Introduction: In Search of (Russian) Virtue

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Virtue Unearthed

There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men’s farms, yet to this their land-deeds give them no title.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*

Kiss the earth.

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

A colleague and friend asked, after one of the talks I gave while writing this book, what was at stake in my project. This strikes me as a healthy question, one that is not asked nearly enough in academic circles. It is a variation on the question, “So what?” which can be taken in both a sequential and a consequential manner, that is, as both “What next?” and “Who cares?” These point in two directions at once, one leading from the research at hand onward, the other looking back to premises and principles; the first following the gaze of specialists into some distant light on the horizon, the second questioning why we started off on this journey in the first place. This is why humanists often have difficulty answering the question, “What are you working on these days?” The disciplinary and the human split at the question, “So what?”
I recall a comment that Peter Manning made once about the reading pleasure of following a mind in thought. He was answering a question about the basic value of humanities scholarship, and while I certainly share that pleasure and hope that to some, at least, the trajectory I follow here will afford some similar enjoyment, it is not enough to claim a stake. I’ve also read books in which the erudition and expressive skill of the author seemed the main purpose. Most often I haven’t finished those books. I am sensitive, too, about the superficiality of the philological web, the illumination of reference by other reference, text by other text, what Carlo Michelstaedter, in a grand neologism, once called καλλοπισματα ορφες, or “ornaments of the darkness.” We word lovers will find their glitter enticing, but “so what” wonders at what might be beneath the sheen.

This is a book about the sheen of virtue, its rhetorical construction in some three hundred years of European expression, and its eventual displacement by the commercial ethic, the growth of consensual fantasy in modern life. The mind in thought is mine. The audience comprises especially those loving readers of Russian literary works who, like me, have found inspiration and deep meaning in them over some significant part of their lives. There are a few discoveries and interventions of a disciplinary nature; others are more popularly based. But there is a limit case, a conceit in the literary sense, and perhaps in a personal one, too. When asked what was at stake, this was what I recalled, the initial sense that what I was following was not merely a thought in my own mind, let alone my own mind in thought, but the answer to a question that had not yet been asked of me because it hadn’t yet occurred to the questioner to ask it.

To understand the conceit is to understand the rationale and motivation behind this book.

The Very Word

Many scholars have noted that at the etymological root of the term virtue one finds the Latin word for man, vir. Few, however, have known quite what to make of this. A common and somewhat predictable strategy has been to leap backward and attempt to resurrect an image of heroism—Homeric, Roman, Stoic—as a remedy for the moral flabbiness of modern times. But such anachronistic equations of virtue with manhood or courage fail to take into account any of the associations the word has acquired since approximately Homer. These include doing good, having sex with one person only or no one at all, and establishing a republic—apparently disparate uses that are, in fact, all
related. Their conceptual unity becomes especially clear when one considers the ways in which these different senses are translated across the linguistic and cultural boundaries examined in this book.

Historically the sense in which virtue—or in its Roman guise, *virtus*—related to the concept of man was physical. But it is an oversimplification to think of *virtus* in terms of mere manly strength, as the virtuous Hercules of both Classical and Renaissance representations makes clear.² *Virtus* was not primarily power over other bodies but mastery over one’s own, especially under traumatic conditions. Thus the virtue of a soldier—which the Greeks called *arete*, and which the Latin word initially translated—lay in his ability to control the body’s impulses amid the chaos of the battlefield, to hold his ground, in short, when some inner voice was screaming, “Run away!”

As Alasdair MacIntyre has suggested, Plato’s account of the virtues in the *Republic* was “part of his strategy to expel the Homeric inheritance from the city-state,” in effect co-opting virtue for the philosopher and guiding the term away from the purview of nonreflecting, physical (as opposed to philosophical) Homeric heroes.³ Even here, however, the root connection to marshaling the body’s resources is evident: the virtues are those undisputed crystalline centers—of character, of soul—that make the wise man and teacher consistent with himself at all times, under all conditions. Whether one follows an Aristotelian understanding of the virtues, as dispositions to act in particular ways through cultivating inclination, or a Kantian view, in which acting virtuously means acting against inclination, the term’s bodily core remains untouched. The Aristotelian thinks more of exercising, the Kantian more of exorcising, but virtue in either case is measured in relation to the body’s “honesty.”⁴

From here the extension of this root concept in the term *virtuoso* should be easy to grasp. The virtuoso masters the manipulation of the body’s parts to achieve feats of dexterity, or at least to give the impression of achieving such feats. A virtuoso performer is one who appears to see an action with the mind’s eye and be able fluidly and with ease to transform the idea into bodily movement. The achievement is all the more impressive for its lack of technological mediation, its immediate mind-to-body efficacy.

