II. Letter One: Two Worlds

My meek, my radiant friend!

Our vaulted room greeted me with coldness, sadness, and loneliness when I opened its door for the first time after my trip.

But, alas, I entered it alone, without you.

That was not only the first impression. I washed up and put things in order. As before, rows of materialized thoughts were stretched out on the bookshelves. As before, your bed was made and your chair stood in its place (let there be at least the illusion that you are with me!). At the bottom of a clay pot, oil was burning as before, casting a beam of light upward—at the icon of the Savior. As before, in the late evening the wind was blowing noisily through the trees outside the window. As before, the night watchman’s stick made an invigorating sound, and locomotives passed by with a deep-voiced roar. As before, roosters were stridently calling to one another just before the morning. As before, at about four in the morning, the bells rang their summons to the matins. Days and nights became one for me. It was as if I did not know where I was and what was happening to me. [The wordless and the timeless had come to reside beneath the ceiling, between the narrow walls of our room.] And beyond those walls, people would come, speak, tell the news, read newspapers, leave, then come again—and this eternally. Again distant locomotives would cry out in their deep contralto. Eternal peace here; eternal movement there. Everything as before... But you are not with me, and the whole world seems deserted. I am alone, absolutely alone in the whole world. But my sorrowful loneliness aches sweetly in my heart. At times, it seems that I have become one of those leaves that are whirled about by the wind on paths.

I rose today in the early morning and seemed to sense something new. Indeed, in a single night the back of summer had been broken. Golden leaves whirled over the ground in serpentine, wind-driven eddies. Flocks of birds were set in motion. There were files of cranes, and a swirling of crows and daws. The air was filled with the cool aroma of autumn, the smell of decaying leaves, a longing for the distances.

I went out to the edge of the woods.

One after another, one after another, leaves were falling to earth. Like dying butterflies, they were describing slow circles in the air as they descended to earth. On the fallen grass the wind was playing with the “liquid shadows” of tree limbs. How good it was, how joyous and sad! O my distant, my quiet brother! In you is spring, while in me is autumn, perennial autumn. It seems that my whole soul is melting in sweet agony at the sight of these fluttering leaves as I smell the fragrance of faded aspen groves.

It appears that the soul finds itself in seeing this death, that it has a foretaste of resurrection in this fluttering. [Seeing death] I am surrounded by it. And I speak now not of my thoughts, nor of death in general, but of the death of those dear to me. So many, so many have I lost these last years. One after another, one after another, like yellowed leaves, dear people fall away. In them I had felt a soul; in them I had sometimes seen a reflection of Heaven. I had known only good from them. But my conscience is not at peace: “What did you do for them?” They no longer are, and now between me and them lies an abyss.

One after another, one after another, like the leaves of autumn, those people whom our heart has come to love forever whirl above the dark chasm. They fall, and there is no return, no possibility of embracing the feet of each of them. Gone is the opportunity to drench oneself with tears and to implore forgiveness, to implore the whole world for forgiveness.

Again and again, every sin, every “petty” baseness is present, ineradicably distinct, in my consciousness. More and more deeply, “petty” intentions, egotism, and heartlessness are branded into the soul with letters of fire, gradually crippling it. Not that there was ever anything clearly bad, anything clearly, tangibly sinful. But always (always, O Lord!) it was in the petty things. And out of petty things, mountains grew! And looking back, one can see nothing but futility. Nothing good... O Lord!

Autumn leaves keep falling without interruption. One after another they describe circles above the earth. Gently, the inextinguishable lamp burns, and one after another our dear ones die. “I know he will rise on the
day of resurrection, the last day.” Nevertheless, with a kind of tranquil
grief, I repeat before our cross, which you made from an ordinary stick
and which our gentle Elder blessed, I repeat, “Lord! If Thou hast been
here, my Brother would not have died.”

