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**Евангелие от Чернышевского:
нигилизм, искусство и религиозный аскетизм**

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**The Gospel of Chernyshevsky:
Nihilism, Art, and Religious Asceticism**

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Аннотация: В данной статье предпринята попытка оценить философские и религиозные элементы в романе Чернышевского «Что делать». Принимая во внимание судьбу романа в критике, расценившей это произведение как «новое Евангелие», статья разделена на три части. Во-первых, мы исследуем религиозные искания молодого Чернышевского, его интерпретацию христианства и трансформацию его религиозных убеждений в результате знакомства с философией Фейербаха. Во-вторых, анализируем «Эстетические отношения искусства к действительности» и то, каким образом Чернышевский переосмысляет такие концепты, как прекрасное, трагическое и возвышенное, что будет положено в основу его реализма и материалистической эстетики. Наконец, статья рассматривает роман «Что делать?» как симптом секуляризации христианства, истолковывая религиозный инстинкт Чернышевского сквозь призму научного и материалистического мировоззрения.

Ключевые слова: Чернышевский, искусство, религия, нигилизм, материализм, христианство, аскетизм.

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Abstract: The paper attempts to evaluate the philosophical and religious elements of Chernyshevsky's book *What is to Be Done*. Taking into consideration a critical fortune that considered the book as a "new gospel", the paper is divided into three parts. Firstly, we evaluate the religious trajectory of the young Chernyshevsky, his interpretation of Christianity, and the transformation of his religious convictions through his contact with Feuerbach's philosophy. Secondly, the article analyzes the essay *The Aesthetic Relations of Art with Reality*, and Chernyshevsky's redefinition of the concepts such as beautiful, tragic, and sublime, which will be at the base of his realism and of his materialist aesthetic. Lastly, the paper interprets *What is to Be Done* as a symptom of secularization of Christianity that translated the religious instinct of Chernyshevsky through a scientific and materialist *Weltanschauung*.

Key words: Chernyshevsky, Art, Religion, Nihilism, Materialism, Christianity, Asceticism.

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With the publication of *Fathers and Sons*, in 1861, and *What is to be Done?*, in 1863, one can see the literary translation of the philosophical-religious and aesthetic scenario of the Russian modernity as an experience of deepening nihilism. Russian nihilism, as it is seen in literature, is the aesthetic addressing of deepening and, at the same time, the abandoning of the philosophical tradition of German idealism. The presence of Feuerbach's philosophy in Chernyshevsky's treatise on art and the birth of a 'new gospel' through the pages of *What is to be done?* established the traditional bases for understanding the Russian nihilism as an anarchic denial of aesthetic and moral values. For instance, the humanistic and scientific catechism of the "new gospel," which provided us with the principle of the psychological modeling of homo sovieticus, appears as an aestheticization of Feuerbach and as an inversion of Christianity in the shape of a democratic egalitarianism and revolutionary socialism. The abandonment of metaphysics through the submission of

art and morals to the positivity of the sciences, as Chernyshevsky proposed in his treatise on art, established utilitarian and rational principles for new aesthetics and morality. The destruction of aesthetics, to use Pisarev's expression, as the subjection of art to social progress, meant for young nihilists the renunciation of the speculative philosophy of idealism and their submission to Science facts. As for Bazarov, in *Fathers and Sons*, nihilism meant the replacement of Pushkin by Buchner's *Kraft und Stoff*. The utilitarian determination of art and morality and the rupture with an aesthetic conception of life appear as a core of understanding of the young radicals' nihilism from the 1860s and as the materialization of "seminarist principles", as they were known by Turgenev.

Franco Venturi's judgment in *Roots of Revolution* helps one think of the historical and philosophical inaccuracies related to the use of the concept of nihilism in the history of Russian thought in the second half of the nineteenth century. For the Italian historian, "it was at once obvious that the word had been badly chosen" [Venturi, 1960, p. 326].

The "Nihilist", more than anyone else, believed – blindly and violently – in their own ideas. Their positivist and materialist faith could be accused of fanaticism, of a youthful lack of a sense of criticism, but not of apathy. Saltykov-Shchedrin was right when he wrote that it was "a word devoid of meaning, less suitable than any other for describing the younger generation, in which could be found every kind of 'ism', but certainly not nihilism" [Ibid, p. 326].

Turgenev's understanding of the concept of nihilism in *Fathers and Sons* was decisive for establishing the link between nihilism and the sons' generation, which was represented in the Russian intelligentsia by the figures of Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov, and Dmitri Pisarev. The portrait of the new generation, immortalized by Turgenev, became popular as a sign of Russian nihilism and certainly linked the concept to the scientific and revolutionary materialism of young radicals. When it comes to the popularization of the concept amongst the new generation, the nihilist label began to represent a type of criticism guided by the Natural Sciences and by a philosophical materialism which would become the cri-

teria for discernment of reality. The divorce between philosophy and science in the German thought from the nineteenth century, as well as the progressive assimilation by young radicals of a leftist Hegelianism centered on the figure of Feuerbach, was the gateway to a scientism that rejected any trace of philosophical abstraction from idealism.

The subjection of all phenomena to the critical judgment of a scientific reason and the denunciation of mysticism in religion and philosophy, especially when considering the appropriation of the Hegelian idealism by the Slavophiles, gave way to what was classified by Chernyshevsky as critical realism. The nihilism phenomenon, comprehended from the perspective of young radicals, flourished amongst the young people who were not part of the intellectual aristocracy and, at the same time, who were completely displaced from the Russian peasantry. Andrzej Walicki, as he brought in details the roots of the movement, identified these young men as being “of mixed, non-noble background, who were mostly sons of petty officials, priests, or impoverished gentry families, and who had to earn their living by their brains” [Walicki, 1979, p. 185]. The “seminarian” epithet used by Turgenev and Dostoevsky while referring to the 1860s generation and their philistinism in art finds its roots in the fact that the “intellectuels radicaux et les révolutionnaires des années 1860 venaient souvent d’un milieu ecclésiastique, et leur éducation première avait été théologique” [Papermo, 2017, p. 12]. As considered by Irina Papermo,

L’émancipation intellectuelle des années 1860 était liée à une transformation sociale majeure: l’émergence de l’intelligentsia roturière (*raznotchinnaïa intelligentsia*). Cet ensemble d’intellectuels professionnels, munis d’une formation universitaire, d’origines diverses (issus principalement du clergé et de la petite bourgeoisie) était lié par un sentiment commun de déracinement social et par un esprit d’opposition généralisée à l’ordre existant. Dans les années 1860, l’intelligentsia *raznotchinnaïa* (ou *raznotchintsy*, “gens de rangs variés”, terme qui insiste sur leur origine hétérogène) atteignit une position de pouvoir et d’influence dans la société, qui avait été jusque-là dominée par la noblesse éduquée [Ibid, p. 12].

