

*From the desk of Pierre Beaudry*



## **ILYA REPIN AND THE IRONIC RANGE OF THE NOOSPHERE.**

by Pierre Beaudry, 6/02/2009



**“Beauty is a matter of taste; for me she is to be found in truth. I can’t ridicule lightly, nor can I give myself to spontaneous art. To paint carpets which caress the eye, to weave lace, to busy oneself with fashion, in one word, in various ways to mix God’s gifts with scrambled eggs, to adapt oneself to the new spirit of the times...No! I am a man of the 60’s. I am a backward person for whom the ideals of Gogol, Belinsky, Turgenev, Tolstoy and other idealists, are not as yet dead. With all my small strength, I aspire to embody my ideas in truth; contemporary life deeply affects me, it does not give me peace, it begs to be represented on canvas.” (I. Repin letter to N. I. Murashko, Nov. 30, 1883.)**

## INTRODUCTION:

Ilya Efimovitch Repin (1844-1930) was a Ukrainian-born revolutionary Russian painter and a man of the people who lived through the Russian Revolution of 1917, but, who never embraced communism. Ranking among his compatriots as the foremost patriotic artist who dared tell the truth about the history of both Russia and Ukraine, Ilya Repin can be considered the first artist in the world with Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Church to design the boundary conditions for the formulation of ironies establishing the range of the Noosphere. In doing so, Repin participated in creating a new universal standard, beyond Leonardo, Raphael, and Rembrandt, for the future orientation of classical artistic composition.

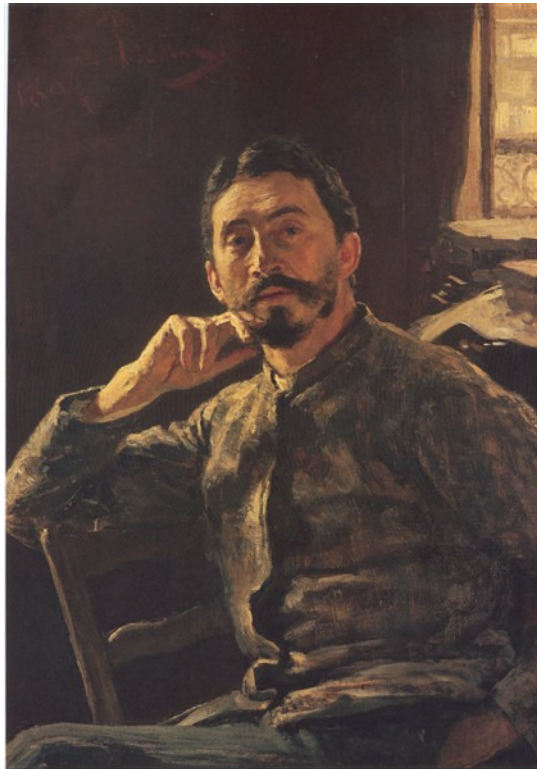


Figure 1. Ilya Repin, *Self-portrait*. 1894.

The most significant aspect of Repin's irony, as a method of creative insight, is the capturing of a truthful and anomalous moment of national life that appears to be entirely meaningless, which has completely bypassed the consciousness of the general population, but which, when brought to the attention of an alert mind, suddenly stands out like a necessary idea for furthering the understanding and progress of his national culture. Therefore, in his contact with a Repin painting, the viewer is changed in such a conscious and deliberate manner that he can no longer view the subject of the painting with his former indifference. The viewer has been touched by an irony of noospheric quality, and his worldview will never be as it was before viewing that painting. That is

how the artistic dramatization of truthful ironies consciously immortalizes the artist, the poet, or the composer, changes the spectator, and enriches the Noosphere with the treasures of national cultures. It is in that sense that Repin reflected the economic process that made the Noosphere grow.

Repin had a very close collaboration with most of the great Russian writers and musicians of his time and made the portraits of quite a number of them such as, Alexander Pushkin, Leon Tolstoy, Maxim Gorky, Michael Glinka, Modest Musorgsky, Anton Rubinstein, Nikolay Rymnsky-Korsakov, and so forth. As a student of the Saint Petersburg Imperial Academy of Arts and as a self-taught master in classical artistic composition, Repin easily avoided the two artistic traps of his time: the fads of romanticism in music, and of impressionism in painting. His most enduring commitment was to the universal ideas that began to shape the new scientific and artistic domain of the Noosphere around Mendeleev and Vernadsky during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

## **1- REPIN, MENDELEEV, AND VERNADSKY: MEASURING TRUTH AGAINST COMFORTING TRADITION?**

It is essential to put Russian and Ukrainian scientific and cultural developments of classical composition in their proper perspective. Gottfried Leibniz had introduced in Russia the spirit of classical education through his founding of the Saint Petersburg Academy with the institutional support of Tsar Peter the Great. There is no doubt that when Peter the Great brought to his new capital all of the best elements of Western European culture, he was establishing the basis for future classical music, classical drama, and classical plastic artistic compositions. Leibniz was also attempting to get the Russians to avoid the errors that the Western Europeans had made in the past.

In his 1716 memorandum to Peter, *On An Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Leibniz wrote to him: **“It seems that God has decided that science should make a tour of the world and penetrate as far as Scythia, that he has designated Your Majesty to be his instrument for that purpose, while Your Majesty is in a position to draw from Europe on one side and from China on the other what there is of the best, and to perfect the institutions of both these countries by means of wise reforms. For considering that everything that has to do with education is still to be done for the greatest part of his empire, and that one starts, so to speak, with a blank sheet, one will be able thus to avoid so many errors which have imperceptively slipped in; we know that a palace, built entirely anew, rises much better than one which, after several centuries of existence, has to be repaired and is subject to numerous alterations.”**(*Leibniz Selections*, edited by Philip P. Wiener, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, p.597.)