The term *virtual* derives from a functional sense that likewise may be understood through the notion of corporeal *honestas*, an inner nature that does not lie. Thus the virtue of a table is its “tableness,” its capacity to function as a table; the virtue of a watch, its time-telling capacity, and so on.⁵ To call someone a virtual dictator or virtual saint, then, is to make an assertion about that person’s essence, which might not be recognized publicly or officially. The virtual-ness of such a dictator or saint is the manifestation of an underlying
state, some real or essential being that is not immediately visible: in effect, a concealed corpus. This increasingly obsolete usage of virtue-qua-function makes the digital “virtual” of our own day possible by reducing and, in the end, releasing altogether its pressure on the physical. For if the essential being is invisible and known only through its manifestations, then you can have all the effects of a being without actually having the being: you can have a virtual being.\(^6\) This is how we move conceptually from the virtual saint who has not been canonized, because the saintliness of his body has not been publicly declared, to the digitally generated entity staffing a virtual confessional in an online virtual church.\(^7\) Function, effect, or force allows one to move from the merely veiled to the altogether absent body.\(^8\)

It is understandable, with such connections in mind, how the linkage to the world of property should have become a central consideration in modern discussions of the form of virtue termed “civic,” for such discussions proceeded metaphorically from individual to group health, from the virtue of the citizen to the virtue of the “body politic.” The vigor of a republic, for Machiavelli and his followers over the centuries, derived from a society of independent property holders used to hard work and able to endure discomfort. That to which such natural republican agents were attached was land, especially land as property, a binding social construction that linked one person to others, giving him weight and value among his peers. Land as property was thought to extend and amplify the individual citizen’s body, as it were, providing a foundation for the political body. In classical formulations, such virtuous citizens were large landed proprietors; in American reformulations of the eighteenth century and beyond, they tended to be smaller freeholders, each constituting a living stake in the republic’s healthy constitution.\(^9\)

With the European financial revolution of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the creation of the Bank of England, public (national, governmental) debt, and the gradual replacement of landed interests by moneyed interests, the notion of a man’s virtue-in-property began to give way before more liquid conceptions of the self. This was the transformation that John Pocock addressed in his writings of the 1970s and ’80s, one of which appears as the first epigraph to this study.\(^{10}\) While he ended his discussion in the eighteenth century, the path of thought he traced should be of interest to readers today, for in the last thirty-five years we have uncannily replayed in the digital revolution the reactions he explored in the financial. The rise and spread of forms of consensually determined values such as credit and publicly owned stock in early eighteenth-century England suggested a fantastical foundation to social interaction that some heralded as liberation, the promise of future worth, and others bemoaned as the onset of both moral and political
corruption. Similarly, apologists for the virtual in our own day have seen in it at least as much if not more potential for future well-being, both individual and collective, as their early modern counterparts saw in credit, while concerns about the corrosive influence of digital phenomena have tended to fall into two types, some focusing on the moral life of the individual, others on the health and sickness of the polity.

The growth of credit in the eighteenth century gave rise to a counter-discourse in which virtue moralists argued for the solidity of property over the corruption of consensually determined, “fantastical” value. I used to think we had not seen an explicit virtue movement in reaction to the rise of virtuality in our own day. I suspected that the word *virtue* had become overly quaint, academic, gendered, or politically overcharged, or by contrast, that the sign might have simply lost all its freshness, become hackneyed and, for all constructive purposes, empty. Having worked on this project, however, I should say that, while not unitary, virtue theory and virtue discourse have seen a marked resurgence in the past thirty-five years, with Deirdre McCloskey’s multivolume work on the “bourgeois virtues” as only one of the latest in an impressive, diverse, and still growing array.

By once again resurrecting this old word in these pages, I want to suggest that the conceptual thread from the bodily foundations of virtue to the absent body of virtuality are implicit in the term’s usage, even when not articulated explicitly, and that the gradual decorpoorealization of value in modern life is largely responsible for the continued intensity of virtue talk today. In other words, people want to talk about virtue still and perhaps especially now, because they feel it questioned fundamentally in the rise and spread of the virtual. Human reactions to the increasing centrality of this “symbolic public order” range from euphoria to madness, with an aggregate of mild stimulation or anxiety in the center. Thus, “consensual fantasy” may be seen as a beneficent harnessing or a malevolent unleashing of the power of human thought, and this dichotomy shares a basic similarity with the arguments about credit in early modern times.

Two Visions of (American) Virtue

The prospect is thus that the human being will gradually lose its grounding in the concrete life-world.

—Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*

The technological transformation of thought into action has long been the stuff of science fiction. In the 1956 film *The Forbidden Planet*, an ancient civi-
lization known as the Krell was supposed to have developed a means of harnessing the mental power of its citizens. While technology enabled them to achieve astounding creative and constructive feats, it also unleashed a devastating corrosive force—identified in the popular Freudianism of the day as “the id”—a monster of their collective unconscious that destroyed their civilization through the dreams of its members. The scenario first envisions consensual fantasy as a beneficent harnessing of confident mental energy that puts the power to radically improve life at the disposal of imaginative beings. Then it turns around to regard consensual fantasy as a malevolent unleashing of destructive impulses, which lead to madness and the destruction of everything previously created by it.

The growing role of consensual fantasy in human life, especially in the most affluent societies of the past several centuries, bears a marked resemblance to the Krell scenario. Most of us do not yet attach anything to our heads, and most of our machinery remains above ground, but the transmogrifications we accomplish regularly are no less fantastical. We may see them as mundane, indeed perhaps not as transmogrifications at all but simply as part of daily experience, unremarkable reality. Perhaps this is because we have grown used to the conventions of language, the conventions of money, even the conventions of plastic money—a special compounding of consensual fantasy in which the higher the sums involved, the more precious the metal invoked. Remove consensual fantasy, however, and the daily experience that seems such unremarkable reality would disappear, and most of contemporary human life with it. I am not just referring to the kind of confidence that might be measured by an index. I have in mind the constituents of confident modernity, the myriad promises atop which our confidence floats—the verbal, the paper, the plastic, the digital.

The current of popular culture that recognizes such a fantastical movement in human history is strong. Far from balking at this suggestion, sci-fi buffs will find it banal, though they will likely differ among themselves about whether it is a good or bad thing. For their point, moreover, they will make use of arguments that found first articulation in the conceptual history of virtue. Such arguments are of two basic kinds. The first is territorial: property, rootedness, and propertied community are the foundations of society. This Classical republican model was especially attractive to American thinkers like Thomas Jefferson. The second is transcendental. It holds forth the earth (often by contrast to property), emancipation, and the liberated individual: an Emersonian ideal. In contrast to conceiving American virtue through property and propertied social actors, the Emersonian emphasizes a divorce from property as the means of maintaining virtue, a radical severing of the ties that
bind—in his thinking “constrain”—individuals, thereby hindering them from becoming truly free.

These two visions have long dwelt together to make up a somewhat schizophrenic American version of the virtuous ideal—whether conceived as good or right action, or, teleologically, as the proper end of a human being. One is based in the relations of property, the other in their absence. One, as in Richard Pipes’s account, predicates political freedom on the possibility of private property ownership. Societies that lack such ownership, he claims, are without the very foundation necessary for freedom, where liberty and private property are seen as practically synonyms: “Property is an indispensable ingredient of both prosperity and freedom.” The other suggests, with Rousseau, that property owners experience anxiety throughout their possessions, and that the extension of human beings by means of property ownership imagined by republicans actually deforms them morally if not spiritually with its weight. In this view, the only true freedom, and the only just society, may be found in
liberation from such anxiety, in effect, in divorce from the constraints of real estate.

This second strain in American social thought, which parallels and in some sense does battle with the Classical republican model, makes possible the fetishization of the rootless wanderer, the frontier hero, the cowboy, and—in an elaborate and self-conscious play with consensual fantasy itself—the confidence man, who lives and prospers off of other people’s hopes, dreams, and fears regarding the future, enticing them to do the same. On the one hand, then, the huge swaths of land extending westward from the seat of American government represented to republican apologists a vast repository of potential civic virtue for the new nation’s citizens. On the other, ironically, those same empty expanses provided the physical and social dimensions necessary for creating the quintessentially homeless, property-less American hero. I’ll come back to this topic below.

These extremes are evident in countless popular books, films, and television programs, especially those whose subject touches on the virtual. For instance, the 1999 film *The Matrix* and its sequels both blur and depend upon the boundaries between a technologically mediated reality, where the mind reigns supreme, and the reality of the body. The city of salvation is rooted deep in the earth, where the last “real” people live. The hero takes control of the virtual world, manipulating objects as he “uproots” himself by rising into the air and flying across the screen. Here control of the virtual represents a harnessing of the thought-power of people, for it is they—helmeted and wired to the requisite network of machinery—who power the system. The spatial relationships are consistent: When the hero is released from his initial mental captivity, his body drops down, closer to the earth below. When he reigns supreme in the virtual world, he rises up. The in-between realm of the ship, which is also the launching pad for excursions into virtuality, is a hovercraft. Still more relevant in the context of republican virtue theory are the *Star Wars* films, the first three of which portray in effect half of the modern virtue-corruption dichotomy, where the hero’s origins on a farm in the middle of the deep countryside resonate with a Jeffersonian (Classical republican) ideal. Subsequent episodes fill out this picture through the image of a governing senate, the seat of ultimate corruption and the vehicle for evil, where the assembly delegates float through the air inside a structure that appears to have no floor on a planet that is one immense (farmless) urban extension.

