies. Surely you do not think that [331] Nature, our most merciful and solicitous Mother, has behaved like a stepmother and has slammed the door to happiness in their faces. I beg you, do not confine God's all-wise providence within narrow limits; do not slander Nature's omnipotent mercy. Nature is good to every creature that breathes, not just to a chosen few members of the human race. In her sedulous providence She has prepared all those things without which the happiness of the lowliest worm cannot be accomplished, and if anything is lacking then, of course, it is superfluous. The mole has no eyes but what does that matter? Birds know nothing of shipbuilding, but they have no need of such knowledge. Whoever needs it knows it. The lily knows nothing of manufacture; it is beautiful without it. Leave off, dear friend, this petition that slanders our own Mother.

ERMOLAI: I do not slander and I make no petition.

GREGORY: You slander Her mercy.

ERMOLAI: God forbid! I do not slander God.

GREGORY: What do you mean, not slander? How many thousands of people are without that which you desire?

ERMOLAI: Countless thousands, but what of that?

GREGORY: Strange man! Then, according to your definition, God is not merciful?

ERMOLAI: How so?

GREGORY: Because He has closed off from them the path to that which you desire, that is, the certain happiness of the creatures.

ERMOLAI: What point have we reached in our discussion?

GREGORY: The point where either you and your desire are stupid or the Lord is not merciful.

ERMOLAI: God forbid that I should say such a thing.

GREGORY: Why are you so sure that attaining the object of your desire will make you happy? Consider how many thousands of people have been ruined by attaining what they desired. To what vices does health with abundance lead? Whole republics have fallen because of it. How then can you desire abundance as though it were happiness? Happiness does not make people unhappy. Do you not see now how many people have been swallowed up by abundance as by a universal flood, while their souls are grinding themselves to pieces through immoderate undertakings, like millstones that turn without grain? God's mercy, certainly, would have showered you with abundance had you needed it. Now, cast away this desire from your soul. It stinks like our worldly native *kvas*.<sup>12</sup>

ERMOLAI: Do you call my desire *kvas*?

GREGORY: Yes, and a vile *kvas*, worldly and filled with restless worms that mortify the soul day and night. For, as Solomon says: "Counsel in the heart of man is like deep and clear water,"<sup>13</sup> so I say that the desire in your heart is like vile and worldly *kvas*. "Thou hast put gladness in my heart,"<sup>14</sup> [332] so David sang—and I say: you have taken this disturbance into your heart.

ERMOLAI: Why is desire worldly?

GREGORY: Because it is common.

ERMOLAI: And why is it common?

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12. A drink based on fermented bread.

13. Cf. *Prov.* 20:5: "Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water."

14. *Ps.* 4:7.

GREGORY: Because it stinks and because it is everywhere. Where will you find me a soul not filled with this *kvas*? Who does not desire honours, silver, and lands? Here is the source of murmuring, complaints, sorrows, hostilities, litigation, robberies, and thefts—of all machinations, hooks and crooks, and cunning devices. From this spring flow treason, revolt, usurpation, the fall of states, and a whole sea of troubles. “Lord,” says Saint Peter in the *Acts*, “nothing unclean will enter my mouth.”<sup>15</sup> In our language the word is “unclean,” but in Greek it is “koinon,” that is, ‘common.’ Common, worldly, and unclean all mean the same thing. The opinion of the world is not clean water in a man’s heart, but a swamp—*koinon*, *coenum*—a dwelling-place for swine and evil spirits. Who has stamped this crooked path to happiness so deeply in their hearts? Surely, it was the Father of Darkness.

Receiving this secret glory of the dark kingdom from one another, people, led by a spirit infected with worldly appetites, wander from the glory of the Light Divine, which leads to true happiness. They have not entered into the heart of the sweetest truth, and their sinful wandering, in the words of Jeremiah, is written on a diamond fingernail, on the very horns of their altars.<sup>16</sup> Whatever they say or do follows from this, so that this primordial script cannot be erased, or cut away, or torn up, unless a man tries with all his heart together with God, as it is said in Paul: “For we wrestle not....”<sup>17</sup>

Gird your true loins, oh man, and arm yourself against your own wicked opinion. Why do you esteem the ways of the world? For you know that truth always resided and resides in the few men enlightened by God, while the world cannot accept it. Bring before you all the best painters and architects, and you will discover that artistic truth does not dwell in many places and that the largest crowd of artists is imbued with ignorance and lack of taste.

ERMOLAI: Then tell us in what does true happiness consist?

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15. Cf. *Acts* 11:8: “Not so, Lord: for nothing common or unclean hath at any time entered into my mouth.”

16. *Jer.* 17:1 says: “with the point of a diamond: it is graven upon the table of their heart, and upon the horns of your altars.”

17. The point becomes clearer if we expand the quotation: “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood” (*Eph.* 6:12).

GREGORY: First, discover where it does not lie, so that having explored the empty nooks, you will more readily come to the place where it resides.

JAMES: But looking in dark corners without a candle—how is he to search for it?

GREGORY: Here is your candle: our most merciful Father [333] has opened the path to happiness to all people. With this touchstone test the purity of gold and silver.

ATHANASIUS: But what if one is unskilled in such testing?

GREGORY: Here is how to do it! Can all people be painters or architects?

ATHANASIUS: Of course not. That would be absurd.

GREGORY: Hence, happiness does not lie in those callings. You can see that this path is not open to everyone.

ATHANASIUS: This is impossible, just as the whole body cannot be an eye.

GREGORY: Can all people be prosperous or of high station, strong or comely? Can everyone live in France? Can all people be born in the same period? By no means! Thus it is plain that true happiness lies neither in high rank nor bodily gifts, neither in a beautiful country nor a glorious age, neither in lofty sciences nor the abundance of wealth.

ATHANASIUS: But is it impossible to be happy if one has high rank and lives in a pleasant land?

GREGORY: You have jumped to the other side of the question, like the Pole who jumped over his mare.

ATHANASIUS: How is that?

GREGORY: He was unable to mount without assistance, and when he tried for the twelfth time, he slid over to the other side. “The devil take you! You’ve overdone it,” he said angrily.<sup>18</sup>

ATHANASIUS: I’m not asking about him; I’m asking about myself.

GREGORY: Not long ago you said that high rank and abundance constituted happiness, and now you exclude it from them altogether. I do

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18. The story goes that he invoked the saints to help him, adding another saint to his list after every attempt. After landing on the other side of his horse, he chided the saints, “Don’t push all together.”

not say that the happy man cannot enjoy high station, or live in a pleasant land, or have things in abundance; I say only that it is not because of his rank, homeland, or wealth that he is happy. The aroma of a rich feast in a fine house is not caused by its ornamented corners. Fine pastries are often served in unornamented dwellings. The splendour of a house—as the saying goes—comes from its fine pastries, and not from its fine corners.<sup>19</sup> Can you assert that all the inhabitants of France are calm and merry?

ATHANASIOS: Who would endorse such a claim?

GREGORY: But if one's homeland were the substance and essence of happiness, none of one's countrymen could fail to be happy. In every rank there are happy and unhappy people. God did not limit happiness to the days of Abraham, to the ancestors of Solomon, or to the reign of King David, to the sciences or to social ranks, to natural gifts or to wealth. For this reason He did not open the path to it to everyone and is just in all his acts.<sup>20</sup>

ATHANASIOS: Where then is happiness to be sought, if it is neither here nor there, nor anywhere else? [334]

GREGORY: Listen to a fable I learned when I was still a boy. An old man and his wife built themselves a hut but left no window in it. The hut was not very cheerful. What should they do? After long deliberation the "family senate" decided that they should go to fetch some light. They got an animal skin and spread it out in the midday sun to collect sunlight as though it were flour and bring it into the hut.

They did this several times and then looked to see if there was light in the hut. But they saw nothing. The old woman decided that the light must be leaking out like wine from a wineskin; therefore, they should run faster with it. Running back and forth the two "senators" collided at the door so that the foot of one hit the head of the other. A noisy quarrel arose. "You have certainly lost your mind," said the old woman. "And you were born without one," retorted the old man.

They were about to set out to distant mountains and valleys to fetch light when a strange monk stopped them. Though only fifty years old, he was very clever at providing light. "Because you offered me bread

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19. The Russian proverb rhymes: "Ne krasen dom uglami, krasen pirogami."