When Leibniz advised Peter to start a cultural program, as it were, from proverbial scratch, like Repin in front of an empty canvas, he was ironizing on the fact that the new culture had to spring from the Russian soul and not from the Russian soil. This, no doubt, was Leibniz's way of forecasting the quality of busy transformations of the Russian soul that were later to be found in the discovery of the *Table of the Elements* by Mendeleev, which could have also been called the discovery of a table of ironies. Repin was establishing the standard for the quality of irony that was required for the crucial scientific discoveries that Mendeleev and Vernadsky were working out in the respective biotic and a-biotic domains of chemistry and biochemistry. Repin was showing his scientific friends that if their mathematical tools were required for the Geosphere and the Biosphere, they required the poetry of artistic composition to reflect the creative domain of the Noosphere. It was from this connection that this period of history was probably the richest scientific and artistic period since the Italian Renaissance.

If ever there were a crucial moment in science and in classical artistic composition for Russia and Ukraine after the Leibniz intervention, it would have been the aftermath of the American Centennial Philadelphia Exhibition of 1876 and the impact it was to have on Russia with the emancipation of the slaves by Lincoln and the creation of the transcontinental railroad. The period of the post 1876 American Centennial was the period that Repin established himself in Moscow. This period also represented the necessary fermentation time that was later to bring about the creation of the *Ukrainian Academy of Sciences* by Vernadsky at the turn of the twentieth century.

When Repin lived in Moscow, from 1877 to 1882, he had regular contacts with Russian railroad businessman and art patron, Savva Mamontov, who was the director of the Moscow-Yaroslavl Railway and one of the builders of the Donetsk Railway (1876-82). Repin had met Mamontov in Rome in 1873 where they had already made plans to create an artistic colony in Moscow. By the time Repin arrived in 1877, Mamontov had already bought his Ambramtsevo estate north of the city where Repin and his artist friends congregated and sometimes lived. For a period of five years, Repin and Mamontov were inseparable and Repin used to spend his summers at the estate where Mamontov had built him a studio. Mamontov was also the patron of the Russian Private Opera and gave his support to composers such as Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Borodin, and Modest Musorvsky. He produced several of their operas at Abramtsevo where he acted as director and singing teacher.

However, after the death of Dostoevsky, in 1881, Repin decided to move back to St Petersburg. He was, as he wrote to his friend and critic Vladimir Stasov "...terribly fed up with Moscow, its limitations and dullness, its self-satisfied bourgeoisie." He disclosed to Stasov the true reason for his lack of sympathy with the sort of Russophilism that permeated the city, in his critique of Dostoevsky:

"Giving full due to his talent,... I hate his opinions. What a patriarchal sophistry. What intimidation and narrowing of our already none-too-broad and full-of-prejudices boring life. And what about these sympathies for the monasteries (*The Brothers Karamazov*) ... the salvation of the Russian land!!?"

And why this filthy charge against the intelligentsia? And that coarse hatred of the Poles; [that] home-grown philosophy about the putrefaction of the West and that priestly glorification of Orthodoxy... And how Moscow drinks [it] all up! ... To my chagrin, I differ so much in my opinion from some of my friends that I am almost alone. And more than ever I believe only in the intelligentsia, only in the freshening influence of the West.” (Repin letter to V. Stasov, February 16, 1881.)

Repin’s friendship and collaboration with the great scientist and economic advisor, Dmitri Mendeleev (1834-1907) was to awaken Russia’s historical world identity and make St Petersburg the center of a new development for the scientific and cultural life of Russia, bringing Russian and Ukrainian scientists, musicians, writers, and artists to an international level comparable with the greatest capitals of the world, and especially reflecting the great inspirational event of the Lincoln revolution in the United States. The American idea of creating a transcontinental nation free from imperialist slavery became the new model for Russia. The reader should not forget that the origin of the word “slave” originates from the Russian name “Slav!”



Figure 2. Ilya Repin, *Dmitri Mendeleev Wearing the Gown of a Professor of Edinburgh University*. 1885.

In Saint Petersburg, the two most notable salons created for a series of regular weekly informal meetings were notably those instituted at the homes of Mendeleev and of Repin. Every Wednesday, artists, writers, musicians, and scientists gathered at the house of Dmitri Mendeleev for discussions. This salon of friends was not for “society people,” but for a select group of serious creative individuals who promoted a national culture based on the freedom of its people, as exemplified by the American constitutional system. One can only imagine how these meetings must have involved comparisons between the social condition in the United States and in Russia, especially since they began after the return of Mendeleev from the Philadelphia Centenary of 1876. It would be interesting to compare the interactions of ironies between Repin and Mendeleev on the one side with those of Church and Humboldt on the other. Furthermore, as a protégé of Mendeleev, the young Vladimir Ivanovitch Vernadsky (1863-1945) was likely one of the most inspiring figures in attendance to these all-day sessions. One can only imagine how exciting it might have been to discuss in those artistic-scientific circles Vernadsky’s revolutionary ideas, and especially the idea of the planetary weight of human culture as a cognitive planetary phenomenon.