Everything whirls. Everything slides into death’s abyss. Only One
abides, only in Him are constancy, life, and peace. “To Him is drawn
the whole course of events, as the periphery to the center. Toward Him
converge all the radii of the circle of the ages.” It is not I who speak thus,
from my own meager experience. No, this is the testimony of a man who had
wholly immersed himself in the element of the One Center: Bishop Theo-
phanus the Recluse. On the other hand, outside of this One Center,
“the only certain thing is that nothing is certain and that there is nothing
more miserable or arrogant than man (solum certum nihil esse certi et
homine nihil miserius aut superbus).” This was said by one of the noblest
pagans, Pliny the Elder, who wholly gave himself to the satisfaction of his
boundless curiosity. Yes, in life everything is in a state of unrest, every-
thing is as unstable as a mirage. And out of the depths of the soul there
rises an unbearable need to find support in the “Pillar and Ground of
the Truth,” in studos kai hedraiomà tès alêtheias (1 Tim. 3:15), in tès
alêtheias, and not merely alêtheias—not in just one of the truths, not in
one of the particular and fragmented human truths, which are unstable
and blown about like dust chased by the wind over mountains, but in
total and eternal Truth, the one Divine Truth, the radiant and celestial
Truth, that “Truth” which, according to the ancient poet, is the “sun of
the world.”

How can one approach this Pillar?

At the decaying body of St. Sergius, which always gives peace to
the troubled soul, we hear every day and every hour a call that also promises
repose to the troubled mind. The 43rd pericope from Matthew (11:27–
30), which is read at the office of St. Sergius, has primarily a cognitive
meaning, and even a knowledge-theoretic or epistemological meaning.
This becomes most clear when we recognize that the subject of the entire
eleventh chapter of Matthew is the problem of knowledge, the problem of
the insufficiency of rational knowledge and the necessity of spiritual
knowledge. Yes, God has “hid” all things that can be called worthy of
knowledge “from the wise and prudent, and [has] revealed them unto
babes” (Matt. 11:25). It would be an unjustifiable violence to Scripture to
reinterpret the “wise and prudent” to mean the “pseudo-wise” and
“pseudo-prudent,” and the “babes” to mean virtuous wise men. The
Lord, of course, said without irony precisely what he wanted to say: true

human wisdom, true human prudence is insufficient just because it is
human. At the same time, the mental innocence of “babes,” the absence
of mental riches which prevent one from entering the Kingdom of
Heaven, can turn out to be a condition for the acquisition of spiritual
knowledge. But the fullness of all is in Jesus Christ, and therefore
knowledge can be acquired only through Him and from Him. All human efforts
at knowledge, which exhaust the poor wise men, are in vain. Like
unwillingly camels, they are loaded down with their knowledge. And like salt
water, science only inflames the thirst for knowledge. It never gives peace
to the feverish mind. For the Lord’s “easy yoke” and “light burden”
(Matt. 11:30) give the mind what it cannot get from the cruel yoke and hard,
unbearable burden of science. That is why, at the grave of one who
pours forth grace, the Divine words keep sounding like an unceasing
source of living water:

“All things are delivered unto me of my Father; and no man knoweth
the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the
Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him. Come unto me, all ye
that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke
upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall
find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”
(Matt. 11:27–30).

But far be from me the desire to convince anyone. I give of my mea-
gerness. And if but one soul were to feel that I speak to it not with my lips
and not into the ears, I would wish for no more. I know that you will
accept me, for it is you who destroy the bounds of my egotism.

My Brother! You who share my soul. Torn away and lonely, I am
nevertheless with you. Rising above time, I see your clear gaze; once
again, I speak to you face to face. It is for you that I write down my
discontinuous thoughts. You will not hold it against me that I do so with-
out system, only placing a signpost here and there.

On quiet autumn nights, in holy hours of silence, when a tear of rup-
ture sparkles on my eyelashes, I will secretly begin to write down for you
schemata and pitiful fragments of those questions which we so much dis-
cussed together. You know in advance what I will write. You know that
my writing will not be didactic, and that the pompous tone comes from
my foolish incompetence. If a wise teacher does even the difficult as if in
jest, an inexperienced pupil employs a solemn tone even in trivial things.
And I, after all, am nothing more than a pupil who repeats after you the
lessons of love.

* Theophanus the Recluse was a 19th-century Russian-Orthodox bishop known for his
spiritual and ascetic writings. He is the translator into Russian of the Philokalia [see
Floresky’s note 135], the famous compilation of mystical and ascetic writings of Eastern
Christianity.