20. Skovoroda should have said "He opened," rather than "He did not open."

and salt<sup>21</sup>,” he said, “I must not keep this useful secret from you.” Following his advice, the old man took a hatchet and began to hack through the wall of the hut, uttering such words as these: “Festive light, living light, ubiquitous light, everlasting light, impartial light—visit this dwelling, bring it light and enlightenment.” Suddenly the wall broke open; pleasant light flooded the dwelling. And from that time to this, people have built lighted chambers in that land.

ATHANASIUS: There is no one in the world so foolish as your old man and woman.

GREGORY: He is mine and yours, and belongs to all people.

ATHANASIUS: Impossible! What is his name?

GREGORY: Ish.<sup>22</sup>

ATHANASIUS: Ish—the devil take him.

GREGORY: You flee him but he is always with you.

ATHANASIUS: In what sense?

GREGORY: If you don’t want to be with him, you will be him.

ATHANASIUS: I have had enough of your old man.

GREGORY: What does the name matter if your deeds identify you as Ish?

ATHANASIUS: Away with him, I say!

ERMOLAI: And what is the old woman’s name?

GREGORY: Mut.<sup>23</sup>

JAMES: Mut will not be separated from Ish;<sup>24</sup> they are an inseparable pair.

GREGORY: But aren’t all of us relatives of Ish? We seek happiness<sup>25</sup> in our social stations, our epoch, our country, while it is always and everywhere with us. We are in it like fish in water; surrounding us, it seeks us out. It is nowhere because it is everywhere. It is like the radiance of the sun: all you have to do is open a passage for it into your soul. It is always knocking against your wall, seeking an entrance and not finding it. And your heart is dark and joyless [335],

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21. Traditional Slavic symbols of welcome and hospitality.

22. The name suggests searching or quest.

23. The name suggests trouble or disturbance.

24. The original text rhymes: “Mut ot Isha ne razluchitsia.”

25. There is a play on the words “Ish” and “ishchem” (we seek).

like the brink of an abyss. Tell me, is it not foolishness and madness to worry about a valuable garland? To what end? As though a man in a simple cap could not enjoy the blessed and universal light to which this prayer flows upward: “Hear me o Thou holy One, Who hast an eternal and seeing eye.” The foolish husband with his malicious wife leaves his home, seeks happiness outside himself, moves from one calling to another, acquires a brilliant name, drapes himself in bright garments, draws to himself a swinish rabble of gold coins and silver vessels, finds friends and foolish comrades in order to bring a ray of blessed radiance and radiant blessedness into his soul. Is there light? They look—there is nothing. Now look at the heaving ocean, at the crowd of people, called world or cosmos, which in every age, country, and station has been filled with disorder and rebellion. What things does it refrain from doing? It makes war, carries on lawsuits, schemes, worries, initiates, builds, destroys, whirls, casts a shadow. Does it not seem to you that Ish and Mut are running into their hut? Is there light? They look—there is nothing.

JAMES: Blessed Ish and happy Mut! At the end of their days their prayer was answered and the all-seeing, unsleeping great eye of the whole world, the sun, lighted up their dwelling, while others suffered eternal torment, rebellion, and vacillations.

LONGINUS: God give you joy!

GREGORY: Oh, my dear friend! What spirit taught you this greeting? We thank you for your felicitations.

JAMES: The ancient Christians always used this greeting.

ERMOLAI: That is not surprising. This way of greeting is characteristic of Christ our Lord. It springs from the peace of God. In the world, Christ brought us the good news and a peace that surpasses all understanding.<sup>26</sup> He deigns to grant us peace. “Peace be to this house,”<sup>27</sup> peace be with you.<sup>28</sup> He teaches peace: “A new commandment I give unto you...”<sup>29</sup> Upon departing, He leaves them peace: “My peace I give unto you, keep it! Be not afraid! Rejoice!”<sup>30</sup>

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26. A reference to “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding” (*Phil.* 4:7).

27. *Luke* 10:5.

28. Cf. *Luke* 24:36: “Peace be unto you.”

29. *Jn.* 13:34.

30. Cf. *Jn.* 14:27: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.... Let not your

ATHANASIUS: Do you know what we were discussing?

LONGINUS: I have heard everything down to the last detail.

ATHANASIUS: He must have been sitting beneath that apple tree. Am I right?

LONGINUS: You could not see me because of the branches.

GREGORY: Tell us, my dear Longinus, is there any more miserable creature than a man who has not discovered what is best and most desirable for him?

LONGINUS: I myself have often been astonished at our excessive curiosity, assiduity, and penetration with respect to peripheral things: we have measured the sea, the earth, the air, and the heavens, and have disturbed the belly of the earth to draw out metals. We have traced the paths of the planets; we have found mountains, rivers, and cities on the moon; we have discovered a countless multitude of unfinished worlds. We build incomprehensible machines, fill great abysses, block off and redirect [336] the flow of waters; every day we produce new experiments and wild inventions.

Good heavens, what is there that we cannot do! But the sad thing is that, in all this, greatness is lacking. Something is missing that we cannot even name; we know something is missing, but we do not know what it is. We are like an infant that cannot yet talk: it only cries and feels only frustration without being able to know or to say what it needs. Does not our soul's evident dissatisfaction suggest that all of our sciences cannot satiate our minds? You see the sciences filling the soul's abyss. We have devoured a countless multitude of spinning systems with planets like clockworks on English bell towers, planets with mountains, oceans, and cities—yet we remain ravenous. Our thirst is not slaked; rather it increases.

The more copiously we dine on mathematics, medicine, physics, mechanics, music, and their ungovernable sisters, the more our heart burns with hunger and thirst. In our coarse stupefaction we fail to realize that all of them are only handmaidens serving a mistress, tails to a head, without which the entire body is ineffective. What is hungrier, more restless and dangerous than a human heart that is attended by these ungoverned slaves? Is there anything it will not dare to undertake? The insatiable spirit drives the people; it furthers

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heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”

and follows its inclination, like a ship without a pilot or a carriage without a driver, without counsel, foresight, or enjoyment. Like ravening dogs, which growl as they gulp down deadly dust and ashes, alienated and erring from the moment we leave the womb, avoiding the essential truth, which rings out over the spiritual abyss in us: “I am, I am he who is!” Since people have not yet taken account of their most essential need, or of the limit, line, and boundary of all their desires and intentions, so as to direct all their works to this most central and certain point, they have neglected the Mistress of all the ancillary spirits and sciences that from earth return to earth and bypass the door of Her mercy, a door that opens a way out and leads our thoughts away from the base villainy of the shadows towards the radiant and essential truth of an unfading happiness.

And now give thought, dear friends, and tell me what is man’s most essential need. What is best for you and most desirable in itself? What can make you happy? Think of this now, in good time; leave the ranks of those lost travellers who do not know where they are going or why! Our life is a path<sup>31</sup> and the way to happiness is not short.

ATHANASIUS: I should have expressed my desire long since, but I cannot think what it is that is best in the world for me. [337]

LONGINUS: Ah, man! You should be ashamed to say such a thing! If the sunset is red, we prophesy that the following day will dawn fair; but if the eastern sky is red, we say—and it happens thus—that there will be frost and bad weather that day.<sup>32</sup> Tell me, please, if a resident of one of the cities of the moon were to visit our earthly globe, would he not be astonished at our wisdom, seeing that we are so skilled in interpreting heavenly signs? But at the same time would not our moon-man be beside himself to discover that we are blind and stupid in dealing with the economy of our own tiny world as with [the workings of] an English watch? Like perfect drones we neither notice nor care about the most astonishing of all systems—the system of our own small body. Tell me, please, would our guest not be justified in comparing us to the foolish mathematician who fully understands a circle millions of miles in circumference but can feel neither the

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31. Cf. *Ps.* 16:11.

32. Cf. the English saying: “Red sky at night, sailor’s delight; red sky in the morning, sailors take warning.”

power nor the beauty of a small golden ring? Would he not be right to give us the title of brainless scribe for being able to read and understand words and letters that are fifteen arshins<sup>33</sup> high, but being completely baffled by alpha or omega written on a scrap of paper or on a fingernail. Certainly, he would call us after that witch who knows what food is cooking in other people's pots but is blind, careless, and hungry in her own house. And such a wise man belongs almost among those women who do not take care of their homes and whom the great Paul calls wandering busybodies.<sup>34</sup> I do not condemn the sciences and praise the most humble trade. The only thing that should be condemned is that by relying on them we neglect the supreme science to which every period, country, rank, sex, and age has open access, [the doctrine] that happiness is necessary to everyone without exception. This cannot be said of any other science. In this way the supreme parliament, which eternally governs the ages and systems, has proved sufficiently that it is always righteous and that its judgments are always just.