Such examples, of which there are many more, suggest that the leap to embrace the ether and the desire to burrow into the earth are both still powerful responses to decorporealization. The fact that the fictional construct
of “the civilization of the Krell” ultimately derives from Prospero’s magic in Shakespeare’s early modern play *The Tempest*—with its central subtexts about the power of imaginative thought, government form, and the subjugation of others and oneself—suggests once again the increased importance of consensual fantasy in modern times.

**After Virtual**

The virtual saint whose saintly body is not acknowledged by the church hierarchy and the virtual saint who hears confession in an online virtual confessional stand at opposite ends of a conceptual divide. One is embodied but unrecognized as such, the other is recognized but has no body. What links them is effect, force, or power. This is the sense of virtue that remains in the English phrase “by (or in) virtue of.” Thus the *Oxford English Dictionary* attests to the usage of “virtual church,” not as a digital entity that recognizes a-corporeal virtual saints manning virtual confessionals but as a seventeenth-century “council or similar body acting in the name of the whole church.” Used in this sense, such a metaphorical body would always be “capable of producing a certain effect or result” (another of the *OED*’s definitions); it would be “effective, potent, powerful” (yet another). According to the same source, it would also be obsolete. But would it?

The question of the reality of virtual reality is not limited to popular culture. It has gained pressing importance in a variety of scholarly disciplines from psychology to political theory, from law to library science. In such contexts the effect or power of virtual phenomena is sometimes celebrated, sometimes questioned, sometimes anticipated as looming and dangerous. I want to argue, however, that the central concern should not be how real virtual phenomena are but the degree to which they alter or do not alter our orientation—here I borrow an old Catholic distinction—to things and persons. To the extent that the modern world has long been shaped by the power of consensual fantasy, virtual phenomena may not, after all, present much of a change. It is several centuries since we first began to be surrounded by “the exchange of forms of mobile property” and “modes of consciousness suited to a world of moving objects” whose values rise and fall with the apparent sense and order of rumor. Perhaps the virtual is simply the latest stage in a history of consensual fantasy, to which we have repeatedly grown accustomed, like building up a tolerance for caffeine or alcohol, from spoken and written symbols to moving images and digital stock portfolios. The point is not how real—and therefore how liberating or dangerous—
the phenomena, but how different they are from the already a-corporeal phenomena among which we have grown used to living our lives.

Having written these words, I must take a step back, embodied as I am, and acknowledge that the virtual is not a simulacrum of a challenge. It does not seem so to me, at least. The advent of things virtual in the contemporary world—virtual documents, virtual hospitals, virtual empathy, and more—challenges us on a conceptual level as well as on moral and ethical ones. Such phenomena test the understanding and practice of life that the history of virtue concepts and representations explored here, I hope, helps to illuminate. It is not a history divorced from our current lives. Long-standing responses to the rise and spread of consensual fantasy are imbedded in the cultural artifacts explored in this book, which provide clues to our responses today and help to indicate possible paths for making our way through the challenges that we find ourselves faced with when the conceptual worlds of virtue and virtuality come into contact.

Let me put this in a different way. My nine-month-old son lifts his hand and opens and closes his fingers when prompted by the word *bye-bye*. He smiles and seems pleased without truly understanding the gesture or the word that accompanies it. If he understood, after all, he would be sad, not happy, when asked to repeat it upon his papa’s departure for work. He looks at his fingers, rising and falling as if they are divorced from his body, alien entities he is only slowly learning to control. It is not yet a virtuoso performance. Nevertheless, I know that one day he will make the conceptual connections to enable him to enter the realm of consensual fantasy, to join us there and dwell among us to the end of his days. I suspect that, as a cautious boy like his father before him, he will linger on its fringes for some time, uncertain of what it means to enter, just as now he is uncertain of what it means to wave to his papa, smiling behind the glass of the kitchen door.

And I am struck by a possibility: when one day he senses the conceptual connection between virtue and virtuality and, being a thoroughly contemporary child, understands the latter word but sees the former only at the dim periphery of his life’s experience, he might very well ask: “Papa, what is virtue?”