Son of an Orthodox priest and postulant to follow his father’s path, Nikolai Chernyshevsky began his career at the Theological Seminary of Saratov and later on was accepted at the University of St. Petersburg. The decisive event in Chernyshevsky’s intellectual and religious course was

his encounter with Feuerbach and David Strauss' ideas. His role as an organic intellectual and propagator of a scientific materialism raised to the summit the controversies over the statute of religion and the meaning of art in Russian literature from the second half of the nineteenth century. The religious instinct took over a significant space in his ideas and intellectual progress. Thus, his reading of authors, such as Proudhon, Fourier, and Saint Simon was associated with a strong religious engagement. After his acceptance at the university, in 1848, his contact with Fourier's ideas and members of the Petrashevsky circle made the resizing of his religious concerns possible, as well as their conjugation with a revolutionary principle. A. Walicki observed that, in this period, Chernyshevsky sought "to reconcile 'the ideas of the socialists and communists, the radical republicans and montagnards' with his Christian faith" [Walicki, 1979, p. 185]. Nicolay Lossky pointed out that in 1848, one year before Chernyshevsky's reading of *Essence of Christianity*, he "was deeply religious" [Lossky, 1952, p. 60]. Such a religious instinct would soon become quite decisive in the way he understood and applied Feuerbach's ideas.

Chernyshevsky's religious crisis took a crucial place in the development of his aesthetic and philosophical-religious ideas. Chernyshevsky's religious conflict over *the old and the new faith*, as one can recall David Strauss's booklet, reveals exactly the withdrawal of a particular conception of religion (Orthodox faith) in order to benefit from another one (Feuerbach's materialism). As Victoria Frede wrote, during the summer of 1849, in the midst of a religious crisis, Chernyshevsky noted with regret that he still believed in God; however, he pointed out, he still did so mainly because of his religious education. Along with the growing of his new convictions, during the fall of 1850, he wrote on his personal journal that he himself was "almost entirely" dedicated to Feuerbach, deed which would be achieved in 1853, when an entry in his diary confirmed the Feuerbach's idea that God was a "fantastic being" [Frede, 2011, pp. 125-128; Domingues, 2015, p. 64]. Andrzej Walicki summarized Chernyshevsky's philosophical-religious trajectory well and showed how religious instinct and revolutionary temperament were central elements in the constitution of philosophical and aesthetic ideas in Russia during the nineteenth century.

Under the influence of the Saint-Simonians and Pierre Leroux, he tried to link utopian socialism to the concept of a "new Christianity", of a "new Messiah, a new religion, and a new world". Later, new doubts assaulted

him. “The methods adopted by Jesus Christ were not, perhaps, the right ones”, he wrote in his diary. It might have been more useful if he had invented a self-regulating mechanism, a kind of *perpetuum mobile* that would have freed mankind from the burden of worrying about its daily bread. Comments of this kind suggest that the young Chernyshevsky’s Christianity sprang not from a transcendental experience, but from a passionate belief in the Kingdom of God on Earth. This belief easily underwent a process of secularization: from concluding, after Feuerbach, that the secret of theology was anthropology, it was an easy step to interpreting the Kingdom of God on Earth as a Kingdom of emancipated human beings in full control of their fate [Walicki, 1979, p. 187].

Taking under consideration George Simmel’s idea on the particularity of religious natures, one would have no difficulty in stating that the process of secularization experienced by Chernyshevsky was accompanied by an unquestionable religious feeling. The concept of “religious immanentism”, used by V. Zenkovsky to classify Herzen’s thought [Zenkovsky, 1953], appeared in distinct forms in the Russian intelligentsia, reaching out to figures like Bakunin, Herzen, and Tolstoy. Articulated within Hegelian categories, in the case of Herzen and Bakunin, or taken under the prism of an idea of nature, as it was in Tolstoy’s case, this immanentism was directly linked with the Russian reception about the German Romanticism. Karl Löwith’s distinction between Hegel’s and Goethe’s philosophical and aesthetic mediations would easily find resonance in the pictures which composed the Russian thought, since the former, starting from the historical spirit, recognized as a “cunning of reason” and the latter, as a “cunning of nature” [Löwith, 1964, p. 9].

The advent of Russian nihilism responded to the exhaustion of the classical mediations of Romanticism (Hegel’s reason and Goethe’s nature serve as models), thus, proclaiming an empiricism that promoted a true cult to the natural sciences. The role of German philosophy in the gestation of the Russian philosophical and literary intelligentsia is immeasurable. What has been called Russian nihilism should be interpreted as an iconoclastic rejection of the abstract forms of reconciliation found in the German romanticism and idealism. Criticism of metaphysics, the advent of the natural sciences, and the materialist and scientific performatism in philosophy were the starting point for the nihilism of the 1860s’ Russian generation. The destruction of the old world, which was based on a transcendental and metaphysical realm of ideals in which morality, religion,

and art remained preserved as supernatural entities, was proclaimed with a religious unparalleled passion in nineteenth-century Europe. German materialism, reduced, during the first half of the nineteenth century, to the professorial universes of Feuerbach and Buchner, became a religious pamphlet and set the literary universe of young Russian nihilists on fire.

Chernyshevsky's essay *The Aesthetic Relations of Art with Reality* was the first expression of actual profanation of art and morality in Russian thought. In this work, which was presented as a master's thesis at the University of St. Petersburg and published in the *Contemporary* newspaper in 1855, Chernyshevsky took all the lessons he had learned from Feuerbach and introduced his work as a manifesto for a materialistic aesthetic. The fall of art into the world of social and historical phenomena, as well as the interpretation of morality in the light of the empiricism of the natural sciences reverses the world of idealism and submits the last sacred cows of romanticism [art and morality] to Science and utilitarianism. The essay should be read, according to Chernyshevsky's preface to the third edition in 1888, as an application of Feuerbach's philosophy in discussions on art in the context of Russian literature. The essay, as an expression of a controversy with Hegelian aesthetics¹, sought to establish the foundations of a realistic aesthetic while vigorously opposing the concept of abstract in art².

¹ Chernyshevsky's contact with Hegelian aesthetics was established through the dissemination of Hegel's ideas by young Hegelian leftist Germans. In his treatise on art, Chernyshevsky confronts Hegel's aesthetics based on the ideas found in Vischer's treatise on aesthetics, *Aesthetics, or the Science of the Beautiful*.

² In one of his *Essays on Gogol period of Russian Literature*, Chernyshevsky recognized the germs of a realistic aesthetic in Belinsky's critique to the art of Gogol. Belinsky's judgment on the meaning of Gogol's works is that art is "the representation of reality in all its fidelity", enables Chernyshevsky to take the first step towards rupture with the notion of abstract in art. "The conception of 'reality' is quite new", says Belinsky [Sovremennik, 1848, p. 18], and, indeed, it was defined and went into science only very recently, when our contemporary thinkers explained the obscure allusions of transcendental philosophy, which had recognized truth only in concrete realization. Like all the major truths of modern science, this view of reality is very simple, but very fruitful. There was a time when the dreams of the imagination were regarded as being higher than reality, and when the power of the imagination was regarded as infinite. But our contemporary thinkers have examined this problem more carefully than did those of the past and have obtained results that are the very opposite of the old opinions, which proved to be totally untenable. The power of our imagination is extremely limited and its creations are very pale and feeble compared with reality. The most vivid imagination is overwhelmed by the thought of the millions of miles that separate the earth from the sun, and of the extreme rapidity of light and electric current. The most ideal figures painted by Raffaello proved to be portraits of living persons. The ugliest

Realism, for Chernyshevsky, means an understanding of reality subjected to a scientific *Weltanschauung* defined according to the laws of the natural sciences. Thus, aesthetic understanding must be imbued with “respect for real life” and “distrust of a priori hypothesis”. Chernyshevsky finds in the divorce between philosophy and science the starting point of a realistic aesthetic which rejects the fact that any excess would be committed in relation to scientifically defined measures of what is either real or illusory. If one can recall Bazarov’s reaction to Nikolai Petrovitch reading Pushkin, when he suggested that Arkadi had given his father “something useful to read” and recommended Buchner’s *Kraft und Stoff*, one can grasp a good idea of the background of Chernyshevsky’s aesthetic ideas. Buchner’s words, in the preface to the first edition of his book, echo as if they were uttered by Bazarov: “we shall take no notice of any but those who meet us on the ground of facts and of empiricism. Let the speculative gentry go on fighting one another from standpoint that are their own creation, but let them not run away with the strange notion that they possess the monopoly of philosophic truth. ‘Speculation, says Ludwig Feuerbach, is philosophy intoxicated’” [Buchner, 1884, p. xxii].