Although not much has been reported on the content of these meetings, there is an interesting anecdote uniting Repin and Mendeleev in their fight against the stultification of the Tsarist Russian Academies. Repin’s portrait of Mendeleev is a reflection of that fight that both Repin and Mendeleev waged against the oligarchical control of the Academy of Science and Arts in Russia. In this portrait, Mendeleev is wearing a foreign academic gown. Repin biographer Elizabeth Valkenier identified the underlying conflict behind the dress code adopted by Repin. She noted: “**Mendeleev was denied full membership in the Russian Academy of Science, Oxford University awarded him an honorary degree; and Repin, in a gesture of solidarity with the outcry at home and abroad, painted a portrait (1884) in which he garbed him in Oxford’s academic robe.**” (Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, *Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990, p. 110.)

While both Dmitri Mendeleev and his second wife, Anna Popova, received Repin and his friends at their home regularly for discussions on art and science, Repin also did the same at his own home, where he held weekly meetings with the members of the Association of Itinerant Art Exhibits in which the Mendeleevs would participate regularly. The meetings were organized with the explicit intention of creating a scientific and artistic elite for the development of national cultures in both Russia and Ukraine, but in opposition to the official Academic rules and status controlled by the State oligarchy. Furthermore, Repin was also holding regular Sunday morning lessons of drawing for the most talented students of the Saint Petersburg Academy. The patriotic struggle against the autocracy of the Russian Tsar was one of the primary motives for artistic and scientific life during the second half of the nineteenth century, and the required measure for membership into these Mendeleev-Repin meetings was a keen sense of the cultural elevating mission.

This patriotic commitment explains why Repin developed the theme of the oppression of the Russian people attempting to break their chains with subjects such as

*“The Confession”* (1879-85), *“They Did Not Expect Him”* (1884-88), and *“Arrest of a Propagandist”* (1880-92). However, the most celebrated work that initiated this whole movement was the *“Barge Haulers on the Volga”* (1870-73), which created the most effective intervention into creating a revolution in the culture of Russia. For Repin the purpose of painting was like that of music: improve the people. He wrote to Kramskoy:

**“Our task...a face, a man’s soul, the drama of life, impressions of nature, its life and sense, the spirit of history. These are our themes, it seems to me. Colors constitute our weapon, they should express our thoughts; our color is not a defined spot, it should express the mood of the picture, its soul; it should predispose and overpower all of the viewer, as does a chord of music.”** (Repin letter to Kramskoy, March 31, 1874.)

This explains the reason why Repin was always profoundly at odds with Tolstoy, though they were close friends. In a letter to Vladimir Chertkov, a close follower and companion of Tolstoy, Repin explained his disagreement with Tolstoy’s philosophy of anarchy and peasantry:

**“Much and often do I think about Lev Nikolevich [Tolstoy]... Principally I cannot accept his negation of culture. It seems to me that culture is the foundation, the basis of good, and without it humanity would become contemptible and powerless, materially and morally. Great ideas are impossible without great collective effort. With his harness of rope and his wooden plough, Lev Nikolaevich seems pityful to me. At the sight of the inmates of Yasnaya Poliana, in their black, dirty huts with roaches, without light, vegetating in the evenings near a kerosene wick, exuding only stink and soot, I was pained, and could not imagine the possibility of any bright, joyous mood in this Dante’s inferno. No! Who can, let him follow the noble Prometheus! Let him bring the fire of the gods to these old deadened creatures. They must be enlightened; they must be roused from their vegetation. To descend to this darkness for a minute and say, I am with them – is hypocrisy. To submerge with them forever – is a senseless sacrifice. To raise them, to raise them to one’s own level, to give life – this is a heroic deed!”** (Repin letter to V.G. Cherkov August 29, 1887. Quoted by Fan Parker and Stephen Jan Parker, *Russia on Canvas Ilya Repin*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980, p. 92.)

## **2- THE BARGE HAULERS ON THE VOLGA**

What Repin was addressing in the *Barge Haulers on the Volga*, is the same emotion that was expressed by the Negro Spirituals in America: the immortalization of a people who has been denied their humanity. The reason why this painting brought Repin overnight fame is because he had brought to the consciousness of the whole Russian and Ukrainian people a collection of outcast individuals that no one would even care to pay

any attention to; and therefore, he ironically demonstrated the Christian principle whereby “**the last shall be the first.**” That is the primary irony of this painting that launched his career. The *Barge Haulers on the Volga* is the first great painting that Repin composed as he came out of the Saint Petersburg Imperial Academy of Arts. Although the identity of the haulers may appear to be reduced to the mere harnessed value of their weight, that was enough for Repin to dare choose to immortalize them and give them the value of their weight in artistic gold, that is, their value in poetical irony beyond the domain of sense perception. Thus, through this narrow opening, Repin established the ironic power of the human mind as the universal standard for artistic value and the entry point to the Noosphere.



Figure 3. Ilya Repin, *Barge Haulers on the Volga*, 1870-73 (State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg)

Repin was only 26 years old when he began painting this immortal irony on social justice. The subject itself reflects a tremendous ambiguity, because it represents both the misery of slavery, yet at the same time, the hope for freedom. Repin gave this subject such a universal character, that whether it should come from Ancient Egypt, from Russia, or from America, the burden of responsibility of the artist had to be the same in all cases. Repin treated this subject with a passionate understanding of the human suffering involved, and not just the expression of the physical burden. Therefore, the art form that expresses the fight against the enslavement of man-by-man must always be the most human that can be found, and consequently, the most ironical, because it is irony that makes man human.