What, I wonder, will I tell him?

**American Property, Russian Earth**

Let me return to the distinction introduced above between land as property in civic republican guise and the Earth in neoromantic liberatory rhetoric.
The first conditions a conception of property as a repository for a person’s and a people’s virtue. In its most radical formulations, the second sees such property as a limitation, if not a deformation, of both. The increased commoditization of land, with the rise of commercial culture, set them in sharpest contrast, encouraging, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, a search for virtuous, uncorrupt people in virtuous, unsullied territories. This new “virtue discourse,” which both rested upon and challenged long-held notions of land as a form of knightly feudal holdings, was part of the epoch’s much-discussed utopianism. The Swiss Alps and the “virgin” lands of the New World provided especially fecund ground for such seedlings, two very different environments that fed republican theory on the one hand and liberatory rhetoric on the other.

The most striking characteristic of this dual development lies in the attempted harnessing of consensual fantasy. Joseph Addison, then taking part in the “Court” versus “Country” debates of English political history, was one of the first to identify the explicitly republican virtues of the Swiss montagnard, whose simple relations to the local community contrasted sharply to both the busy complexities and the growing fantastical foundations of modern English political life. This thread was taken up by subsequent writers, most notably Rousseau, who secured its place in the popular mind-set of the day and handed it on in powerful form.

The Swiss-inspired virtue ethos also inspired republican enthusiasts in the new government of the United States, who combined the repository-of-republican-virtue idea with the virgin-territory conception of the land in one and the same productive model. To early American republican advocates, “an infinite supply of land, ready for occupation by an armed and self-directing yeomanry, meant an infinite supply of virtue,” and such virtue would be measured by the effectiveness of the republic to maintain itself and remain true to its uncorrupt foundation. These Americans were therefore prepared to attach themselves and their descendants to the land as a means of harnessing virtue for the republic. In contrast, the image of virtue in a work such as Thoreau’s *Walden* can be understood as a reaction to classical republican attempts to encumber the human being with land-as-property. His response, like Rousseau’s, is not an attempt to control and direct the forces of modernity in the manner of the republicans and their nation-building progeny. It is instead a turn to the land as buttress against modernity, a turn away from civilization in what Simon Schama has characterized as “a sort of blessed amnesia, a liberation of the burden of the dead in order to see what [is] truly and naturally alive.” For Thoreau and many a mythologizing frontiersman in his wake, the landscape of Western Europe, especially in its various prop-
ertied incarnations, was equivalent to the burden of the dead, which needed to be abandoned if one was to achieve freedom, authentic life: the virtuous ideal. Land afforded such a liberating opportunity only when it could not be attached to a person in the form of property. The rootlessness of American “road” virtue, from Huck Finn to the nameless drifters of the Spaghetti Western, and the extension of republican virtue theory by early American social and political thinkers thus derive, paradoxically, from the same source. Each, moreover, is dependent on the American experience of the land—on the one hand, an infinite transcendence, on the other, a finite repository: unleashing and harnessing.

While West European thinkers provided the virtue vocabulary and laid the conceptual foundation for its subsequent elaboration, the most extreme visions of the two responses to the rise of consensual fantasy in modernity outlined here were provided not in Western Europe but in what Alexis de Tocqueville, at the end of part 1 of his Democracy in America, referred to as its periphery—in the United States and in the Russian Empire. In fact, the degree to which rootless and propertied virtue are dependent on the American experience of land becomes clear by comparison with contemporaneous Russia, where such notions did not develop beyond an embryonic stage among a small group.

There were many factors that might have linked the two countries in the minds of contemporaries. Both were large, conceptually “empty” (to the European imagination) land masses with indigenous populations then being colonized with the help of internal myths of sovereignty. Both were thought of as new countries. Russia had entered the European scene as a “great power” only with the defeat of the Napoleonic armies in 1814; the United States had attained lasting security in their struggle against the British only after 1812. Both had experienced a subsequent euphoric moment characterized by an increased national self-consciousness and confidence in a future salvational or “redeemer” role. Moreover, social thinkers in both countries long carried a chip on their shoulder in their attempts to define themselves and their work and to measure the achievements of their respective cultures against a West European standard.

Both struggled with the heritage of slavery, and noted polemical works of literature aimed at depicting the humanity of the owned person, the person as property, appeared nearly simultaneously in each, namely, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Ivan Turgenev’s A Sportsman’s Sketches, both of which were published in 1852. The institution of slavery persisted in the United States until 1863, its concomitant in Russia, serfdom, until 1861. Widespread social and political unrest accompanied the respective proclamations
of emancipation—the Civil War in the United States, clandestine revolutionary activity and terrorism in Russia. Two key assassinations followed, of each emancipating leader, Abraham Lincoln in 1865 and Alexander II in 1881, in the last of many attempts that began in 1866.