The submission of art to the categories of scientific thought made use of the same procedures of diminishing religion into culture that is found in *The Life of Jesus*, by David Strauss. The worldliness of Christianity in this work inspired Feuerbach’s intuition to find that the secret of theology was anthropology. Moreover, art, similarly to religion, is understood as a pale reflection of the sensible world and is justified insofar as it contributes to a man’s full realization and self-knowledge. The process of secularization of Chernyshevsky’s religious ideas and their connections with utopian socialism and Christianity found in Feuerbach a clear formulation. For the former, realism in art has as its principle the construction of a new world and the destruction of an old one, which brings to light the utilitarian character of art. Art, since it does not have an end in itself when it is dissociated from the mystifications of an aristocratic class, can be seen as a means of reproducing the image of the real man who is within a real world and freed from the religious and aesthetic mystifications of a pre-scientific reality which is held in the old order. Preaching the ideas

creations of mythology and popular superstition proved to be by no means so unlike the animals around us as the monsters discovered by the natural scientists. History and careful observation of present-day life have revealed that living people, even those who do not belong to the categories of arch scoundrels or heroes of virtue, commit crimes far more exalted than those invented by poets. Imagination had to yield to reality; nay, more, it was forced to admit that its fictitious creations are only copies of what is provided by the phenomena of reality [Chernyshevsky, 1953, p. 488-489].

that gave shape to Soviet realism, art, in Chernyshevsky's treatise, finds its purpose as a revolutionary one towards the construction of the "Kingdom of God on Earth as a Kingdom of emancipated human beings in full control of their fate". Taking into account that every revolutionary conceals or holds in the most intimate part of himself a priest, the relation between religion and revolution in the writings of Chernyshevsky is quite appropriate.

The thesis of Chernyshevsky's essay lies in the statement that art "cannot owe its origin to man's dissatisfaction with beauty in reality". By submitting art to the sensitive world, Chernyshevsky calls into question the concept of beauty, as understood by Hegelian aesthetics, as well as its relation to any form of transcendental obscurity. The definition "beauty is life, life that reminds us of man and of human life" [Chernyshevsky, 1953, p. 290] presupposes an ontological sufficiency of the sensible world and the outcoming understanding of the inexistence of any deficit in nature that could be satisfied by an abstract or transcendent element in art: "the highest beauty is the beauty that man meets with in the world of reality and not the beauty created by art" [Ibid, p. 292]. Not satisfied with the abstract idea of beauty, as one can recall Marx's theses about Feuerbach, it was in the sensitive world that Chernyshevsky sought the origins of beauty.

Due to his controversy with the aesthetics of German idealism, Chernyshevsky lays the foundations of his realism in the redefinition of the concepts of sublime and tragic. The author rejected the idea of sublime as an experience that exceeds understanding or as an experience itself, which is necessarily bound to the concept of infinity and of the non-representable that is subjected to abstract intellect categories. Addressing his criticism to the understanding of the sublime in German idealism, specifically in Hegel, for whom "the sublime is the manifestation of the idea of the infinite", Chernyshevsky considered that sublime could not be associated with a supersensible reality due to the fact that "if the sublime is in essence infinite, there is nothing sublime in the world that is accessible to our senses and our mind". Taking the sublime as an expression of the sensible world, Chernyshevsky defines the sublime object as "one whose dimensions far exceed those of the objects with which we compare" and since it does not belong to the domain of abstraction, it is the *sublime object* not "the thoughts roused by this object that seem to us sublime" [Ibid, p. 295]. Thus, abstract thought must be considered a simple effect and

not “the cause of the original sensation” itself. Therefore, the denial of the idea of the immeasurable as a characteristic of the sublime object discards the notion of infinity in art since there is nothing fundamental in existence that goes beyond the limits of understanding.

The fight against the sublime, which exposes the fracture of idealism and characterizes the nineteenth-century criticism, is seen in Chernyshevsky’s work not as philosophy, but as Science. What Karl Löwith called the “dissolution of Hegel’s mediations” must be here interpreted as the moment of dissolution of the “metaphysics of the beauty”, which, according to Marx, “could not be applied to the rough reality of the industrial age” [Gisbertz, 2017, p. 105]. The denial of the sublime embodied in the Prussian state, as one can find in Marx, presents itself as a radical inversion of aesthetics – “tragedy turned into farce”. This inversion of the world brought up by the revolution of Marx’s thought happened, as defined Gisbertz, “in order to fight the ‘sublime’ Prussian power”. Chernyshevsky’s denial of the sublime must be understood in this context of dissolution of Hegel’s mediations. Since it was a concept associated with the old order, the philosophical and the religious mystifications of a pre-scientific world, Chernyshevsky was against the idea of the sublime in the name of a scientific worldview.

Georg Lukács demonstrated that “the denial of tragedy and the traditional tragic theory has been present from the beginning as an essential point of the Chernyshevskyan aesthetics” [Lukács, 2017, p. 17]. As an exemplary concept of the experience of the sublime, the concept of tragedy was subjected to a criticism which regarded it as a pre-scientific experience, displaced from the reality of the modern man. The concept of tragedy, seem as belonging to the universe of “fantastic ideas of the semisavage man” [Chernyshevsky, 1953, p. 304], as well as the modern notion of the tragic found in German idealism found no place in Chernyshevsky’s materialist aesthetic.

The tragedy based on the Oriental or ancient Greek idea of fate will have for us the significance of a fable spoilt by revision. And yet, all the conceptions of the tragic contained in German aesthetics are only an attempt to harmonize the concept fate with the concept of modern science; but this profound attempt serves as an emphatic proof that such strivings can never be successful; Science can only explain the origin of the fantastic ideas of semisavage man, but it cannot reconcile them with the truth [Chernyshevsky, 1953, p. 305].

For Chernyshevsky, while there is no conflict between human freedom and the objective world of nature, which operates according to its own laws, there is no meaning in tragedy since all human actions are based upon the same natural laws [Ibid, p. 311]. By denying the sense of tragedy as the expression of an ontological conflict between freedom and necessity and between man and nature Chernyshevsky abandoned romantic delusions, such as the ones found in Turgenev's poem *Nature*. In the poem it is presented as a woman of "dark menacing eyes" who does not know the human meaning of the words reason, law, and justice [Turgenev, 1994, p. 881]. Nature as a workshop, according to Bazarov, has natural laws which determine the behavior of men in the world. Since they are not juxtaposed, nature and men experience a natural coincidence provided by objective laws emanating from the former. The denial of these laws would not be tragedy, but simple stupidity.