Furthermore, this painting's treatment of irony is especially located in the contrast between the light-colored new boy-recruit who is trying to adjust his shoulder strap in concert with the rest of the grey rag-tag bunch, but, whose dusty greyness he does not yet resemble. Note also the discrete shadow feature of the footprints in the sand ahead of the haulers. This has the effect of either reminding the viewer that those men are doomed to repeat the same Sisyphean task of pulling their load by repeatedly retracing their own footsteps, endlessly; or that they are following in the steps of a previous group of haulers who were slaving in the same manner, just ahead of them. Either way, they are sunk into forever towing their load, but their apparent docility as slaves, especially expressed by the fourth hauler from the left who is staring in the eye of the spectator, and the young man putting his hand under the strap to ease the pain, convey a latent force of spirit that has not been broken in spite of their condition of enslavement.

Thus, all of these elements come together and produce a single unity of effect. All of these actions must converge onto one exquisite moment of irony that has to be captured by the viewer in the unity of a gestalt. In that sense, the picture represents a fugitive moment that the artist has captured within his mind, in the simultaneity of eternity, as the singularity of a process which is completely meaningless, unless it is seized at that precise moment he chose for the irony to produce its effect. If that special moment is missed, the effect is not produced, and the artistic composition remains in potential simultaneity of eternity until someone else captures the unity of effect that mere words cannot express. The best way to capture this intention of Repin is with music.

One might think that the musical reference to this painting would be the famous *Volga Boatman*. Maybe. But I found that the best musical piece that honored the true intention of Repin was the classic rendering of the Negro Spiritual *Old Man River* by Paul Robeson. Double click on the icon below to get a taste of Paul Robeson's irony.

YouTube - Paul Robeson - Old Man River.mht

Robeson treats the subject with the same sense of irony that Repin has drawn in his shabby characters. In Robeson's *Old Man River*, one hears the same cry of the enslaved soul that asserts the will to fight for freedom until the very end, ... "**but I keeps laughin instead of cryin**" sings Robeson, because "... **I must keep fightin.**" In *Old Man River*, the irony is captured in a moment of laughter, while in the Repin painting, the irony is captured by the fact that the only moment of respite the haulers get is the opportunity to light up their pipes, even if there may just be dried up grass in them. Note the third hauler from the left and the young recruit who resents the stench coming from him, while the fourth hauler from the right is quietly filling his own pipe from his pouch.

There is another significant resemblance between Repin and American artists. At almost the same time that Repin started to look for models to sit for the haulers of the Volga, he encountered the same difficulty as did Albert Bierstadt in his attempt to find

Indian models to sit for his great pictures during his voyage to the American Rockies. Both artists encountered the same superstition where both the American Indian and the Russian peasant refused to have their portraits taken. They both feared that once they gave their image to be painted on canvas, they would lose their souls. Little did they realize that, by losing their mortality, they were entering the domain of immortality. This is really the very first step into understanding how the individual mind enters the Noosphere. The irony is that you first have to understand what is going on in your own mind, before you investigate someone else's mind, because it is with your mind that you are going to tackle every other problem.

Think about this for a moment. The epistemological gap that Ilya Repin had opened between that primitive fear of the peasant and his own ironic insight had the purpose of establishing the actual range that the Russian people had to cover in order to become a free people, continent wide and world wide, but by achieving universal status within the Noosphere. Notably, no matter where one may be situated within that range of the Noosphere, each new step had to be of the type that Panurge had to go through in his experiment of the Pythagorean Tetrad, in the Fifth Book of Rabelais, or the type of axiomatic shift that the solar system had to experiment in the region of the "exploded planet" that Kepler and Gauss discovered and pondered as the shadow footprint of the clash between sense-perception and the ontological substance of creativity.

Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Church were accomplishing the same task on the other side of the planet, in the United States, at about the same time. In all three cases, the planetary range was not just physical, but mental. The purpose was to captivate the viewer into an uplifting experiment, spanning from the gradual power of suggestion, where most is left unsaid, to the full blown power of an axiomatic change, where the viewer is hit with the artistic truth of the proverbial ton of bricks. Notably, with the same intention in mind, all three artists also chose to paint very large murals. The size of *Barge Haulers on the Volga* is of epic proportion, 131.5 x 281 cm. Thus, with this painting, Repin was providing a measuring rod to establish the lower boundary limit of the Noosphere.

### **3- BUT, HAPPILY, LAUGHTER IS MIGHTIER THAN SLAUGHTER.**

However, as in any long fight for social justice, there is relief. Repin's historical portrait of the Zaporozhian Cossacks is a case study for a Rabelaisian moment of truth during the long historical fight for Ukraine's independence. The entire painting is an irony demonstrating that if you cannot laugh like this before going to battle to secure your nation, then, you don't deserve to win the war.



Figure 4. Ilya Repin, *The Zaporozhian Cossacks Writing a Mocking letter to the Turkish Sultan*. 1880-91 (State Russian Museum).