The development and rise to international prominence of both countries, moreover, depended fundamentally on technological innovation and massive construction projects, particularly the railroad, which brought together disparate spaces and moved people from the countryside to key cities—Moscow, Petersburg, New York, Chicago. As they grew, both countries showed similar tension and hesitation over the creation of national financial institutions, a stock market in Russia, a national bank in the United States. Both were characterized by “frontier” myths and mind-sets, to the south and east in Russia, to the south and west in the United States.

Such a list, which might be extended further, provides a sense of the multitude of considerations behind de Tocqueville’s famous comparison, quoted in one of the epigraphs to this study. Differences were of course easy to find as well, some of which de Tocqueville noted at the time, especially on the political front. To these I would add a fundamental conceptual divide at the base of social and political contrasts that extend before and after the two countries’ rise to prominence. The importance of republican virtue in the early United States as a continuation of European thought on the subject has been well traced and thoroughly documented. This kind of thinking among Russians of the same period, however—or before or after, for that matter—had a less formative influence for the country as a whole. Perhaps Richard Pipes is correct in painting a picture in which the absence of such yeomanly property in Russian society was what most distinguished it from Western conceptions of political liberty and civic virtue. But relying on an absent yeomanly property ethic to characterize Russian ideas about virtue and the state will per force only ever make Russia look inadequate by contrast to the United States, where such an ethic was thoroughly developed. This kind of reliance, moreover, fails to take into account the apparent resistance to such notions of “progress” in Russian cultural history, especially those associated with the forms of commercial self-interest and property ownership embraced by republican advocates in Europe and North America.

There is a presence rather than an absence at the heart of the approach taken in this book. It is land not as property but as something other, a hosting perhaps, something not attached to people by custom or law, but rather a thing to which people are attached by heritage, obligation, love, and faith, and perhaps especially the maternal expressions of such notions. It is apparent that in both its liberatory and yeomanly modes, American virtue required
that the land be motherless, an instrumental construct for republicans to
which liberationists replied in their own staunchly anti-instrumental idiom.
In either instance of the American vision, Robert Frost’s line applies: “The
land was ours before we were the land’s.”33 In other words, the land existed
in the minds of American social and political thinkers as something held, a
tool or instrument to be wielded in the service of one or another political
or moral agenda, before and apart from any sense of shared provenance, let
alone responsibility, to it. The very possibility that the land might be some-
thing possessed, as conveyed in Frost’s language, is a profoundly colonial
thought, an American thought. And while the absence of yeomanly pri-
ivate property for much of Russia’s history in effect precluded the kind of
discussion of republican virtue that was so important to eighteenth-century
American social thinkers,34 it also meant that the reaction of a Thoreau, or
a Kerouac for that matter, was unlikely to resonate in the Russian context.
What one finds in its place is a different sense of rootedness, community,
and landed connection—what Dostoevsky, in a distinctive response, called
pochvennichestvo (“landedness,” “grass-rootedness,” “groundedness”)—that is
largely alien to the modern American discussion.35

The injunction of the Elder Zosima in The Brothers Karamazov to “water
the earth with tears” has deep roots in Slavic premodern thought. It springs
from a premodern orientation to the land, which is driven home by con-
sidering it in opposition to Thoreau’s antimodern orientation to property.
This is not to claim that Dostoevsky’s is any less sophisticated a response to
modernity than that of the American liberationist. On the contrary, in the
conditions of Russian nineteenth-century society Dostoevsky’s is a far more
effective rhetorical strategy, for instead of eschewing the relations of prop-
erty and the responsibilities of property owners to one another and to the
state by a radical severing of property ties, as advocated by Thoreau, Dosto-
evsky’s response in effect raises those responsibilities to a new level of inten-
sity by taking them beyond civil law, beyond human law altogether, through
reference to a noninstrumental, nonpropertied orientation to the earth. Land
as freedom from in the American liberationist sense yields to earth as moral
obligation to in the thought of the Russian writer. Here the responsibility of
human beings to the earth and, by extension, to other human beings dwell-
ing within the same community derives ultimately from their resemblance
to God, not from an agreement that they are free to make or annul, not from
a social contract.36