JAMES: Of course, a man punishes his wife not for visiting someone and drinking beer—there is nothing wrong with that—but for staying out all night.

LONGINUS: We had not yet heard the term “mathematics” when our ancestors a long time ago had already built temples constituting Christ's school. In it the whole human race learns what is its congenial happiness and this is the catholic, that is, universal science. Pagan temples or shrines are also temples of Christ's teaching and school. Inside and outside their walls was written this most wise and blessed phrase: “gnōthi seauton, nosce te ipsum”—“know thyself.” Undeniably, we have the same idea; for example, “Only take thyself, and keep thy soul”<sup>35</sup> (Moses); “The kingdom of God is within you”<sup>36</sup> (Christ); “Ye are the temple of the living God”<sup>37</sup> (Paul); “If thou be wise, [338] thou shalt be wise for thyself”<sup>38</sup> (Solomon); “If

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33. 1 arshin = 28 inches.

34. *1 Tim.* 5:13.

35. *Deut.* 4:9.

36. *Luke* 17:21.

37. *2 Cor.* 6:16.

38. *Prov.* 9:12.

you do not understand yourself”<sup>39</sup> (Solomon); “Thy law is within my belly”<sup>40</sup> (David); “He that believeth not shall be damned”<sup>41</sup> (Christ).

But, because of the hypocrisy of unskilled prophets, that is, priests or teachers, the pagan temples have become by now completely corrupt and an abomination of desolation, while the true and living spring water is stomped into the ground and buried by cattle hoofs. This also happened to the Jews—the truth was often buried among them for long periods because the number of Isaac’s servants who cleaned out Abraham’s wells decreased while the number of Samsons and Philistines who filled with earth the wells of water flowing to eternal life increased.<sup>42</sup> And these fountains were buried so deeply that (as the Bible shows) the Jews could discover only with great effort the divine law in God’s temple, that is, come to know themselves and find the power of God’s kingdom and His truth within themselves. Now we ourselves have become quite different from our distant Christian ancestors before whose blessed eyes God’s truth, which was lifted from the earth, and the power of the radiant resurrection, which was raised from the grave, shone with their full brilliance. Furthermore, our instructors today are not very skillful. The reason for this is that no one wants to liberate oneself from everyday affairs and to purify one’s heart to be able to penetrate into the inner depth of the sweetest truth, which is concealed in the holy temple of the Bible and is most necessary for the happiness of all nations. We do not hear David’s “free yourself and understand”<sup>43</sup> or listen to Christ’s “seek,” for every science, every trade, and anything else is dearer to us than that which alone finds us, lost souls, and restores us to ourselves.

This is to be happy: to discover, to find oneself. You hypocrites (this is addressed to us) have learned to analyze the heavenly person quite well, yet how is it that you fail to notice the signs that would lead you like footprints to the truth that has to make you happy? You have everything, but you do not know how, and do not wish, to find

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39. Cf. *Prov.* 20:24: “How can a man then understand his own way?”

40. Cf. *Ps.* 40:8: “Thy law is within my heart.”

41. *Mark* 16:16.

42. A reference to the story in *Gen.* 26.

43. Cf. *Ps.* 35:23: “Stir up thyself, and awake to my judgment.”

yourself. It is truly amazing that an individual who has lived thirty years has failed to notice what is best for him and when the best things happen to him. Evidently, he rarely stays at home and does not care: “Oh, Jerusalem! If you knew what is in your peace but is hidden today from your eyes.”<sup>44</sup>

ATHANASIUS: For me, there would seem to be nothing better than to have a heart that is tranquil and at peace. Then everything is pleasant and bearable.

JAMES: I should like to have a fortress in my soul so firm that nothing could shake or overthrow it.

ERMOLAI: As for me, give me living joy and joyful life; I would not exchange such a treasure for anything else. [339]

LONGINUS: Your three desires are essentially one and the same. Can an apple tree be alive and joyful if its root is not healthy? But a healthy root is a firm soul and a heart at peace. A healthy root brings moisture to all the limbs and gives them life. A heart at peace, filled with living moisture, makes its imprint upon the external surface. “And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water.”<sup>45</sup>

GREGORY: You could not resist adding a biblical diamond. Take this one too: “Beside the still waters instruct me.”<sup>46</sup>

LONGINUS: Here is the summit and flower of all your life: inner peace, the heart’s gladness, the soul’s strength. Direct all your deeds towards this.

Here is the limit, haven, and end. Cut off anything that is opposed to this haven. Let every word, every action promote this end. Let this be the limit for all your thoughts and desires. How many people are healthy, well fed, well clothed, and at peace in respect to the body, but that is not the peace I am praising—that is a worldly peace,<sup>47</sup> which is known to all and deceives everyone. Here is peace! In the mind’s calmness, the heart’s rejoicing, and the soul’s quickening. This is peace! This is the inner core of happiness. This peace opens the temple of tranquility for your thoughts, clothes your

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44. Cf. *Luke* 19:42: “If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes.”

45. *Ps.* 1:3.

46. “Beside the still waters” is from *Ps.* 23:2.

47. “*Mir mirskoi*”: a play on the homophones “мир” (‘peace’) and “мip” (‘world’).

soul in the garments of mirth, and nourishes the heart with wheat flour and strengthens it. "Oh, peace," exclaims Gregory the Theologian, "you are God's and God is yours."

ATHANASIUS: I think Paul speaks about it: "Let the peace of God rule in your hearts."<sup>48</sup>

LONGINUS: Yes.

ATHANASIUS: It is announced by the clean and beautiful feet of the apostles.

LONGINUS: Yes.

ATHANASIUS: Is it left to his disciples by the dying Christ?

LONGINUS: Yes.

ATHANASIUS: And when He left it to them, did He completely separate Himself [from them] on earth?

LONGINUS: Completely.

ATHANASIUS: Can everyone get it?

LONGINUS: Everyone can.

ATHANASIUS: Where can one get it?

LONGINUS: Everywhere.

ATHANASIUS: When?

LONGINUS: Always.

ATHANASIUS: Why doesn't everyone have it?

LONGINUS: Because they don't want it.

ATHANASIUS: If everyone can obtain it, why does Paul call every mind or concept superior?

LONGINUS: Because nobody wants to accept it for consideration and to contemplate it. Without inclination everything is burdensome, [340] even the easiest task. If all of a man's sons were to leave him and, deserting their home, should bury themselves in mathematics, navigation, and physics, one might justly say that the thought of farming did not even cross their minds. However, agriculture is ten times better than such involuted sciences, since it is more needful to all people. Peace is buried like a priceless treasure in the house within ourselves. One may say that

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48. *Col.* 3:15.

peace never enters the minds of vagabonds or homeless people who eat out their hearts in empty distractions. But to find peace is much easier than to run around the outskirts collecting useless things. Did you not hear that the sons of this century are wiser than the sons of today?

ATHANASIU: So what?

LONGINUS: So, although they are stupid, they find what they are looking for.

ATHANASIU: What follows from this?

LONGINUS: It follows that it is not difficult to attain, if it can be found by good, but nevertheless clumsy and lazy, people.

ATHANASIU: Why don't young people possess peace, although they are clever?

LONGINUS: Because they cannot even think of it until they have been disappointed.

ATHANASIU: How is that?

LONGINUS: Who can be drawn away from home more easily than young people? If an entire city raises the false cry "Here is the enemy, the enemy is already at the city gate!" will not a young person rush into the reeds, meadows, or desert? Do you see where the whole problem lies? It is not difficult for a young man to stay quietly at home, but he is driven out of his mind by people who induce anxiety in him.

ATHANASIU: What are such people called?

LONGINUS: World, society, fashion. At such a time will our suckling babe listen to at least one good man?

ATHANASIU: Even if he should shout all day that this is a lie, the youngster will not believe him. And what is the good man called?

LONGINUS: He who does not join the council of the profane...

ATHANASIU: What is his name?

LONGINUS: Christ, Gospel, Bible.<sup>49</sup> Only he walks without vice: his tongue does not flatter his neighbours but rewards followers and friends with gifts such as "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth."<sup>50</sup>

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49. Juxtaposed with "Gospel," "Bible" refers only to the Old Testament.

50. *Jn.* 14:27.

JAMES: Does not Sirach's son speak about this peace: "The gladness of the heart is the life of man, and the joyfulness of a man prolongeth his days"?<sup>51</sup>

LONGINUS: All the pleasant names in the Bible, such as light, joy, mirth, life, resurrection, path, promise, paradise, and sweetness, refer to this blessed peace. (Hear) what Paul calls it: "The God of peace be with you all"<sup>52</sup> and again "Christ, He is your peace."<sup>53</sup> [341]

JAMES: Does he even call it God?