Chernyshevsky's analysis of the concept of moral tragedy was made in the light of his judgment of a new man freed from the mystifications of religious or bourgeois moralities, which are centered on the idea of guilt. The relation between crime and punishment and the connection of the latter to a moral order, which results from a guilty conscience that is the basis of tragedy, would find no place in the social relations of a world freed from religious and idealistic mystifications.

As regards punishment by a conjunction of circumstances, we have long ridiculed the old-fashioned novels which "always end with the triumph of virtue and the punishment of vice". Nevertheless, many novelists and all authors of treatises on aesthetics insist that vice 'and crime should' be punished on earth. And so a theory has arisen to the effect that they are *always* punished by public opinion and by qualms of conscience. But this, too, does not happen Always. As regard public opinion, it does not by any means punish all moral crimes. And if the voice of society does not rouse our conscience every moment, in the majority of cases it is not roused in us, or, if it is, it soon falls asleep again. **Every educated man understands how ridiculous it is to look at the world with eyes of the Greeks** of the period of Herodotus: everybody understands perfectly nowadays that the suffering and doom of great men are not inevitable; that not every man who dies does so far his crimes, that not every criminal dies; that not every crime is punished by the court of public opinion. Therefore, one cannot help saying that the tragic does

not always rouse in our minds the idea of necessity that the basis of its essence does not lie in this [Chernyshevsky, 1953, pp. 310-311].

Taking all of that into consideration, the denial of the instances of moral judgment, which are based upon religious content or social circles (public opinion) of an old order, is due to a criticism that sought to base morals on rational and utilitarian grounds. In his novel *What Is To Be Done?*, Chernyshevsky names this position *rational selfishness* and draws the portrait of a new man who is uprooted from the values that substantiated traditional bonds. Considering that the “Earth is not a court, but a place to live in” [Ibid, p. 575]. Chernyshevsky restates the emptying of the moral of his religious contents and denounces the values of an old order as a psychological habit of a bourgeois class. By waving to the fragility of society’s voice in consciousness, Chernyshevsky approaches the bonds that unite cynicism and virtue and points to the ineffectual permanence of a spectrum of moral consciousness: “the crime is not always punished even by qualms of conscience” [Ibid, p. 575]. The ridicule in “to look at the world with eyes of the Greeks” [Ibid, p. 310] arouses from the modern man’s realization of the absence of any moral constraint that could overlap with the particular interests that organize social relations. Raskolnikov’s failure and the tragic fatum that determines the plot of Dostoevsky’s novel are due to a ghostly moral consciousness tied to the values of an old society.

The central ideas of *What Is To Be Done?* are germinated in Chernyshevsky’s early essay in which he criticizes the concept of tragedy and the idea of an utilitarian art, ideas that will appear as fundamental to his thinking. Chernyshevsky, through the acknowledgment that art is an instrument of insurrection against the old order and of demystification of the cynical nature of the bourgeois morality, sheds light on the distance between the archaic sense of tragedy and the new morality grounded in rational bases. The democratic principle, the female emancipation, as well as the revolutionary commitment appear as realities opposed to the idea of necessity which exists in the traditional tragic doctrine. The feminine question arises in *What Is To Be Done?* as part of an anti-tragic aesthetic and as a counterpoint to the moral fragility of the bourgeois social habit. In the manuscript of his essay on aesthetics, Chernyshevsky ponders on society, which “in our day regards the violation of moral purity as disgraceful only for women, not for men. In the opinion of most people it is not wrong for a young man to sow his wild oats, in fact, they

think it would be wrong if he did not do so” [Ibid, p. 575]. It is impossible not to address Tolstoy’s subtle criticism of the conventional morality in *Anna Karenina*. In the sentence “everything was confused in the house of the Oblonskys”, the reader is introduced to a scenario of inauthenticity of morality in which the *tragic fatum* that will destroy Anna Karenina will unfold.

In *What is to be Done?* one finds oneself far from the depths of Tolstoy’s moral world and from the objective expression of tragic need in Anna’s “ghostly” conscientious scruples. Lukács’ synthesis of the key points of Chernyshevsky’s conflict with tragedy is accurate, as for him, the novel must be interpreted as a

poetic controversy surrounding tragedy and against the interpretation of conflicts – which appear in bourgeois society in a more or less usual way in the tragic form – are essentially tragic. The center of this constructive controversy is the new type of representation of man and his destinies as a character, who is appropriate for the formation of the new man. Moreover, there are the controversy sources of ideologies – which are human creators – the “rational egoism”. The denial of tragedy and the traditional tragic theory were present from the beginning as an essential point in the Chernyshevskyan aesthetics. Tragic is for him nothing other than the terrible in human life. <...> Chernyshevsky did not argue that the tragedy which emerges during the usual course of the bourgeois life was necessarily indispensable. Nor did he accept the thesis of bourgeois literature and aesthetics which professes that the psychological foundation of tragedy, the evidence of its necessity, and the tragic elevation that results in the experience of this necessity correspond to the true essence of life. Therefore, the same foundation would be apt to serve as basis for the aesthetic definition of tragedy. The poetic and worldview roles of “rational egoism” lie precisely in the possibility of demonstrating that the conflicts considered to be tragic by the bourgeois aesthetic – that is, the situation of women in the family, the conflict of the couple, and love – have no solution solely due to the spiritual and moral inferiority of the human type of the old society. The new man can solve, without tragic plot and catastrophes, similar human conflicts with his “rational egoism”, which makes evident his spiritual and moral superiority. This means that there is no tragedy insofar as man acts in the spirit of “rational egoism”, as he, with clear conscience, examines his own interests (and rationally organizes them), and as he, without

any illusion or fetish, observes his internal and external relations. More correctly: any and all tragic conflicts that the bourgeois social structure, psychology, morality, etc., grows or creates is by no means a “universal human” nature (therefore has no eternal validity). They are merely forms of appearance of the inhumanity and of the narrowness of the spirit of the bourgeois society; thus, by no means definitive, they can and should be overcome [Lukács, 2017, p. 4, 29].

In his work *The Death of Tragedy*, G. Steiner considered the demystification of necessity as one of the principles of Marxism. For Steiner, “Marx repudiated the entire concept of tragedy. ‘Necessity’, he declared, is blind only in so far as it is not understood” [Steiner, 1993, p. 12]. Similarly, although not exactly on the path of a Marxist dialectic, Chernyshevsky advocated for a demystifying critique of the concept of tragedy in the Russian thought: “Science can only explain the origin of the fantastic ideas of semisavage man, but it cannot reconcile them with truth”. Mirian Leonard, in *Tragic Modernities*, assesses the role of criticism of tragedy in modernity and shares the vision of the Marxist critic Raymond Williams, for whom “the diagnosis of tragedy in human life and society is a Marxist undertaking. Tragic drama plays a crucial role in uncovering structures of social oppression and conditions of alienation. The exposure of the shortcomings of modernity is necessary to the creation of a new modernity” [Leonard, 2015, pp. 11-12]. It would not be unreasonable to consider that Chernyshevsky’s work made an impact in the nineteenth-century Russian literature when one regards his attempt to demystify art, similarly to the Marxist tradition in Europe. Chernyshevsky, by considering his capacity for mystification and the role of criticism in the demystification of aesthetic ideologies, understood that art is justified insofar as it enables the creation of symbolic space for a new man and a new morality.