Conceptions of property make possible an array of startling ideas to
Dostoevsky’s male characters. For instance, at the start of Crime and Punish-
ment, in Raskolnikov’s premurder nightmare of the senseless, brutal slaying of a horse, the drunken peasant Mikolka justifies himself by saying that the horse is his “goods.” “Hands off,” he exclaims. “It’s my goods. I can do what I want.” The Russian word employed, dobro (literally, the neuter singular noun “good”), is marked as colloquial and therefore accords with Mikolka’s way of speaking. But its root associations open another path of meaning. Mikolka’s brutality, his ability to beat—and enjoin others to beat—the animal to death, with sticks and a crowbar and, in the end, a great wooden beam that breaks the horse’s spine, is conditioned upon a conception of property, of what Tolstoy, in a later equine exploration of the subject, would characterize as the human being’s love of naming things as “mine.” But it is also, through the rich and multiple associations of the word dobro, an implicit questioning of the reference to “goods” in a trading sense. A way of talking and thinking about goods—my property, part of me, mine to do with as I choose—is closely associated with the great evil lurking in the murderer’s mind. The agreements of human beings about the nature of property and how to value it suggest a confusion and a merging of the categories of what is good and what is good for.

An alternative might be found in the philosophical distinction between intrinsic and instrumental goods, but this would lead us down a side path. In this formulation, the earth is not worshipped for its own sake. It is not depicted as an intrinsic good. It is instead understood as the place of humanity as such, the place where human beings are human, the place, therefore, of the bodily limit, where “man strives toward an ideal that is contrary to his nature,” where that nature finds expression. To embrace the earth is to embrace imperfect humanity, one’s own and that of all divinely inspired but earthly dwelling humankind in general. This means human beings conceived of in a very specific way, with value that cannot be assigned by themselves. In effect, the earth is like the holy icon, a great sacrament by which human beings come together with other human beings on their path to God. A “European” conception more alien to modern property is hard to imagine.

A less radical, though equally contrastive response to the onset of modernity was provided by Lev Tolstoy in his depiction of the landowner-farmer Konstantin Levin, in Anna Karenina. Levin is associated with the peasant by means of work in common, which suggests a contact with the land that has been lost by his urban compatriots. The peasantry’s connection to the land, moreover, is emphasized in Levin’s claim, which he tries to support by means of a scholarly treatise, that the peasant and the land constitute an elemental relationship in the practice of farming that, like climate and soil, must be taken into consideration in any discussion of the nation’s resources, the
nation’s wealth. Juxtaposed to this picture—which appears, in effect, to be a Russian aristocratic transformation of republican virtue theory—is the story of Anna’s adulterous affair, her sexual inconstancy. This in turn is facilitated by that great demon of progress in Tolstoy’s novel, the railroad, which uproots the peasantry from the land, thereby destroying the nation’s moral and material foundation, and at the same time mows down the heroine in one fell artistic swoop.

The instrumentalization of property in *Anna Karenina*, as demonstrated, for instance, in the buying and selling of land, is consistently depicted as a form of corruption, practiced by the inept and irresponsible (Stiva Oblonsky, for example) or the unscrupulous and rapacious (such as the peasant Ryabinin, who purchases the Oblonsky forest). There are no circumstances in which Tolstoy imagines that such buying and selling might somehow be a good thing or might result, even in some distant eventuality, in a net gain for society. It is always net loss, always a form of corruption, social, political, and moral.

Even in what might be thought of as a more orthodox leftist work, such as Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s 1863 novel *What Is To Be Done?*, which functioned as a rallying cry for numerous future revolutionaries, Vladimir Lenin among them, the author struggles with what are essentially republican categories as he depicts his hero of heroes, the mysterious, “exceptional” Rakhmetov in the guise of a landed heir of old-Russian civic-mindedness, the progeny of a family that has owned thousands of serfs. He does this apparently not in order to hold up the new man’s old values to ridicule but as a badge of his revolutionary’s distinctively patriotic “Russian-ness.”

These are examples of distinctive responses to the challenges tossed at the feet of Russian social thinkers by the rise of an increasing commercial ethic in the nineteenth century. The new conditions underlay the discussions of the clandestine philosophical circles of the 1840s, which helped to form such men as the radical anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, the moderate socialist Alexander Herzen, the Slavophiles, the Westernizers, the liberal gradualists, the monarchist reactionaries, and the militant left materialist utilitarians who would inspire two subsequent generations of revolutionary activists. What is common to all these various and sundry groups, beyond their commitment and intensity of belief, is a *nonpropertied orientation to the land*, especially the Russian land, and a simultaneous search for virtue—right action, the proper end of a human being—expressed by means of a vocabulary located largely outside the categories of character formation that were central to the modern European and, even more so, the modern American political personality.
Virtue as One and as Many

The integrity of concept—by which I have in mind the play of roots and the range of connotative associations—of West European virtue vocabulary was never truly assimilated by Russian social thinkers, a fact partly evidenced by the variety of words used to translate virtue into Russian. The most common equivalency, *dobrodetel’*, which is formed from the roots *good* and *act*, emphasizes an ethical and religious heritage, especially in the term’s medieval Latin usage. The virtue of the Greek or Roman soldier is more likely translated as “force” or “power”—as in the word *sila*, whose direct connection to virtue is evident in the translation of the English phrase “by/in virtue of” as *v silu* (literally “in the force/power [of]”).