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Ukraine was a constantly disputed borderland region between Catholic Poland and Muslim Turkey. In fact, the very name of Ukraine means, “border.” A Cossack settlement known as **Zaporozhie Sech** was located on an island of the Dnieper River, facing Turkey over the Black Sea. However, in 1675, Poland had signed a treaty that surrendered Zaporozhye to the Turks. The Cossacks were not very happy when, after several years of being harassed by the Turks, the Muslims came as an invading force to grab their land. The Cossacks had no intention of giving up their freedom, so they fought bravely against the invading Turkish army. One day, in 1680, after the Muslims had lost 15,000 of their troops under the walls of the Zaporozhie, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire sent the Cossacks an ultimatum. The letter of Mahmud IV read as follows:

**Sultan Mahmud IV to the Zaporozhian Cossacks:**

**As the Sultan; son of Muhammad; brother of the sun and moon; grandson and viceroy of God; ruler of the kingdoms of Macedonia, Babylon, Jerusalem, Upper and Lower Egypt; emperor of emperors; sovereign of sovereigns; extraordinary knight, never defeated; steadfast guardian of the tomb of Jesus Christ; trustee chosen by God himself; the hope and comfort of Muslims; confounder and great defender of Christians – I command you, the Zaporozhian Cossacks, to submit to me voluntarily and without any resistance, and to desist from troubling me with your attacks.'**

**Signed: Turkish Sultan Mahmud IV.**

In response, Ivan Sirko, the leader of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, seen in the painting smoking his pipe behind the letter writer, dictated the following reply:

**The Cossacks of the Dnieper to the Sultan of Turkey:**

**Thou Turkish Satan, brother and companion to the accursed Devil, and companion to Lucifer himself, Greetings! What the hell kind of noble knight art thou? The Devil voids, and thy army devour. Never wilt thou be fit to have the sons of Christ under thee: thy army we fear not, and by land and on sea, we will do battle against thee.**

**Thou scullion of Babylon, thou wheelwright of Macedonia, thou beer-brewer of Jerusalem, thou goat-slayer of Alexandria, thou swineherd of Egypt, both the Greater and the Lesser, thou sow of Armenia, thou goat of Tartary, thou hangman of Kamenetz, thou evildoer of Podoliansk, thou grandson of the Devil himself, thou great silly oaf of all the world and of the netherworld and, before our God, a blockhead, a swine's snout, a mare's ass, a butcher's cur, an unbaptized brow, May the Devil take thee!**

**That is what the Cossacks have to say to thee, thou basest-born of runts! Unfit art thou to lord it over true Christians!**

**The date we write not, for no calendar have we got; the moon is in the sky, the year is in a book, and the day is the same with us here as with thee over there, and thou can kiss us thou knowest where!**

**Signed: Sirko and the Zaporozhian Cossack Brotherhood.**

During the 13 years of preparation for *The Zaporozhie Cossacks*, Repin made a total of 31 sketches, from 1878 until 1891. When he was about to finish the painting, he wrote this very revealing truth in a letter to N. S. Leskov about the Cossack idea of freedom:

**“I have always been interested in the communal life of citizens, in history, in art memorials, and especially in the architectural planning of cities – most often feasible only under a Republican form of government. In each trifle remaining from these epochs, one may observe an unusual spirit and energy; everything is done with talent and energy, and bears wide common, civic meaning. How much of such material is found in Italy! To this day this tradition is preserved.**

**Our Zaporozhie Sech delights me with this same love of freedom and heroic spirit. There the brave elements of the Russian people renounced a life of comfort and founded a community of equal members to defend the principles they cherish most – Orthodox religion and personal freedom. Today these will sound like obsolete words, but then, in those times, when thousands of Slavs were carried into slavery by the Moslems – when religion, honor, and freedom were being desecrated – then, it was a highly stirring idea. And thus, this handful of daring men, of course the best of them (these were the intelligentsia, for most of them were educated), raised their spirit of mind to such an extent that they not only defended all of Europe from the rapacious Eastern plunderers, but menaced their strong civilization, laughing heartily at their Eastern arrogance.”** (Repin, *Khudozhestvennoe nasledstvo*, 2:69. Quoted by Parker and Parker, Op. Cit., p. 99.)

As the story is told, the Zaporozhian Cossacks had developed such a great fearless laughter in response to the Sultan, that the incredible musical irony of it was echoed all over Europe, and throughout Asia, across the great steppes, and through the canyon passages of the Caucasus Mountains that carried the message like immense polyphonic amplifiers. Thus, by the time the music had reached Istanbul, the great laughter had exploded in the Sultan’s ears like a sonic boom. He was totally dumbfounded, and, from that day on, he refrained from ever threatening the Cossacks again. This great victory, recorded for universal history by Ilya Repin, should be seen as expressing a great revolutionary moment in classical artistic composition, because it demonstrated that throughout the Noosphere, a thorough and well-composed irony could become a more powerful weapon than that of warfare itself.

Although *The Zaporozhie Cossacks* had raised a lot of controversy at the very first showing of the painting to the general public, the motivating force behind its creative idea caused such a shockwave that even Tsar Alexander III was won over by the great historical laughter, and immediately bought the painting for the enormous sum of 35,000 rubles, the highest price yet paid for any painting from a Russian artist.



Figure 5. Ilya Repin, *Pavlov in the Operating Theater*. 1924?

I would like to add an additional note to underscore the sort of means that Repin had put at the disposal of his viewers in order to bring a change in human behavior with the use of ironies. Witness one of the rare paintings that Repin has produced with the new impressionist method of behaviorism. With *Pavlov in the Operating Theater*, Repin is demonstrating the effectiveness of the psychological method of Dr. Pavlov in inducing change in human behavior. Like fascism, it essentially shows how behaviorism begins after society has exhausted its moral and social purposes on the treatment of human life.

The story, however, doesn't say who the patient was, or if he survived the surgical intervention, but it should be stressed that this is the sort of measure that American behavioral economists of the current Obama administration have already begun to introduce across the United States with their new program of political reform.