LONGINUS: Of course. This is the beautiful rainbow that brought peace to Noah's days.

JAMES: You say wonderful things. Why is this wonderful peace called God?

LONGINUS: Because it ends everything while it itself is endless, and an endless end, beginningless beginning, and God are all one.

JAMES: Why is it called light?

LONGINUS: Because it dwells only in enlightened hearts. It always accompanies the unsetting light as though it were its radiance. And when this light is absent, the soul lacks joy, life, mirth, and comfort and is filled with darkness, fear, revolt, sorrow, death, and Gehenna.

JAMES: What you speak is strange, sweet, and dreadful.

LONGINUS: Now, you tell me is there anything better than this? I shall listen to you.

ATHANASIUS: Listen, brother!

LONGINUS: Yes, what?

ATHANASIUS: Is this why the following words of Paul, "God's power is with us,"<sup>54</sup> refer to this peace?

LONGINUS: I think so.

ATHANASIUS: Then, evidently, Gregory was mistaken; previously, he said that virtue labours to find happiness and he called it in the Greek and Latin "strength" and "manliness." But if strength means peace then

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51. *Sir.* 30:22.

52. *Rom.* 15:33

53. Cf. *Eph.* 2:14: "For he is our peace."

54. Cf. *Col.* 1:11: "Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power."

it itself is happiness. Why should it seek anything and what should it seek? Are not strength and power the same?

LONGINUS: What slyness! If only you were as clever at finding peace as you are quick to ridicule others and point out their mistakes! In this way you have shown that the sons of this wicked age are cleverer than the sons of the divine light. Do you not know that to seek true happiness is already to progress along the divine path, the path of peace which has many levels? To find oneself upon the path of peace, is this not the beginning of true happiness? We do not immediately reach the summit of the most blessed mount called Pisgah where great Moses will die and where it is written “His eyes did not grow dim and his power did not wither.”<sup>55</sup> The everlasting light that penetrates the dark abyss of our thoughts to enable us to see where our lofty and firm peace resides urges our heart to climb the mountain of peace. Why should it not be called peace and strength that includes peace if it indicates where peace lies and urges us to strive for it, being both the beginning and source of all goodness? Anyone who does not strive for peace, evidently, does not understand its priceless value. *To discover it* and fervently *to strive* for it are two rays to the blessed sun of truth like the two wings of the Holy Spirit.

GREGORY: Stop arguing, my friends. We are gathered here not to show off in a contest of wit, but to unite [342] our heart’s desires and by collaborating to direct them more effectively, like fragrant incense, to the goal that guides lost wanderers onto the path of peace. Paul himself encourages us to take this path: “Rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, in every thing give thanks.”<sup>56</sup> He commands us always to nourish inner peace and the heart’s joy as though we were adding oil to a burning lamp. And to pray without ceasing means to desire Him with all your soul; seek and you shall find. I know that the blasphemer is always disturbing your soul to make you grumble and feel dissatisfied with anything sent you by God, but drive away this evil tempter and tormentor as you love, seek, and preserve peace and joy. This is the day of the life and health of your souls: you are alive as long as you preserve peace in your hearts. Judge all matters according to mature reason without listening to the whispering devil

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55. Cf. *Deut.* 34:7: “his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.”

56. *1 Thes.* 5:16–18. In the Bible these are three separate verses.

and recognize that God's entire economy throughout the whole universe is perfect, good, and most useful to all of us. Everything in the heavens and on earth without exception happens in His name and by His power. You say with reason: "Hallowed be thy name, Thy will be done...."<sup>57</sup> And He will deliver you from evil. As soon as you become grateful for everything, the following words will be immediately fulfilled in you: "The gladness of the heart is the life of man."<sup>58</sup>

ATHANASIUS: It seems that a man would always be tranquil if everything happened according to his will.

LONGINUS: God forbid!

ATHANASIUS: Why do you say that?

GREGORY: What if your reason and will were like the old man's cat?

ATHANASIUS: What do you mean?

GREGORY: When the old man lighted a fire in his stove, his stubborn kitten refused to leave it. The old man dragged it out and whipped it soundly.

ATHANASIUS: I would try to make my will conform to that of the most sophisticated men in the world.

GREGORY: From which parliament—in London or in Paris—would you select these men? But you should know, even if you took as your judge that king who condemned Nature, our wisest Mother, for Her arrangement of the heavenly orbits, that God is wiser than our time and your judge. Why look for a better judge? Depend upon Him and make His holy Will your will. If you accept it, it is already yours. The agreement of wills means one soul and one heart. What is better than friendship with the Most High? At such a time everything will be done according to your own will and to the all-wise Will. And this is to be content with all things. Our Ermolai desires this, but he does not understand what it means to be content with all things. You see that Paul's words "In every thing give thanks"<sup>59</sup> are the source of perfect peace and joy and happiness. What can [343] trouble my heart? Everything is in fact done by God's will; but I assent to it, and

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57. *Matt.* 6:9–10, *Luke* 11:2. Skovoroda omits a sentence between the two quoted ones.

58. *Sir.* 30:22.

59. *I Thes.* 5:18.

so it is by my own will. Why should I be troubled? If a thing is impossible, then of course, it is useless; they are one and the same. The more useful a thing is, the more accessible it is. My friends, here is wisdom if we carry out what we say: “Thy will be done...”<sup>60</sup>

ERMOLAI: I recall the wise saying of a certain sage<sup>61</sup>: I give thanks to blessed Nature for making what is necessary easy to obtain and what is hard to obtain unnecessary and of little use.

GREGORY: Let us give thanks to our Heavenly Father for having opened our eyes. Now we understand in what our true happiness consists. It lives in the inward peace of our own heart, and peace lives in the harmony with God. The greater the harmony the greater one’s blessedness. The health of the body is nothing but the balance and harmony of fire, water, air, and earth; and the quieting of the soul’s rebellious thoughts is its health and life eternal. If one has only three zolotniks<sup>62</sup> of harmony with God then one has just as much peace and if one has fifty or one hundred zolotniks of harmony then that is how much peace there is in one’s heart. The light advances as much as the shadow retreats. Blessed are those who day by day mount ever higher upon the mountain of this most radiant *City of Peace*. They will go from strength to strength,<sup>63</sup> until the God of gods appears in Zion. This descent and exodus of the Israelites takes place not on foot but in thought. Here is David: “Make the descent in your heart. Our soul will cross the moving waters.” Here is Isaiah: “You will go out in joy,”<sup>64</sup> that is, learn to abandon gladly false beliefs and to turn to: “His truth endureth to all generations.”<sup>65</sup> This is the Passover or the crossing to Jerusalem, that is, the *City of Peace* and its fortress Zion. Come together, my friends, let us go up the mountain of God, to the house of Jacob’s God, and say there, “My heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.”<sup>66</sup>

JAMES: Oh, blessed mountain! If only we knew how to ascend you!

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60. *Matt.* 6:10, *Luke* 11:2.

61. The reference is to Epicurus, *To Menoeceus*, 130, 9–10.

62. An old Russian measure of weight: 1 zolotnik=4.27 gm.

63. *Ps.* 84:7.

64. *Is.* 55:12.

65. *Ps.* 100:5.

66. Cf. *Ps.* 84:2: “My heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.”

LONGINUS: Listen to Isaiah: “You will go out in joy.”<sup>67</sup>

ATHANASIUS: But where am I to get joy? And what is it?

LONGINUS: “The fear of the Lord maketh a merry heart.”<sup>68</sup> Here is your leader. Here is the angel of the great council. Have you not heard what God told Moses?

ATHANASIUS: What?

LONGINUS: “I will send my fear before thee....<sup>69</sup> Behold, I send an Angel;<sup>70</sup> Beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not, for my name is in him.”<sup>71</sup>

ERMOLAI: Tell us more clearly, my friend, how we are to descend?

GREGORY: I humbly beg you to listen to this fable. [344]

Five travellers, guided by their guardian angel, came to the Kingdom of Peace and Love. Melchizedek,<sup>72</sup> the king of this land, was in no way like other kings. There was nothing perishable in his kingdom, everything was eternal and pleasant down to the last hair, and his laws were wholly opposed to tyranny. A beautiful and shining arch marked the boundary of this blessed land, and on it was written: “The Primordial World.” Everything that Holy Writ says about the Promised Land applied to this world. All things around it seemed and were plunged in darkness.