The supremacy of moral values over aesthetics dates from Plato’s critique of poets and finds a significant expression, in Russia, in Tolstoy’s eccentric treatise *What is Art?* The meaning of Chernyshevsky’s work must be interpreted as something that, despite allowing clear approximations, distance from the philosophical clipping that we find, for instance, in Plato’s model of philosophical paideia or in Tolstoy’s fusion of religion and art. The novel *What is to be Done?* represents a particular event in Russian thought, a radical symptom of its nihilism and the consummation of a radical rupture with the traditional and spiritual values of the past.

In the nineteenth century, the demystification of art as a second experience of desacralization deprived the last link to beauty with its transcendent dimension. The formulation of Benedito Nunes, for whom art, “while losing contact with the numinous, has gained autonomy, and while representing the sacred has become sacred” [Nunes, 1989, p. 115], offers us the dimension of the place of art as the last metaphysical refuge to religion in modern age. According to Nunes, “the cult of the image of the gods shifted to the cult of beauty”; thus, “the seduction of the aesthetic object and the disinterest in the beautiful would come from the initial connaturality of the artistic and the religious phenomena” [Ibid, p. 115]. The historical and social context of Russian modernity and the complete rootlessness of its intelligentsia with regards to the concrete materiality of national life made it possible, perhaps more than anywhere else, for this phenomenon of refuge towards the *beautiful* and the *sublime*, which Dostoevsky’s underground man refers to, to take place. The shift from reality toward the high affections of art and the sophistication of aesthetic appetites that overlapped with the senses of nature through the abstraction of a science of the Beautiful were part of the vocabulary of a generation of *superfluous men* who nourished themselves with metaphysical contents of an aesthetic that sought to preserve the last traces of world unity.

Russian Nihilism, understood within the context of the 1860s’ generation, was the accomplishment of an experience of radical dissolution of Hegelian philosophy, as well as of a rejection of the German Romanticism and its attempt to rewrite metaphysics through art. Nihilism as an embodiment of the failure of idealism in Philosophy manifests itself in Chernyshevsky as the dawn of scientific thought. In fact, the dissolution of the Hegelian mediations and the collapse of German idealism had already manifested themselves in the thought of Aleksandr Herzen in the form of a strong Nihilism. For this reason, the experience of young radicals had a *fil rouge* that connected them to Herzen’s thoughts, as Dostoevsky had already suggested in his *Demons* pamphlet, according to which Nihilism manifested in the sons was congenitally linked to their fathers’ criticism. The fundamental difference between the two nihilisms, here the distinction made by Tolstoy from his own experience is considered (a nihilist in the sense of one who believed in nothing), lies in the role played by belief in Science in the way of thinking of young nihilists.

The expression commonly associated with Nietzsche about Science as the last stop of Nihilism has, *avant la lettre*, a clear application to the thinking of young radicals and, in particular to Chernyshevsky's work. His novel, *What is to be Done?*, can be portrayed as the synthesis of an intellectual trajectory that subjected art to the frames of utilitarian Science and morals. The world's interpretation by the anti-metaphysical prism of the Natural Sciences and the radical rupture with the philosophical and spiritual past are at the starting point for a "natural consciousness" that found its basis in modern science. In his essay, *The Anthropological Principe in Philosopy*, Chernyshevsky recognizes that "the principle underlying the philosophical view of human life and all its phenomena is the idea, worked out by the natural sciences, of the unity of the human organism" [Chernyshevsky, 1953, p. 70]. For Chernyshevsky, art, as an aesthetic phenomenon of representation of the new man, must draw the contours of life through the lenses of a science emancipated from philosophical and romantic mystifications, as one can find represented in his theoretical struggle against tragedy. In paraphrasing Husserl, according to whom, "merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people" [Husserl, 1970, p. 6], one can approach Chernyshevsky's critical realism and his conception of art as an aesthetic phenomenon which represents "men of facts".

Written in prison and published in 1863 as a response to the yearnings of the revolutionary youth for a materialist aesthetic art model, *What is to be Done?* was also a response to Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*, which had been published in 1861 and referred to as a superfluous caricature of the revolutionary type by the critics. Based upon his reflection about part of the discussion around Bazarov, Lukács found that Turgenev would have drawn "the traits of his hero from the outside, from the point of view of liberalism" [Lukács, 2017], while Chernyshevsky did so from within and from a revolutionary perspective. Unlike Bazarov's powerlessness, in which many critics have recognized the remaining of paralyzing elements of *the superfluous type*, Chernyshevsky's heroes embodied all the virtues of both new men and action. The assertion of scientific materialism as the ultimate instance to define reality and reason as the foundation of moral actions means, in Chernyshevsky's aesthetic, a world freed from the "antinomies of idealism". Nietzsche's critique of the "gospel of Strauss", according to whom the latter "had no notion of the fundamental

antinomies of idealism or of the extreme relativity of all science and reason”, brings one closer to the philosophical ground where the new men of Chernyshevsky is. The lesson of Kantian philosophy, according to Nietzsche’s reading, that “it is precisely reason that ought to tell how little of the in-itself of things can be determined by reason” [Nietzsche, 2007, p. 27], is radically subverted by the clarity of a positive type which knows precisely how to act according to the laws of reason and truth.

The imperative value of *What is to be Done?* has acquired the status of a *new gospel*, and its content expressed the positive and necessary elements of a revolutionary practice, which sought to overcome the superfluous paralysis provoked by the moral mystifications of the old order. Contrary to the ambivalent nihilism of Turgenev’s hero and to the antinomies provoked by Kant’s bourgeois lessons, the new man would be able to mold himself through the imperatives of reason and Science and to rebuild a new world and a new moral in the light of a utilitarian science. In reality, Chernyshevsky was the Russian translator of Rousseau’s works. Thus, the anthropological optimism of Rousseau’s *Emile* combined with the utopianism of the French revolutionary tradition from the eighteenth century offered the symbolic substance of the revolutionary and religious *élan* of the novel. In the first pages of *What is to be Done?*, by translating the affects of utopian socialism, the reader is introduced to Vera Pavlovna. She sings an adaptation of the French revolutionary song “Ça ira” and expresses the religious creed that accompanied the old and the new revolutionary movements: liberation by knowledge, community wager, and the revolutionary construction of a paradise on Earth.