Be that as it may, artistic ironies are not all fun and laughter. Repin was a man with a moral and patriotic mission. This is demonstrated in the exceptional insight that he had for the most tragic period of Russian history. Again, Repin chose a subject that no one dared think was suitable for artistic composition. No one told the whole truth about Ivan the Terrible in the way that Repin was able to capture it in one of the saddest ironies of human history. Here, one can judge the validity of Keats' profound insight in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: "**Truth is Beauty. And Beauty is Truth...**"

#### 4- THE SAD IRONY OF IVAN THE TERRIBLE AND HIS SON.

In 1881, Repin attended a concert given by his close friend, Rimsky-Korsakov, on the tragic subject of *Sweetness of Revenge*, which was composed to commemorate the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, as well as the terrible events of November 16, 1581, when Ivan the Terrible murdered his own son, the Tsarevich Ivan. Repin was tormented and had sleepless nights during the entire period while painting this subject, because he knew that the terrible historical tragedy he was about to rekindle was going to hit the Russian people like an atom bomb of truthfulness, but he did not wish to feed the tragic emotion of revenge. What sort of device would be appropriate to uplift this historical scene? That was the question that gnawed at Repin's mind during sleepless nights. The beauty, here, is that Repin succeeded in creating a truthful irony in the most unique and sublime fashion.

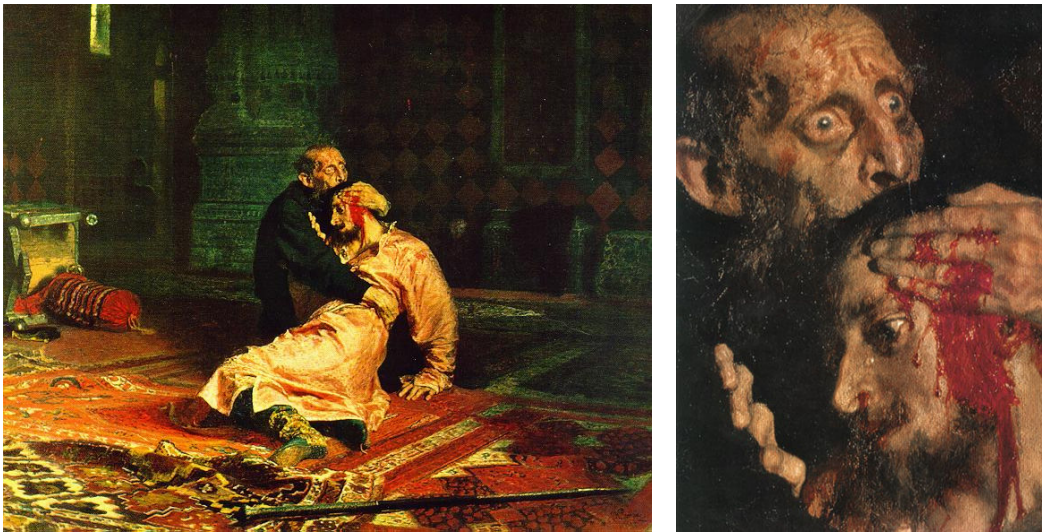


Figure 6. Ilya Repin, *Ivan the Terrible and his son Ivan on Friday, November 16, 1581*. 1885 (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow)

At first glance, the subject of this painting, as interpreted by critics, depicts the violent insanity of Ivan the Terrible, that is, makes the painting a symbol of blood and soil characterizing the tragedy of the old believers. From the very first exhibition of the painting, the attraction had always been centered on the blood. However, you would be wrong, if you were not to give it a second look, through the lens of the Noosphere. Why? Because Repin is always attentive to very delicate details that may change the mood of the entire apparent process. Here, there is such an irony which transforms the entire scene and which brings a solution to the tragedy by introducing a paradox. What is that paradox? Examine the two faces very closely.

In reality, the subject of this painting is love. Repin is actually depicting the son's forgiveness, at the very moment of dying. You ask: how can that be expressed? Indeed,

such an act of barbarity seems to exclude any possible reconciliation. You might even consider that such an act could only inspire vengeance. That is precisely where Repin introduced a touch of irony that transformed the tragic into the sublime. Repin is forcing the spectator to focus on the sublime solution of self-sacrifice. This is not a horror show; this is not blood and soil; this is the consecration of national forgiveness. Internalize the emotions involved here, in the two faces, and ask yourself: how can this be put into voice music? *Can you hear a very faint discordant interval of the cross voices expressing the significance of the tear that the son is shedding out of forgiveness, in spite of his father's madness?* Now, tell me: What would be the intention of such a musical discontinuity, if not to note the presence of a higher non-visible principle that is made conscious through the tiny aperture of a single tear drop?

How else could you explain the singularity of that tear that the son is shedding, not for himself, but for his poor father? This tear is the appoggiatura that changes the entire drama. Repin's closest friend and teacher, Kramskoy, identified this irony quite beautifully by internalizing the state of mind of the dying son. He wrote: "*And the son cannot any longer control the pupil of his eye; he breathes heavily, feeling the grief of his father, his horror, his shriek, and he, like a baby, wishes to smile at him as if to say: 'It's nothing, father, do not be afraid...'*" (Parker and Parker, Op. Cit., p. 84) That is precisely the intention of the painting, and there is only one way to prove that this tear of forgiveness is the window of salvation for the entire Russian people. Take the tear away, and see what remains of the historical event; see what is left for the poor Russian population to hope for.