As soon as the newcomers reached the shining arch, a great multitude of the immortal inhabitants went forth to greet them. They divested the newcomers of everything that was old—clothing as well as the body that came off like a garment—and dressed them in a new body and clothing embroidered in gold with these words: “Get a firmer grasp of yourself.”

Suddenly, harmonious music was heard. A choir sang: “Be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors....”<sup>73</sup> The gates were lifted and the guests were conducted to those cloistered chambers of which David sang:

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67. *Is.* 55:12.

68. *Sir.* 1:12.

69. *Ex.* 23:27.

70. *Ex.* 23:20.

71. *Ex.* 23:21, Skovoroda omits a part of the sentence without indicating this.

72. Cf. *Gen.* 14:18–20.

73. *Ps.* 24:7

”How amiable are thy tabernacles...”<sup>74</sup> There choirs sang in superb harmony: “How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel,<sup>75</sup> for they were built by God, not man.” The travellers sat down to an immortal meal. They were offered angelic bread, new wine, a perfect lamb a year old, a heifer three years old, a she-goat, and the calf that Abraham had offered to his ever longed-for Guest in three persons;<sup>76</sup> young pigeons and turtledoves and manna—and everything needful for a feast, of which it is written: “Blessed is he who has dined.”<sup>77</sup>

However, the guests were not merry during all this merry-making. Some secret sorrow gnawed at their hearts. “Have no fear, dear guests, “ said the blessed citizens, “this happens to all newcomers. In them the divine saying has to be fulfilled: ‘Six times shalt thou be rid of thy sorrows, and the seventh time this evil will not touch thee.’”<sup>78</sup> Then they were led to the King himself. “I know your complaint before you make your petition,” said the King of Peace. “In my realm there is neither sickness nor sorrow nor lamentation.<sup>79</sup> You yourselves have brought this sorrow with you from the alien, heathen lands which are hostile to my land.”

Then He commanded his angels to take them away to the house of healing. There they took emetics for six days; on the seventh they were fully cured of their ills. Instead of sorrow, there was written on one heart “Thy will be done”; on another “Righteous art thou, O Lord, and upright thy judgments”;<sup>80</sup> on a third “Abraham believed in the Lord”;<sup>81</sup> on a fourth “I will praise thee for ever”;<sup>82</sup> on a fifth “In every thing give thanks.”<sup>83</sup>

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74. *Ps.* 84:1.

75. This part of the quotation is from *Num.* 24:5. The rest of the quotation remains unidentified.

76. The reference is to *Gen.* 18.

77. Cf. “It is good and comely for one to eat and to drink” (*Eccl.* 5:18).

78. Cf. *II Kings* 5:10: “Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.”

79. Cf. *Rev.* 21:4.

80. *Ps.* 119:137.

81. Cf. *Gen.* 15:6.

82. Cf. *Ps.* 52:9.

83. *I Thess.* 5:18.

Meanwhile, the universal assembly sang this song by Isaiah, clapping its hands in harmony and joy unspeakable: [345] “And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and thou shalt eat to thy soul’s content, and thy bones shall grow fat and shall be like a watered garden and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not, and thy bones shall grow like grass and become rich, and generation shall follow generation.”<sup>84</sup> All the inhabitants to the last one sang this song so sweetly and loudly that even my heart’s ear in this world could hear it.

ATHANASIUS: I know what you mean. But what emetic did they take?

GREGORY: Strong spirits.

ATHANASIUS: What are these spirits called?

GREGORY: The Eucharist.

ATHANASIUS: And where may we obtain it?

GREGORY: Poor fellow. Do you not yet know that the King’s house of healing is the most Holy Bible? There you will find an apothecary and a heavenly hospital staffed by angels, while the archiatrist<sup>85</sup> is within you. To this hospital chamber the compassionate Samaritan brought the unfortunate traveller to Jericho. Only in this house of healing can you find remedies to cleanse your heart of malicious and cruel enemies, of whom it is written: “A man’s enemies are the men of his own house.”<sup>86</sup> Your enemies are your own opinions,<sup>87</sup> which have established their reign in your heart, constantly tormenting it; they murmur against God, slander and oppose Him, continually disparage the order that governs the world and attempt to restore the most ancient laws. In darkness they eternally torment themselves and those who agree with them, because they see that the governance of nature does not follow their demonic desires or their confused ideas, but continues religiously according to the counsels of our Father—yesterday, today, and forever. Those without understanding dispraise the disposition of the heavenly orbits, criticize the quality of the

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84. Cf. *Is.* 58:11–12.

85. Meaning ‘chief doctor.’

86. *Mic.* 7:6.

87. Skovoroda’s term “mnenie,” like the German “Meinung,” suggests self-centred or selfish opinion.

earth, find fault with the creations of God's wise right hand in animals, trees, mountains, rivers, and grasses. Nothing satisfies them. According to their absurd and gloomy view, there is no need in the world for night, winter, old age, labour, hunger, thirst, disease, or—most of all—death. What purpose does it serve? Ah, our poor small knowledge, our tiny concepts! I think that we would govern the world machine no worse<sup>88</sup> than a son brought up in lawlessness would govern his father's house. Whence did these demons come to settle in our hearts? Are they not legion in us? But we ourselves have brought this primordial darkness with us; we were born with it.

ATHANASIOS: Why do you call opinions demons?

GREGORY: And what would you call them?

ATHANASIOS: I do not know.

GREGORY: But I do. In Greek a demon is called *daimonion*.

*Athanasios*. What of it?

GREGORY: So *daimonion* means 'little knowledge' or 'little understanding' [346] and *daimon* means 'one who knows or understands.' Please, forgive me for using the name of a large demon to refer to little demons.

LONGINUS: An illiterate man named Marko—according to the fable—went to heaven. Saint Peter came out with his keys and, opening the heavenly gates, asked: "Have you studied sacred languages?" "Not a one," answered the simple man. "Did you go to divinity school?" "Never, Holy Father." "Have you read the works of the ancient theologians?" "I have not read them; I don't know an 'A' when I see it."<sup>89</sup> "Then who has set you upon the path of peace?" "Three little rules have done it." "Which rules are those?" "They are: (1) Everything that is prescribed also for holy men is good, (2) Whatever wicked men also obtain is of small account, (3) Do not wish for another what you do not want for yourself. The first and second are home-grown rules; I thought them up myself. The third is a law of the Apostles, given for [men of] all tongues. The first rule has brought me the forbearance and gratitude of Job; the second has freed

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88. Obviously, Skovoroda should have said "no better."

89. The sentence has internal rhyme: "Ia aza v glaza ne znaiu."

me from all worldly lusts; the third has reconciled me with my inner Lord.”

The Apostle, his face as bright as the sun, glanced at him and exclaimed, “Oh blessed and grateful soul! Enter the dwelling of your Heavenly Father and rejoice eternally. You have eaten little but are well fed.”

JAMES: Understanding is not generated by books but books by understanding. He who has purified his reason with clear thinking about the truth is like the zealous householder who digs a well of pure and living water in his house, as it is written: “Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water.”<sup>90</sup> “My son, drink waters out of thine own cisterns....”<sup>91</sup> At the same time, if one nibbles at books, one can benefit much from them, as it is written by Paul who was illumined from heaven: “Wherefore I pray you to take some meat for this is for your health.”<sup>92</sup> Such is our Mark—he is one of the cud-chewing cattle dedicated to God. “Sanctify them through thy truth.”<sup>93</sup> He ate little but chewed much, and from a tiny sum or spark kindled a flame that encompassed the universe. Do we know much more than he? How many holy words have we thrown into our stomachs? And to what effect? They have simply given us indigestion. Ah, you poor bleeding woman with a weak stomach! See the effect of the noxious phlegm vomited up by the serpent of the Apocalypse, against which Solomon warned his son: “Drink not from strangers’ wells.”<sup>94</sup>

How can the peace of God—the health, joy, and life of the soul—find room in a heart filled with such bitter waters? Let us first seek out the spark of God’s truth within us, which, lighting up our darkness, will send us to the holy waters of Siloam to which the prophet summons us: “Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings....”<sup>95</sup> Here is your emetic! Is our life not a battle? But must we struggle with our serpent-like opinions? Is this not the most noble battle of which Paul [347] writes: “For we wrestle not

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90. *Prov.* 20:5.

91. *Prov.* 5:15. Skovoroda treats this and the preceding sentence as one quotation.

92. *Acts* 27: 34.

93. *Jn.* 17:17.

94. *Prov.* 5:17: “Let them be only thine own, and not strangers’ with thee.”