This semantic split is apparent in the translation of a seventeenth-century emblem, included in Maksimovich-Amvodik’s *Emvlemy i simvoly* (*Emblems and Symbols*) toward the end of the eighteenth century. The infant Hercules lies in his crib, which is surrounded by snakes. The Latin caption *Hinc est labor et virtus* is rendered in English, French, German, and Russian translations, two of which split from the others over the word *virtus*. In both the French and the Russian phrases, *Dès ici le travail e la force* and *Otsiuda iaviaetsia i trud i sila*, the last words convey the sense of *virtus* as physical strength and neglect associations with moral excellence, though such excellence, as indicated previously, was part of the character’s and the Latin word’s associations.

A woman’s virtue, in the sense of sexual constancy, is named by a different word, *vernost’*, or perhaps *tselomudrie* (chastity, as applied to women or men), but not *dobrodetel’*, which tends to designate good action in general, especially of a humane variety. Thus when Anna Karenina eschews the Christian philanthropic activities of Lydia Ivanovna’s social set, she denounces those women’s judgmental hypocrisy in championing virtue (*dobrodetel’*), while when she cuckold her husband, she renounces virtue (*vernost’*) in the eyes of society. Separated still further is Konstantin Levin’s brand of both chaste and virile virtue (*tselomudrie* and *sila*), which functions as a counterweight to Anna’s absent *vernost’*. There does not appear to be a single Russian word that can be used to designate Levin’s “centeredness” in this regard.

The first Russian thinker to emphasize the inadequacy of Western virtue vocabulary and the conceptual body it governed for Russian social life was, I believe, Nikolai Gogol, who, in a famous passage from his 1842 novel *Dead Souls*, dismissed the “virtuous man” (*dobrodetel’nyi chelovek*) as a possible protagonist:
A virtuous man has not been chosen as a hero. And we can even say why. Because it's time at last to give the poor virtuous man a rest; because the word "virtuous man" flutters emptily across one's lips; because the virtuous man has been turned into a workhorse, and there doesn't exist a writer who wouldn't go out riding on him, urging him on with a whip and whatever else might turn up; because the virtuous man has been so worn down that not a shadow of virtue is in him anymore, and all that's left is ribs and skin in place of a body; because the virtuous man is not respected.

I shall return to this key passage more than once in the pages of this book. Here let me note simply that the rationale given for not choosing the virtuous man as hero suggests that it is, indeed, in the interest of virtue that Gogol's narrator avoids the well-worn character type. In other words, he opts against depicting the virtuous man because such a character is all worn out and, as such, would not be an effective choice—for conveying virtue. Over the course
of the next decade, in two projected subsequent volumes to his great national epic poem, Gogol would try to reform his hero and make the self-interested commercial “scoundrel” of the first part of his book into a fresh and effective “virtuous man” for Russians to emulate in all his splendor.

Many have speculated on the reasons for Gogol’s failure to finish his work, and I do not wish to add still more speculation to this well-worn topic. It is clear, nevertheless, that Gogol had run up against a major cultural impediment in the conflicting representations of virtue and commerce, and that his failed attempt subsequently to transform his hero introduced in effect an open question into Russian nineteenth-century social thought: How could the notion of self-interest—so important to the development of modern society in Western Europe and North America—be appropriated by Russian society without what was seen as its socially corrosive concomitants? In other words, how might a self-interested commercial agent be depicted in the Russian social context as a nonfragmented masculine character, socially valuable in a manner that redirected, or directed appropriately, the very impulses that motivated him in the first place, those impulses that Gogol was in fact satirizing with such devastating force?

This search was continued in the twentieth century, always in antiproper-tied forms that upheld the values of virtuous action without having recourse to the underlying vocabulary and conceptual tools that West European and, especially, North American social thinkers had assumed were fundamental. Other scholars have seen the key to such Russian attempts in a basic absence amid the country’s social, economic, and political development, an empty center or groundlessness at the heart of what would become Soviet attempts to create a “new man.” This study suggests another path of thought, another ground altogether.