If you take the tear away, you are left with a romantic blood and gore picture, simply describing the tragic culture of Russia, that is, condemning it to its continuing cultural isolationism. However, if you add that tear to the picture, you have completely changed the whole scene, and you have brought in the ambiguous emotion of the sublime, as Schiller understood it, the hope that a nation requires to survive and grow, because you have introduced *agape* as the gatekeeper of the upper entrance of the Noosphere. That is what the peaceful and loving eyes of the son accomplished in forgiving his father. One tiny teardrop was enough to add a new dimensionality to the painting and uplift the entire Russian culture to a higher level of humanity. This is how Repin solved the paradox between love and revenge, between the teardrop and the dripping blood. Yes, the murdered victims of Ivan the Terrible reflect the tragedy of the entire Russian people, but that single painful teardrop of joy is worth more for the love of one's fatherland than all of the gory blood that is gushing out of the history of Russia. That was for Repin the true significance of the imitation of Christ shedding his blood for the sins of mankind.

According to contemporary accounts, this painting created such a commotion and attracted such crowds when it was first exhibited, that mounted police had to be called in to maintain peace and order. In Moscow the imperial authorities found the painting so offensive that they ordered its removal from the Itinerant Exhibition and forbade its buyer to exhibit the painting for several months in other Russian cities. Many critics called this painting "*excessive realism*," but more thoughtful people identified the "*Christ-like*"



feature of the son as transcending the historical event by the universal form of Christian love.

The painting created such a continuing strong passionate response throughout Russia that twenty-eight years after its first exhibition a deranged Icon painter threw the entire nation into a complete turmoil after slashing the portrait in several places with a knife during an exhibition in 1913. No portrait had ever raised such a controversy in the entire history of art. With *Ivan the Terrible*, Repin had provided the measure for establishing the higher boundary limit of the Noosphere for Russia. From the *Barge Haulers on the Volga* to *Ivan the Terrible and his Son Ivan*, Repin had formulated the two ironic extremes of the Noosphere.



Figure 7. Rembrandt Van Rijn, *The Farewell of David and Jonathan*, 1642. Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

Finally, there is an added remark that I wish to make with respect to Repin's connection between Eastern and the Western cultures. It is important to note that Repin had sealed his Russian heritage to Western Europe in a very special way. His *Ivan the Terrible and his son Ivan* was inspired by the Rembrandt biblical scene of *The Farewell of David and Jonathan* (I Samuel 20, 41), also interpreted as the *Reconciliation between David and Absalom* (II Samuel 14, 33), that Repin had visited many times at the Hermitage Museum of St Petersburg. There is, here, great potential nourishment in

comparing the western and eastern treatment of the father-son relationship in art form. Both paintings have the two figures forming a knot in the exact center of your stomach, but the two do not have the same tightness.

What is the nature of that knot? Especially noteworthy are Rembrandt and Repin's dramatic division of the background and foreground into a dynamic space in which shadow and light are made to contrast and interact for the purpose of compelling the viewer to experiment a fundamental transformation of his society, personally and socially, on the stage of universal history. Here, light and shadow define the entire space of the composition in precisely the same dramatic manner that Leonardo da Vinci had produced in the tragic and the sublime versions of his two renditions of his *Virgin of the Rocks*.

The same function of the chiaroscuro preconscious technique used by Repin and Rembrandt is very obvious in the two paintings, here, but the subject of Repin's painting adds a dimensionality that is a characteristic of the Noosphere. Repin's truthfulness hits the heart of the matter when the spectator discovers that the frightful grief of the father's stare is precisely the mirror device that has the power of kindling the emotion that is called upon to make one of the greatest social changes in Russian society. This raises the question: how can the solution of this problem increase the productivity of Russian society? How can this creative moment increase human power in affecting change in the universe as a whole?

## **5- GOLGOTHA: THE SCENE OF WHAT IS NOT THERE.**

Then, in 1921, at the age of 77, Repin painted his last major canvas entitled *Golgotha*, which can only be interpreted as another *Ivan the Terrible* which confronts the viewer with the terrifying idea of desecration of Christianity's most precious icon. The colors are very dark and mostly violet. Again, a singularity emerges in the contrast between a fresh pool of blood and the flickering of a faint light projected from the inside of a tomb which is partially open. The smell of death is everywhere, as in the aftermath of World War One across Europe. Is Repin warning against the self-destruction of civilization?

Repin's *Golgotha* is not a historical representation of the Crucifixion of Christ, but, rather, the representation of an event that has passed; that is, where the emphasis is on the aftermath of the historical event itself, as if during the moment of suspended animation, just before the resurrection, during this interval when the civilized world had forgotten the Christian principle. *Golgotha* is a painting on the subject of what is no longer there and which may never be recovered. Repin described the scene briefly: **“On the Left, clearly visible, are crosses with the thieves' cadavers, and in the middle His cross –already empty –fully saturated with blood [and] a pool of blood at the bottom. And the cadavers with broken shanks are still oozing, making their own**

**puddles on which dogs have started feasting... I cannot get away from the biblical subjects ... I am possessed by them.”** (Repin letter to A. F. Koni, April 28 and July 12, 1921. Quoted by Valkenier, Op. Cit., p. 191.)