95. *Isa.* 1:16.

against flesh and blood....”<sup>96</sup> Opinion and counsel is the seed and the beginning. The head is nested in the heart. But what if it is a serpent’s head? What if it is a bad seed and a kingdom of evil? What kind of peace can the heart expect from such a tyrant? He is a slayer of men, who has observed, guarded, loved, and ruled the darkness from the beginning.

If the heart is filled up with such a bitter sea of opinions, if a pit of evil has swallowed up the soul, what light can we hope for among the dark swarm of sorrows? What mirth and sweetness can we hope for where there is no light? What peace where there is neither life nor mirth? What life and peace if there is no God? What God without the spirit of truth and the spirit of dominion? What spirit of truth without unworldly thoughts and a pure heart? What purity if it is not eternal—as it is written: “His truth endureth to all generations”?<sup>97</sup> How can it be eternal if it is lost in the contemplation of matter? How can it fail to be lost in contemplation of it if it esteems matter? How can one fail to esteem it if one depends on it? How can one fail to depend on it if one grieves over the dissolution of one’s dust? Is this not to have the kind of heart of which it is written: “Thou knowest their hearts to be like ashes; they are deceived, and not one of them can deliver his soul”?<sup>98</sup> Is this not a Fall and a sinful wandering away from God toward the idolatry of dust? Is this not the head of the serpent of which it is written: “He shall crush thy head”?<sup>99</sup> Listen, Ermolai! This is how you must ascend the mountain of peace: you must take an emetic, purify your heart, cast out old opinions, and not return to this vomit. Drink pure water, the water of new counsels for all your days.

This is to move from baseness to mountain heights, from sorrow to sweetness, from death to life, from puddles fit for swine to the springs of heaven fit for deer and antelopes. Drink until rivers of living water flow from your belly, slaking your most unhappy thirst,

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96. *Eph.* 6:12.

97. *Ps.* 100:5.

98. Skovoroda’s rendering of this verse (*Is.* 44:20) follows the Church Slavonic and Septuagint texts. The King James version is significantly different: “He feedeth on ashes: a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul.” According to Old Testament scholars, the King James version here follows the Hebrew text.

99. Cf. *Gen.* 3:15: “it shall bruise thy head.”

that is, your emptiness and dissatisfaction—your envy, lust, boredom, murmuring, longing, fear, sorrow, remorse, and other stings of the demons' heads which all together bring death upon the soul. Drink until you can sing: "Our soul is escaped as a bird ... it will cross the flowing water;"<sup>100</sup> "Blessed be the Lord, who hath not given us as a prey to their teeth."<sup>101</sup> Drink until you can console yourself with Habakkuk, singing: "Thou woundest the head out of the house of the wicked, I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation";<sup>102</sup> singing with Hannah: "My heart rejoiceth in the Lord";<sup>103</sup> singing with David: "Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us."<sup>104</sup>

Ancient opinion is a most powerful and cunning enemy. According to the Gospels, it is difficult to tie up this strongman and to seize his vessels of opinion, once he has been reborn in the heart. But what is sweeter than such labour which brings priceless peace back to our hearts? Struggle from day to day and cast them out one by one. Climb bravely from hour to hour up the mountain, declaring with David: "I shall not turn back until they are consumed..."<sup>105</sup> This [349] is the glorious slaughter of Sodom and Gomorrah from which Abram, the divine conqueror, returned.<sup>106</sup>

GREGORY: My friends, let us fully live out our lives and let our senseless days and minutes flow past. We take the trouble to get whatever is needful to the flux of our days; but our chief concern should be for the peace of our soul, that is, for its life, health, and salvation. What is the use of ruling over the universe if we lose our own soul?<sup>107</sup> What will you find in the world so precious and profitable that you would venture to exchange your soul for it? Oh, let us step carefully so as to succeed in entering God's rest and the Lord's holiday, or at least a Sabbath, if not the most blessed Sabbath of Sabbaths and feast of feasts.

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100. The first sentence is from *Ps.* 124:7. The second could not be identified.

101. *Ps.* 124:6.

102. The first sentence is from *Hab.* 3:13, the second and third from *Hab.* 3:18.

103. *1 Sam.* 2:1.

104. *Ps.* 4:6.

105. Cf. *Ps.* 18:37.

106. See *Gen.* ch. 14.

107. Cf. *Matt.* 16:26.

On the Sabbath we shall be able to release our soul, if not our donkey, from at least half of the most arduous chores and shall attain, if not a general amnesty for man and beast in the Lord's pleasant summer of the seventh seven-year period or the fiftieth year, according to the Apostles, then at least some freedom for our poor soul from these labours: "How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily?"<sup>108</sup> In man the head of all things is the human heart. It is that which is most truly human in man: everything else is peripheral, as Jeremiah teaches: "Deep is the heart of man (above all things); it is man, and who can know it?"<sup>109</sup> Please, take note that the deep heart is man.... But what is the heart, if not the soul? What is the soul, if not a bottomless pit of thought? What is thought, if not the root, seed, and kernel of all our external flesh, blood, skin, and other outwardness? You see that a man who has destroyed the peace of his heart has destroyed his head and root.

Is he not just like a nut, the kernel of which has been eaten away by worms, so that it has no strength, only a shell? The Lord speaks to these impoverished people with such compassion in Isaiah: "Come ye near unto me, ye who have lost your hearts and are far from the truth."<sup>110</sup> Thought is the secret spring within our bodily machine, the head and beginning of all its motion. All the outward limbs follow this head like tethered cattle. Thought, like fire or a river, is never still. Its continuous striving is desire. A flame may die down, a river may cease to flow, but thought—which is without matter or the elements and supports crude corruption, wearing it like a dead vestment—is absolutely incapable (whether it is within the body or outside it) of suspending its motion even for a moment, and continues

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108. *Ps.* 13:2.

109. Skovoroda's rendering of this verse (*Jer.* 17:9)—"Gluboko serdtse cheloveku (pache vsekh) i chelovek est, i kto poznaet ego?"—is a literal translation of the Septuagint Greek: "Batheia hē kardia para panta, kai anthrōpos estin, kai tis gnōsetai auton." The King James version is very different: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" Skovoroda clearly wishes to assert (with the Septuagint) that the "heart," that is, intention and volition, is deep and hidden from view, not (with the King James version) that it is deceitful and wicked. According to Old Testament scholars, the King James version here follows the Hebrew text except that the Hebrew words rendered by "desperately wicked" should be translated as "exceedingly weak."

110. This diverges substantially from *Is.* 48:16.

its striving, flying like lightning through boundless eternities and infinities without number.

What does it strive toward? It seeks its sweetness and rest, but its rest is not lying still and stretching out like a dead body. This is alien and contrary to its living nature. [350] Thought, like a traveller on the road, seeks its own likeness among the dead elements, and intensifying, rather than slaking its thirst by base diversions, it moves the more rapidly from corrupt material nature toward the supreme divine nature, the beginningless beginning or principle which is akin to it, so that having been purified by its radiance and by the flame of its secret vision, it may free itself from its bodily earth and earthly body. And this is to enter into the divine rest, to purge oneself of all corruption, to move in complete *freedom* and without obstruction, flying from the narrow limits of matter to the freedom of the spirit, as it is written: "Thou hast set my feet in a large room...."<sup>111</sup> He brought me forth also into a large place....<sup>112</sup> I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself."<sup>113</sup> And this is what David requests: "Oh that I had wings like a dove! For then would I fly away, and be at rest."<sup>114</sup>

ERMOLAI: But where does thought find this beginningless beginning and supreme nature?

GREGORY: If it does not first find it within itself, it will seek it in vain in other places. But this is the task of the perfect in heart, while we must learn the alphabet of that most blessed Sabbath or day of rest.

ERMOLAI: To overpower the dragon of the Apocalypse and the terrible beast (with iron teeth) which, according to the prophet Daniel,<sup>115</sup> devours everything and tramples whatever is left is the task of the heroes whom, according to the *Book of Numbers*,<sup>116</sup> God orders Moses to enter in the indestructible war lists, leaving out women and children who cannot increase the number of God's saints who are born not of blood, the lust of the flesh, or the lust of men, but of

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111. *Ps.* 31:8.

112. *Ps.* 18:19.

113. *Ex.* 19:4.

114. *Ps.* 55:6.

115. *Dan.* ch. 7.

116. *Nu.* ch. 1.

God,<sup>117</sup> as it is written: “I shall not assemble congregations of them by blood...” They alone rest with God from all their labours, while there is enough divine grace for us weaklings so that we can do battle with little devils. Often one tiny little demonic spirit stirs up in the heart a terrible rebellion and bitter revolt that consumes the soul like a conflagration.