The symbolic set of *What is to be Done?* presents all the elements of an anti-tragedy: a man’s dominion over his own destiny, the primacy of reason over passion, alongside the utopian principle that makes him aware of his role in building a new world. Truly, Chernyshevsky’s literary objective was the representation of the new man in a luminous contrast with the old man, lifting the latter from the “irrational unions of the old society and the old morality”. Subjected from childhood to the tyrannical values of a patriarchal morality, Vera Pavlovna was entangled in an oppressive family universe that forced her into a marriage of interests. Vera Pavlovna’s life in her parents’ home is presented in her memoirs as an experience in an “underground”; thus, the story of her liberation bears a paradigmatic resemblance to the metaphor of Plato’s cave. The positive figure of Lopukhov, a medical student, appears in the novel as a sign of both liberation and a positive model of a social type that establishes

contrast between the two worlds. Lopukhov, while being responsible for freeing Vera Pavlovna through a marriage motivated by moral principles, represents the psychological type of the new man who is at the base of a new society regulated by rational and utilitarian principles. In fact, Vera's freedom is indeed the starting point for addressing certain ideas embodied in the novel, such as rational egoism, democratic egalitarianism, socialism, as well as the feminine question and a particular type of revolutionary asceticism.

The configuration of a positive type of character in Chernyshevsky's art is subject to a scientific worldview and to a revolutionary ideal that has disentangled itself from the aporias of a "problematic individual" which suffers from an absolute inadequacy of his soul in relation to the world, as Lukács defined. The lack of depth in the heroes of *What is to be Done?* represents the antithesis of a romanticism that sought to alienate itself from the fact that human beings are governed by their own calculations and advantages. The bond between Materialism and Utilitarianism, which offered substance to the world of new men, had indeed a corrosive effect on the aesthetic mystifications of a type of art considered decadent. The false aesthetic depth and its refuge in what was called "elevation of spirit", in addition to having alienating effects for falsifying real social contradictions, becomes "totally contemptible in relation to one's desire to obtain advantages for oneself".

Significantly, Lopukhov's teachings to Vera Pavlovna, his scientific *weltanschauung*, opened the scene of a scientific nihilism that ignored the contradictions of a soul seeking refuge in the aesthetic consolations of art. For instance, in the representation of the prosaic reality of rational egoism, the contours of the world are defined by the limits of a scientific reason. It is, thus, in this context that the reader finds Lopukhov's lapidary statement: "Science does not care for a poetical form" [Chernyshevsky, 1886, p. 87]. The adequacy of Science between man and reality and the deletion of the sense of disproportion between man and nature provided the modeling context of the positive type, as seen in Chernyshevsky. Certainly, the idea that for Science there is no poetic form should not be understood as a simple postulate of separation between the art and the scientific spheres, as Wittgenstein proposed. On the contrary, it is through the submission of art to the scientific realism that one could emancipate oneself from empty and harmful fantasies. For Lopukhov, "this theory is merciless and prosaic, but it reveals true motives of life and poetry in the truth of life" [Ibid, p. 87]. The principle of adequacy

between man and world through science has as its particular unfolding the denial of art as an experience of transcendence arising from a fissure between man and reality. To put it differently, art, as the expression of disharmony between man and world, as it appears, for example, in Nietzsche's famous fragment "we have art so we do not perish of the truth" would be, for Chernyshevsky, a phantasmagoric perception of art from a negative and decadent type of idleness.

In *What is to be Done?* Chernyshevsky applies the fundamental thesis of his essay *The Aesthetic Relationship of Art to Reality*, according to which "art can not owe its origin to man's dissatisfaction with beauty in reality" [Chernyshevsky, 1953, p. 115]. Turning away from the antinomic representation that shaped Oblomov's negative type and all the superfluous types that populated Russian literature, Chernyshevsky set up a positive type devoid of depth and fully embedded in the phenomenal materiality of the world. The idea that "the highest beauty is the beauty that man meets with in the world of reality and not the beauty created by art" [Chernyshevsky, 1953, p. 292]. establishes a measure of reality based on the criteria of a scientific materialism and offers a principle of adequacy of the consciousness of the man to the objective forms of the outer world.

The anti-tragic model in *What is to be Done?* presents a frame of the world and man detached from the unscientific types of Greek tragedy and from the modern formulations of the tragic that marked the aesthetics of German Romanticism. The tragic principle, rooted in the conflict between freedom and necessity, is dissolved by rational knowledge and by the adequacy of man to the natural laws of causality which define him. After Vera Pavlovna read the books recommended by Lopukov, the reader finds the following dialogue:

"A man acts from necessity; but there are cases when it seems that it depends upon my will to act in this way or in that. For instance, I am playing, and I turn the leaves of the music. I turn them sometimes with my left hand, sometimes with my right hand. Let us suppose that I have turned them now with the right hand; why could I not have done it with my left hand? Does it not depend upon my own will?" "No, Viéra Pavlovna; when you are turning the leaves, not thinking which hand you use, you turn them with the hand that is most convenient; there is no will about it. If you think, 'let me turn them with my right hand', you then turn them under the influence of this thought; but this thought itself was

not a matter of your will, but was engendered unavoidably by others” [Chernyshevsky, 1886, p. 89]³.

The assertion of a conflict between reason and will on the horizon of the natural sciences would mean nothing more than the lack of knowledge of the natural laws of causality, which are at the basis of man’s behavior. In fact, as the dissolution of the aporias of tragedy takes place by submitting one’s will to laws of causality, Chernyshevsky describes within the framework of a scientific realism what will be the starting point of the construction of his positive and revolutionary types. Indeed, Lopukov’s lessons open an abyss between the new men and the old generation. The distance between so-called superfluous men and new men is seen in clear and insurmountable shades in *What is to be Done?*

The paralysis of the superfluous type and of the negativity, which offers substance to their melancholy, appears to the new men as the result of the idleness of an aristocratic class that finds refuge in a decadent type of art. Oblomov’s laziness and the deep paralysis that accompany all the heroes of his generation are confronted, like in the duel painted by Turgenev in *Fathers and Sons*, with the real men of action found in Chernyshevsky’s novel. The radical judgment of traditional values in the light of a scientific reason results in the dissolution of any immediate bond with the past. The critique of aesthetic and moral values and the rejection of the impasses of consciousness of the old generation, the liberals of the 1840s, mark off a clear dividing line between the new and the superfluous men. In the late 1850s, Nikolai Dobrolyubov’s essay *What is the Oblomovism* offered the first hints on the search for a positive type in literature that could become a real mirror of reality for young revolutionaries. *Oblomovism* set out the stigma for the superfluous type of the old generation and Dobrolyubov’s irony described the abyss that was settled between the two worlds. In pointing out that “when I hear a country squire talking about the rights of man and urging the necessity of developing person-

³ «– Человек действует по необходимости. Но ведь есть случаи, когда кажется, что от моего произвола зависит поступить так или иначе. Например: я играю и перевертываю страницы нот; я перевертываю их иногда левою рукою, иногда правою. Положим, теперь я перевернула правою: разве я не могла перевернуть левою? не зависит ли это от моего произвола?

– Нет, Вера Павловна; если вы перевертываете, не думая ничего о том, какою рукою перевернуть, вы перевертываете тою рукою, которою удобнее, произвола нет; если вы подумали: “Дай переверну правою рукою”, – вы перевернете под влиянием этой мысли, но эта мысль явилась не от вашего произвола; она необходимо родилась от других» [Чернышевский, 1969].

ality, I know from the first words he utters that he is an Oblomov”, Dobrolyubov describes the rupture of the young radicals with the aesthetic, ethical, and religious vocabulary that shaped the world of their fathers’ generation [Dobrolyubov, p. 340].