GREGORY: You have to stand bravely and give no ground to the devil: if you resist, he will flee from you. It is shameful to be so like a woman or infant as to fail in resisting one idle invader or even a small party of them. O Lord! How remiss we are in winning and keeping that peace of the heart that is the most precious thing on earth or in Heaven! A man should think only of this when he is alone and speak only of this when he is with others, whether at home or on the road, lying down or getting up. But when do we think of it? Are not all our conversations mere idle talk and demonic wind? Ah, how little self-knowledge have we attained, having forgotten our house, which was not built by men, and its head—our soul, and the soul’s head—the God-like paradise of peace. Our just reward is that we can scarcely find one heart [351] in a thousand that is not occupied by a garrison of several detachments of demons.

Since we did not learn with Habakkuk to stand guard for God<sup>118</sup> and to continue this most profitable war, we have become at root negligent, deaf, stupid, cowardly, unskilled, and generally weak fighters so that God’s greatest favour to us, which we fail to appreciate, perplexes our hearts as a wolf does sheep; for example, one man worries because he is not well born, handsome of countenance, or gently bred. Another is troubled because, although he leads a blameless life, many people, both high-born and base, hate and disparage him, calling him a desperado, scoundrel, or hypocrite. A third grieves because he has not attained the profession or station that could have provided him with ten-course dinners instead of the six courses he now has. A fourth torments himself trying to hold onto a burdensome but profitable profession so as to not die of boredom in idleness, never realizing that nothing is more useful and important

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117. Cf. *John* 1:13: “Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

118. *Hab.* 2:1.

than to manage piously not one's external, domestic economy, but one's internal, spiritual economy; that is, to know oneself and to bring order into one's heart. A fifth makes himself miserable because he feels he has the ability to serve society, but cannot fight his way through so many candidates to gain the position he seeks—as though only public servants had occasion to be virtuous, and as though service were different from good works, or good works from virtue. A sixth is filled with alarm because his hair has begun to turn grey, because pitiless old age with its dreadful army is approaching hour by hour followed by invincible death with yet another army. He worries because his body is beginning to grow weak, his eyes and teeth are failing, he no longer has the strength to dance, he can no longer eat and drink as heartily as he once could, or enjoy it as much, and so on.

But can one count the countless hordes of unclean spirits and black crows or (according to Paul) earthly spirits of malice that roam the dark and unlimited abyss of our soul as the largest air space? All these petty spirits are not yet giants nor the greatest idlers like little lap dogs,<sup>119</sup> but they really perturb our hearts which are unskilled in battle and unarmed with counsel. The most insignificant little devil frightens our unfortified little town. What will happen when we are attacked by lions? I shall confess to you, my friends, one of my weaknesses. I happened to take part, not without success, in a conversation among select company. I was enjoying it when, suddenly, my joy evaporated: two individuals began to abuse and ridicule me slyly, dropping pretty words that subtly hinted at my humble origins, low status, and physical uncomeliness. I am ashamed to recall how this perplexed my heart [352], all the more so because I had not expected this from them. It was with great effort and after long reflection that I managed to calm down by recalling that they were an old woman's sons.

ATHANASIOS: What do you mean?

GREGORY: An old woman was buying pots.<sup>120</sup> She still remembered the love affairs of her young years. "And what do you want for this pretty one?" "For that one give me at least three quarter-copecks," answered the potter. "And this ugly one here will be a quarter-copeck, of course."

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119. Literally, "bed dogs."

120. This is Skovoroda's Fable 29.

“I won’t take less than two copecks for that one.” “How odd!” “We, old woman,” said the craftsman, “do not judge pots with our eyes; we test them for a clear ringing sound.” Although the old woman was not dull-witted, she could not find a repartee and declared merely that she knew this long ago but had forgotten it.

ATHANASIOS: These people, who have the same tastes, prove conclusively that they are the fruit of the apple tree in paradise.

JAMES: A law-abiding life, firm reason, a magnanimous and merciful heart—these are the clear-ringing sounds of a respected person.

GREGORY: Do you see, my friends, how we have degenerated from our ancestors? The most trivial little opinion of an old woman can upset our heart.

ERMOLAI: Don’t be angry. Peter himself was frightened by an old woman: “For thou art a Galilean, and thy speech agreeth thereto.”<sup>121</sup>

LONGINUS: But was this the kind of heart found in our ancient ancestors? Who can remember Job without horror? But, despite his sufferings, it is written: “In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.”<sup>122</sup> Listen to what Luke writes about the first Christians: “In them was one soul and one heart.”<sup>123</sup> But what is it? What kind of a heart was in them? Besides harmonious love, it was filled with “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.”<sup>124</sup> And here is another heroic heart: “We who are slandered take comfort.”<sup>125</sup> “I rejoice in my suffering.”<sup>126</sup> Who can read the part of his epistle that is read on the day of his victory without being amazed? It is a spectacle of the most wonderful miracles that captivate the heart’s eye. What a miracle! What brings others bitter disappointment brings Paul mirth because his breath or soul is like a healthy stomach, which thrives on the coarsest and hardest food. Is this not to have a diamond heart? The heaviest blow shatters everything else but strengthens him. Oh peace! You are God’s and God is yours! This is true happiness: to obtain a heart encircled by

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121. *Mark* 14:70.

122. *Job* 1:22.

123. Cf. *Acts* 4:32. *Acts* was traditionally considered to be the work of Luke.

124. *Acts* 5:41.

125. Cf. *1Cor.* 4:13: “Being defamed, we intreat.”

126. Cf. *Col.* 1:24: “Who now rejoice in my sufferings.”

diamond walls and to say: “God’s power is with us: we have peace with God.”<sup>127</sup>

ERMOLAI: Ah, this peace is lofty and difficult to obtain. How marvelous was the heart that thanked God for all things.

LONGINUS: It is difficult, almost impossible, but it is worthy of the greatest effort. It is difficult, but without such peace life is a thousand times more difficult. It is laboursome but this labour frees us from countless very heavy labours such as: “As an heavy burden, they are too heavy for me. Neither is there any rest [353] in my bones.”<sup>128</sup> Is it not shameful to say that it is difficult to carry this yoke when carrying it we find a treasure like the heart’s peace? “Take my yoke upon you ... and ye shall find rest unto your souls.”<sup>129</sup> How much effort do we expend to little purpose, often vainly, and sometimes harmfully? To feed and clothe the body is difficult but needful; we cannot get along without it. Bodily life consists in this, and no one should regret this effort, for without it one will fall into sore distress, into cold, hunger, thirst and sickness.

But would you not find it easier to live on rough herbs and have peace and consolation in your heart, than to dine at an overflowing table and be like a whited sepulchre filled with unsleeping worms that gnaw at the soul day and night without rest? Is it not better to cover one’s poor body with rags and dress the heart in the vestments of salvation and the garments of mirth, than to wear gold-brocaded clothes and bear the fire of Gehenna at the centre of one’s soul, the fire that sears the heart with demonic grievings? What profits you to sit in your body, enjoying every comfort among the beautiful corners of your house, if your heart is cast from an ornamented chamber into the outer darkness of discontent. About this chamber it is written: “the fowls of the heaven have their habitation<sup>130</sup> ... founded upon a rock.<sup>131</sup> That Rock was Christ<sup>132</sup> ... he is our peace.<sup>133</sup> Our soul is

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127. The first sentence is from *Col.* 1:11, the second from *Rom.* 5:1.

128. The first sentence is from *Ps.* 38:4, the second from *Ps.* 38:3.

129. *Matt.* 11:29.

130. *Ps.* 104:12.

131. *Matt.* 7:25.

132. *I Cor.* 10:4.

133. *Eph.* 2:14.

escaped as a bird out of the snare of fowlers: the snare is broken and we are escaped.<sup>134</sup> Who will give me wings?"<sup>135</sup>

Why do you speak to me of difficulty? A man who has fallen into a pit or into deep waters thinks not of the difficulties but of saving himself. If you build a house, build it for both parts of your being—body and soul. If you deck and adorn the body, do not forget the heart. There are two kinds of bread, houses, garments—two kinds of everything. All things come in twos so that there are two men in each man, two fathers—the heavenly and the earthly, two worlds—the original and the temporal, and two natures—the divine and the bodily—in all things. If one mixes them together and acknowledges only the visible nature, one falls into home-grown idolatry. This is precisely what the Holy Bible prevents by acting as an arch that bounds all perishability and as a gate that leads our hearts to the faith of the true conception of God, to the hope of divine Nature, and the kingdom of peace and love, the original world.

And this is enduring peace: to believe in and recognize the ruling nature and to depend on it as on an invincible city and to think "my God, the Lord, liveth."<sup>136</sup> Then you will say, "And my soul lives." Without this how can you depend on perishable nature? How can you avoid trembling when you see that all perishable things appear and disappear at every instant? Who would not be upset watching the perishing truth of being? Such people should not await peace but should listen to Isaiah: "They are troubled [354] and cannot rest. There is no rejoicing for the wicked, says the Lord God."<sup>137</sup> Look and see who ascends the mountain of peace: "The Lord is my strength and he will make my feet for perfection, and lead me to high places, which will give me victory in his song."<sup>138</sup> He acknowledges the Lord and sings before those who do not see Him and God leads him to the mountain of peace. To deny the Lord is the most

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134. *Ps.* 124:7.

135. Cf. *Ps.* 55:6: "Oh that I had wings like a dove!"

136. Cf. *1 Kings* 17:12: "the Lord thy God liveth."

137. Cf. *Isa.* 57:20–1: "But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest....There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked."

138. Cf. *Hab.* 3:19: "The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places. To the chief singer on my stringed instruments."

tormenting distress and the heart's death, as Habakkuk sings: "You have put death in the heads of the wicked."<sup>139</sup> David calls this head heart and the heart is our central part, the head of the surrounding parts. What kind of head? The work of their lips. What kind of lips? Until I place the counsels in my soul and the illnesses in my feet. The work of the lips is the illness of the heart and the illness of the heart is death, which is put in the heads of the wicked, and this natural death, which with its sting kills the soul is the confusion of perishable and divine nature; and this confused mixture is a deviation from the divine nature in the direction of dust and ashes, as it is written: "Your food will turn to dust."<sup>140</sup> The deviation is the Fall, as it is written: "Who can understand the Fall?"<sup>141</sup> Here is what Sirach says of sin: "the teeth thereof are as the teeth of a lion, slaying the souls of men."<sup>142</sup> This is darkness! This is going astray! This is misfortune!

You see where bodily nature has brought us, what comes of the confusion of natures? This is the native idolatrous frenzy and deviation from divine Nature and ignorance about God. The well-known grief of this kind of heart is that we do not care for anything except the body's good, like genuine pagans, "for all these things do the pagans of the world seek after"<sup>143</sup> and if one lifts up one's eyes even slightly toward the blessed Nature, we immediately cry out: it is difficult, difficult! This is to call sweet bitter; but the righteous man lives by faith. And what is faith but the disclosure and clarification of the unseen Nature as grasped by the heart? And is this not to be the Israel that is dear to us and divides everything into two and dedicates the invisible half of all visible things to the Lord? Paul sings about this to the lucky man: "And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy."<sup>144</sup> Tell me, please how is one who knows perfectly well that nothing can perish and that everything exists eternally and invisibly in its beginning confused?

ERMOLAI: To me this seems rather obscure.

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139. Cf. *Hab.* 3:13 : "thou woundest the head out of the house of the wicked."

140. Cf. *Gen.* 3:14: "dust shalt thou eat."

141. Cf. *Ps.* 19:12: "Who can understand his errors?"

142. *Sir.* 21:2.

143. *Luke* 12:30.

144. *Gal.* 6:16.

LONGINUS: How could it fail to seem obscure to one who is wallowing in the mire of disbelief! Please, open your eyes and clear your sight. The kingdom of blessed Nature, although it is hidden, is not undetectable behind the external signs: it stamps its footprints on empty matter like the truest image in the oils of a painting. All matter is but painted mud, muddied paint, and picturesque powder. But blessed Nature is the beginning or principle itself, that is, a beginningless invention or contrivance and the wisest delineation that supports all the visible colours [355]. These fit their imperishable strength and essence as clothes fit the body. David himself calls the appearance of things a garment: “All of them shall wax old like a garment...”<sup>145</sup> And he calls the image a handbreadth, a surveyor’s chain, the right hand, or the truth: “Beauty is in thy right hand...”<sup>146</sup> “You have measured in handbreadths...”<sup>147</sup> “Thy right hand upholdeth me...”<sup>148</sup> “The truth of the Lord endureth for ever.”<sup>149</sup> I looked at my body as well with the same sight: “The hands have made me and fashioned me...”<sup>150</sup> He avoids the moving water of his perishability. “Our soul will cross the raging waters”;<sup>151</sup> and its thought will penetrate into the very power and kingdom concealed in the dust of His right hand and will cry, “The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”<sup>152</sup> “Blessed is the man whom thou choosest, and causest to approach unto thee.”<sup>153</sup> Happy is he who has flown over into the kingdom of blessed Nature! On this Paul says: “We walk on earth but turn to the heavens.”<sup>154</sup> Solomon writes of the same world: “But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them.”<sup>155</sup>

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145. *Ps.* 102:26.

146. Cf. *Ps.* 16:11: “at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.”

147. Cf. *Ps.* 39:5: “thou hast made my days as an handbreadth.”

148. *Ps.* 63:8.

149. *Ps.* 117:2.

150. *Ps.* 119:73.

151. This may be a reference to *Ps.* 124:4–5 and not a quotation in the manuscript.

152. *Ps.* 27:1.

153. *Ps.* 65:4.

154. Cf. *Phil.* 3:20: “For our conversation is in heaven.”

155. *Wisdom of Solomon* 3:1.

This is secretly expressed by the rituals of circumcision and baptism. To die with Christ is to leave behind one's elemental and impotent nature and enter the unseen and lofty worlds to philosophize. He who has fallen in love with these sweet words has already made the transition: "The flesh is as nothing..."<sup>156</sup> Whatever perishes is flesh. It is here that the Passover, the resurrection and the exodus to the Promised Land belong. The tribes of Israel that appear before the Lord are included here. Here are all the prophets and apostles who dwell in the City of our God, upon His Holy Mountain, which is peace to Israel.

ERMOLAI: You speak darkly.

ATHANASIUS: You have so clogged your speech with scraps of Scripture that no one can understand it.

LONGINUS: Dear friends, forgive my excessive attachment to this book. I acknowledge my great passion for it. From my earliest years a mysterious force and mania<sup>157</sup> has drawn me to morally edifying books and I love them above all other books. They heal and make my heart glad. I began to read the Bible at about thirty years of age. But this splendid book won out over all my other loves, slaking my long-lasting hunger and thirst with the bread and water of God's truth and justice, which are sweeter to me than honey and the honeycomb. I feel a special natural affinity for it. I have fled and I flee, under the guidance of my Lord, all the obstacles of life and all carnal lovers, so that I might quietly enjoy the pure embrace of this daughter of God who is fairer than all the daughters of men. She has given birth for me out of her immaculate womb to that miraculous Adam who, according to Paul, "after God is created in righteousness and true holiness"<sup>158</sup> and of whom Isaiah says: "Who shall declare his generation?"<sup>159</sup>

There is no end to my wonder at the wisdom of the prophets. The most trivial details in their writings seem to me of great [356] moment: one who is in love always feels this way. There are many who find no flavour in the words: "Benjamin shall ravin as a wolf:

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156. Cf. *Jn.* 6:63: "The flesh profiteth nothing."

157. Skovoroda uses the Greek word for madness.

158. *Eph.* 4:24.

159. *Is.* 53:8.

in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil.”<sup>160</sup> “Your eyes are on the filling up of waters...”<sup>161</sup> But they fill my heart with unspeakable sweetness and gladness the more I ruminate upon them. The more profound and unpeopled is my solitude, the happier is my cohabitation with her who is beloved among women. I am content with the lot the Lord has given me. A male, a complete and true human being was born to me. I do not die childless. And let me boast, like the audacious Paul, about this human being: “I did not run in vain.”<sup>162</sup> This is the Lord’s man of whom it is written: “His eyes will not grow dim.”<sup>163</sup>

GREGORY: If you do not like Biblical crumbs, we can carry on our conversation in a different way. We have spent an entire Sunday morning discussing what we should always be thinking about. Tomorrow is a workday. However, when you gather, toward evening, let us speak more clearly about the soul’s peace. This subject is always worthy of our attention, for peace of soul is the intended end and haven of all our life.

Translated by George L. Kline and Taras D. Zakydalsky

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160. *Gen.* 49:27.

161. Cf. *Ps.* 119:136: “Rivers of waters run down mine eyes.”

162. *Phil.* 2:16.

163. Cf. *Is.* 32:3: “And the eyes of them that see shall not be dim.”