The fostering of a moral consciousness through the development of personality in the frameworks of a decadent aesthetic together with the preservation of an abstract notion of human rights are all interpreted by Dobrolyubov as a mask which covers the romantic lie of the superfluous type. The creation of a positive type, already visible to Dobrolyubov in the small traces of Olga Ilinskaya, in whom the “simplicity and clarity of thought” appears as “elements of the new life”, [Ibid, p. 342] materializes itself in Chernyshevsky’s novel in the form of a radical rupture with the ties embodied in traditional moral and aesthetics. This radical rupture with the values of the past, backed up by an unshakeable belief in the emancipatory potential of Science, is identified by the critical fortune as *Russian nihilism*.

Scientific realism, as the shaping of a new man, as well as the foundation for a new morality, is the ground where Vera Pavlovna and the positive types of *What is to be Done?* will move on. In fact, posing as the finished symbol of revolutionary publicism, Chernyshevsky’s novel is at the origin of what Gorky later called Socialist Realism. Relying on a scientific realism and describing types that, according to the narrator, were already part of Russian society, Chernyshevsky shaped a typology of nihilism by raising his heroes at the base of the traditional society through a radical uprooting or, if one wishes to use the definition of nihilism given by A. Badiou, a “rupture of the traditional figure of the bond, un-binding as a form of being of all that pretends to be bond” [Badiou, 1999]. Moreover, the new hermeneutical horizon of Vera Pavlovna and the substance of her new life are presented as the liberation of a regime of truth that originates in the religious and moral mystifications of the old order and which was used as a principle of maintenance for all current social asymmetries. One finds in *What is to be Done?* the description of a traditional Russian society as a “dispositive”, understood here in the Foucauldian sense as a symbolic network of values which fuels a logic for oppression at all levels of reality. For instance, the home of Vera Pavlovna’s parents, a metaphor of the traditional Russian society, is presented as an underground and the context of their new social relations, the world of the new men, spread as a figurative contrast emanating from the positive types.

The elements that make *What is to be Done?* a revolutionary paideia, discussed theoretically in the essay on aesthetics, are inserted along with the rupture of Chernyshevsky with the elements of the tragedy and become determinant for the configuration of the positive atmosphere of the novel. The detachment of the “dirt, vulgarity, cynicism” experienced by the positive types and the description of Vera Pavlovna’s new life as immersed in “pure thoughts” and “in the company of clean people” point out to an ideal that marks the transition from critical realism to socialist realism. Rufus Mathewson demonstrated Chernyshevsky’s conflict “between description and aspiration, between ‘is’ and ‘should be’”, which resulted in a particular way of overcoming tragedy that was “challenged at its very foundation by the optimism of the dialectic” [Mathewson, 2000, p. 79]. Mathewson considered that “in tragedy, ‘life as it should be’ exists largely as a negative inference to be drawn from the drama’s presentation of life as it *is* and should *not* be. The Russian radicals on the other hand incorporated their vision of life as it should be into the literary work itself and presented it as the inevitable and desirable extension of life as it is” [Ibid]. The configuration of a positive type as an overcoming of a superfluous paralysis and a symbol of overcoming tragedy was made possible by the depiction of a young man whom in opposition to Dostoevsky’s anti-hero, got used to “acting in the way taught to him by reason and by the sciences”. Whilst in tragedy “should be” presents itself in the form of a negative principle, “life as it *is* and should *not* be”, the utopian imagination of young radicals gave birth to a positive-ideal type “as it should be”, which would become a principle of justification of art.

Through the critique of the elements that constitute tragedy, which presupposes an “unchanging universe”, and the rupture with a set of traditional values that offered the substance of paralysis of the superfluous types the scientific nihilism of *What is to be Done?* was set as (aesthetic, moral, and religious) a revolutionary paideia and determined the purpose and the utilitarian dimension of literary activity. It is in this horizon that aesthetic and social modulations of the feminine question and socialism appear, as one finds in the founding of Vera Pavlovna’s atelier. As a matter of fact, the construction of a seamstress cooperative, the democratic principle for profit distribution, alongside the unmasking of capitalism’s internal logic appear as metaphors that in themselves justify art and design a world “as it should be”. Lukács’s definition of *What is to be Done?* as poetic controversy surrounding tragedy is justified on several levels and the rational mediations of the affections with which we

come across in the novel deny, through the theory of rational egoism, any psychological basis for the tragic. Vera's passion for Kirsanov, Lopukov's best friend, and the orchestration of a love triangle that insinuates, at the end of the novel, a *ménage à quatre*, emancipates itself from the traditional moral universe of the nineteenth century and appears as a revolutionary sign of liberation of women.

Mathewson's observation that "every motive of the characters is contained in a creed" and that an "ethical theory underlies the entire work and guides the behavior of the principals at every step in the story" [Mathewson, 2000, p. 75]. must be read in the light of the argument concerning the religious character of Chernyshevsky's work presented in this text. The application of Feuerbach's philosophical-religious ideas in the treatise on aesthetics and their implicit presence in *What is to be Done?* show Chernyshevsky's affective and intellectual connection with the author of *The Essence of Christianity*. The definition of the concept of rational egoism in Feuerbach, not as "the egoism of the 'philistine bourgeois', but as the philosophical principle of conformity with nature, with human reason" [Lukács, 2017], appears as the ethical element which laid the foundations for the community of young men seen in Chernyshevsky. The traditional doctrine of the tragedy rooted in a bourgeois psychology, which determines the affections and subjects women to the schemes of a traditional morality, finds its ending line within the new marital relations setting indicated by Vera and Lopukov. Beyond the scope of private issues, Vera Pavlovna's commitment with the idea of community and the subversion of bourgeois surplus value represent the symbolic universe of a revolutionary psychology that is genealogically close to the fusion of utopian socialism and Christianity found in the young Chernyshevsky and to the changing of theology in anthropology seen in Feuerbach.

The overcoming of bourgeois psychology through what Lucien Goldmann called *transindividual subject* [Löwy, 1995], in the context of his reading of the tragedy of the seventeenth century [Pascal and Racine], became possible only on the horizon of a materialistic dialectic that enabled a type of "community wager" which would result in the "realization of the individual in 'the authentic' human community" [Cohen, 1994, p. 9; Goldman, 1959]. In reality, what Goldmann called the "community wager" has a religious dimension due to the fact that it is an "act of faith which is at the starting point of the Marxist option: the possibility of the historical realization of an authentic human community (social-

ism) [Löwy, 1995, p. 54]⁴. The appropriation of Goldmann's concepts as a way of approaching Chernyshevsky's worldview is justified insofar as one is dealing with a work of art that, before Marx, drew a positive type that corresponded directly to the idea of a *transindividual subject*.

Rakhmetov's figuration, the outsider of *What is to be Done?*, can be interpreted as the finished product of Chernyshevsky's secularization of Christianity, which preserved, as the hard core of his temperament, the basic elements of a religious instinct. The concept of "care of the self" and "asceticism", revisited by modern philosophy and named by Michel Foucault as "technologies of the self"⁵ and by Pierre Hadot as "Spiritual Exercises" [Hadot, 2002] are part of the moral wealth of ancient Greek philosophy and shaped practices of ascetic spirituality of early Christianity. The relation between art and nihilism in the Russian nineteenth century together with the search for a positive role model promoted an exercise of regaining a type of asceticism as a moral practice that sought to overcome the antinomies which shaped the superfluous world. The rupture of Tolstoy with the symptoms of superfluity, which led to the moral judgment of aesthetics found in his treatise on art, has the same nihilistic origin that through different paths and an almost blind faith in science modeled the type of revolutionary asceticism seen in Rakhmetov. Going through all the stages of a classical experience of religious asceticism, Rakhmetov, by examining his consciousness, deed that led him to pay close attention to his body and intellect, underwent a series of abstinence exercises. With aristocratic origins and therefore prone to becoming hostage to the sins of superfluity, he decided to renounce all the advantages and honors which he might have demanded of life in order to work for the benefit of other. In spite of the fact that it gave him much pleasure, "he said to himself, I am not going to drink a drop of wine; I shall not touch a woman"; thus, developing deprivation techniques that envisaged a form of "self-possession" [Chernyshevsky, 1886, p. 278].

The cultivation of a severe and ascetic way of life, "gymnastics, work that served to increase his strength, and reading", indicates a movement

⁴ "L'acte de foi, qui se trouve au point de départ de la démarche marxiste <...>: la possibilité de réalisation historique d'une communauté humaine authentique (le socialisme)".

⁵ "...technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform I themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" [Foucault, 1988, p. 16].

of attention to the body and intellect that underlies a “cultivation of the self”. The renouncing “in order to work for the benefit of other” appears as an aesthetic model and a moral construction of a transindividual subject; thus, Rakhmetov symbolizes, in the economy of the novel, the finished molding of the new man. Experiencing a rational self-possession, “he has overcome ‘inertia’, ‘ennui’, ‘exaltation’, ‘romanticism’, ‘whimsicality’, all the vices of his superfluous predecessors” [Mathewson, 2000, p. 77].

Joseph Frank found that Rakhmetov should be considered “the fateful fusion between the hagiographic pattern of Russian religious kenoticism and the coldly dispassionate calculations of English Utilitarianism that forms the essence of the Bolshevik character” [Frank, 1990, p. 45]. There is little doubt about the existence of a religious instinct which offers substance of the ascetic character of Rakhmetov. Appearing at the heart of the novel as a strange outsider, the exceptionality of his temper provokes astonishment and admiration in his peers, who are essentially ordinary people plunged into daily life chores when compared to him. The episode in which he spent an entire night in a bed with nails claiming that this was necessary for him to find out if he would be able “to stand it” could be interpreted as an experience of ascetic mortification that the character sought in order to strengthen himself to participate in the world’s redemption. His daily seclusion, since “it was a common occurrence for him to vanish”, his intense attention to body and intellect, the control of emotions, and the creation of a *rule*, in the molds of the monastic tradition of a classical asceticism, throw light on a religious consciousness that has acquired the exact clarity about *What is to be Done?*

If one can remember Anna Karenina’s words, “I don’t know myself. I know my appetites”, which appeared as a symptom of the religious crisis experienced by Tolstoy and that made him break definitively with the aesthetics of the superfluous type, one can glimpse at the separation of the romantic aesthetics of superfluous men from the phenomenon of fusion of art and religion in the Russian literary universe of the second half of the nineteenth century. Rakhmetov’s *self-possession* is the outcome of asceticism’s experience that knew how to confront the superfluity and aestheticism present in bourgeois hedonism. The monastic cell means, in the economy of the novel, the “cultivation of the self” and at the same time the combat against the illusions of romantic aesthetics; thus, putting Rakhmetov as a key character of the novel. Notwithstanding, in discussing the meaning of men similar to Rakhmetov, Chernyshevsky made use of

a biblical metaphor found in the Gospel of Matthew: “they are the salt of the salt of the earth” (это соль соли земли).

They are few of them, but through them flourishes the life of all; without them life would become dead and putrid; there are few of them, but they help all people to breathe; without them people would suffocate. The mass of honest and kind people is great, but people like these are few; but they are in the midst, like theine in tea, like the bouquet in fine wine; from them com their strength and fragrance; it is the flower of the best people; they are the motive powers, they are the salt of the salt of the earth (это соль соли земли) [Chernyshevsky, 1886, p. 291]⁶.

Certainly, the distance between the figure of Rakhmetov and the “mass of honest and kind people” represents the distance between the sacred space of monastic activity and ordinary life. Chernyshevsky’s wordplay on the original sense of the biblical text, “they are the salt of the salt”, sought to describe the qualitative leap in the experience of men such as Rakhmetov. At a turning point in the novel, while confronting Vera Pavlovna’s decision to abandon the direction of the cooperative, Rakhmetov appears as a point of stability that offers direction and nurturing of a transindividual consciousness. Indeed, for Rakhmetov, to jeopardize collective well-being because of individual comfort would imply the dissolution of the entire social bond implemented in the cooperative – which is a metaphor for the historical realization of an authentic human community (socialism).

Irina Paperno suggests that the title of the novel *What is to be Done?* (*Что делать?*) might evoke the baptism episode in the Gospel of Luke 3:10-14, in which the crowd asks John the Baptist the following question: “What shall we do then?” For Paperno, “un riche réseau d’allusions à la Bible et à la tradition chrétienne traverse le roman, prévenant le lecteur que ce texte a pour objectif de fournir des solutions globales aux problèmes de l’existence humaine et de l’organisation de la vie spirituelle et matérielle de l’homme” [Paperno, 2017, p. 217]. Just before the episode in which Rakhmetov exhorts Vera Pavlovna on the ethical implications of socialism, the reader finds him reading Isaac Newton’s *Observations on*

⁶ «Мало их, но ими расцветает жизнь всех; без них она заглохла бы, прокисла бы; мало их, но они дают всем людям дышать, без них люди задохнулись бы. Велика масса честных и добрых людей, а таких людей мало; но они в ней – теин в чаю, букет в благородном вине; от них ее сила и аромат; это цвет лучших людей, это двигатели двигателей, это соль соли земли» [Чернышевский, 1969].

the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St. John. Newton's influence as a religious thinker became vast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the reception of his work inspired a series of "scientific studies and prophetic interpretations" that shaped modern religious thought [Force, Popkin, 1990, p. 166]. The understanding that through Science one could establish a doctrine of human behavior and an objective understanding of the world, as well as understanding the course of history and, therefore, creating an objective principle of organization of the spiritual and material life of man is found in the basis of the narrative of Chernyshevsky's novel. *What is to be Done?*, as a materialistic subversion of Christianity, was conceived and formulated in the form of a new gospel. In the gospel of Luke, the answer of prophet John to the question "What shall we do then?" is known to every Christian: "He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise". Although it is not necessary to be a theologian of liberation in Asia or Latin America to deduce the moral and ethical implications of the gospel response, from an early age Chernyshevsky was aware of the difficulties of putting the socialism symbolically presented in his gospel into practice. In an entry in his youth diary, which has already been mentioned, the author acknowledges that "the methods adopted by Jesus Christ were not, perhaps, 'the right ones', as it might have been more useful if he had invented a self-regulating mechanism". Anticipating, perhaps, the inquisitor's lucidity of Ivan's poem, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Chernyshevsky found in monastic asceticism (the salt of the earth's salt) the only path for the establishment of a transindividual consciousness and for the preservation of the moral values of Christianity.

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