Figure 8. Ilya Repin, *Golgotha*, 1921. Art Museum Princeton University  
For a colored reproduction of this painting, see:  
[http://fairview.smugmug.com/gallery/797474\\_enWRR/1/251785390\\_Gutz](http://fairview.smugmug.com/gallery/797474_enWRR/1/251785390_Gutz)

Repin's description is not particularly revealing except for one thing: with the flickering light inside of the tomb he is forcing the viewer to enter and seek the truth of this subject in the domain of shadows. Don't think of this scene as a visual Crucifixion; think of it as being the antechamber of Repin's mind. This is the period of his life when he painted several religious paintings such as *Morning of the Resurrection*, *Golgotha*, *Doubting Thomas*, *Saint Peter's Denial*, *Young Christ in the Temple*, and *Christ in the Wilderness*. However, the subject is a mere opportunity. The question that comes to mind with *Golgotha* is not: what is it? The question is: where would this irony be located within the range of the Noosphere? Is this an axiomatic *punctum saliens* in the domain of

the history of ideas? What is the significance of it? What is the truth of it? Let's look at it with the lens that Lyn provided for us:

**“In respect to the subject thus placed before the reader here, in all relevant, competent sorts of known treatments of the subject of the dynamical roots of ancient, through modern physical science, the principle issue has been the dispute: whether the products of the mental-creative powers of science, are either reflections of the sense-perception of sensory experience (a view which is the standpoint of the modern academic reductionists) or, on the contrary, that the principles discovered are native to those innately creative powers, specific to the human mind, those powers which the mind employs for insight into the deepest significance of what are, on the surface of events, the mere empirical phenomena, those mere shadows of reality known to us as sense-perception.”** (Lyndon H. LaRouche Jr. *The substance of tensors: THE ONTOLOGICAL MATTER*, LPAC, May 21, 2009, p. 4.)

Think of Repin's *Golgotha* as similar to the mental process that Lyn described. Even though the visual apparatus is the instrument, the conveyor-belt, that carries form, color, light, and shadow to the imagination, it is not vision which composes the arrangements formed by ideas: it is the combination of irony and imagination that does the work and brings the choice of visual material to the judgment of the thinking process. Then, and only then, it is the creative judgment which decides if the visual material is valid or not as judged on the basis of universal principles. The difficult part of this process is to properly connect the intention between sense-perception, imagination, and principle. And so, the idea is formed in the mind with reference to principles, before and independently of, what it might look like to sense-perception. It is the principle that evaluates, judges, and decides on the cognitive validity of the connection between imagination and perception. If you use this process to understand what Repin has created in this painting, you will understand what he has done.

## **CONCLUSION: THE NEW CURRENCY OF NATIONAL ECONOMIES.**

In his paintings, what Repin was searching for was never the populist aspiration of the revolutionary, the romantic plight of peasant slavery, or the false spirituality of the true believer; it was always the historical figure, or historical group of figures, that reflected the immortal consciousness of a living anomaly reflected through the shadows of a Russian window. Repin searched for the characteristic type of Russian or Ukrainian as a true immortal type of human being that had gone beyond the tragic and represented an overwhelming poetic quality of Rabelaisian truth. Again, this is best stated by Repin himself, describing *The Archdeacon*, (1877). Repin wrote to Kramskoy: **“It is the most interesting type. The essence of our deacons, those lions of the clergy who do not have an iota of anything spiritual about them – he is all flesh and blood ... It seems to me our deacons are the only survival of pagan gluttony.”** (Repin letter to Kramskoy, January 13, 1878. Quoted by Valkenier, Op. Cit., p. 77.)



Figure 8. Ilya Repin, *The Archdeacon*, 1877.

Here, Repin has reached universal truthfulness in the highest form of irony by representing one of the most characteristic caricatures of Russian culture. With *The Archdeacon*, Repin has reached a higher level of expression of false spirituality in the Russian culture, a superior truth to what could be found in the so-called Western European culture of his time. With *The Archdeacon*, Repin became the Rabelais of the canvas. Artists are seldom able to characterize their own work properly in words and identify the nature of their purpose in history; however, this was not the case with Repin. In two other letters to friends, Repin identified his creative insight quite beautifully and truthfully:

**“As for myself, I long ago made up my mind that I would stay in Petersburg. I had been pulled in this or that direction, but in general I see more and more clearly my appointed task...But may God save me from factional struggle. I face so much genuine struggle, that is, with my art until it expresses what I want to express in a way that is clear and faithful to the truth.”** (Letter of Repin to Ivan Kramskoy, December 16, 1873.)

**“I was characterized in *The Art Journal* as a painting artisan to whom it does not in the least matter what he paints so long as he can paint. Today**

**he paints from the Bible, tomorrow a popular scene on some fashionable idea, then a fantastic canvas drawn from the epic folk tales, some genre painting of foreign life, an ethnographic picture, then at last a tendentious newspaper report, then a psychological study, next a liberal melodrama, all of a sudden a bloody scene from Russian history, etc. No consistency, no definite goal for this activity; everything by chance and, of course, superficially...Don't you find this characterization close to the mark? By the way, I am giving it in my own words, but this is roughly the sense. What is one to do? It could be that the judges are right, but one can't escape oneself. I love variety.”** (Letter of Repin to M. P. Fedorov, May 4, 1886. Quoted by Valkenier, Op. Cit., p. 123-24)

Thus, like Rabelais, Repin was a universal “**variety artist.**” No matter what subject he chose, he gave it the same ironic touch, with a brush of colored insight that nobody had paid any attention to, or was even interested in thinking about. He created something that never existed before and, in so doing, gave it immortal life. Within that scope, Repin established the ironic minimum-maximum range of the Noosphere, from the lowest level of the peasant's fear of immortality in *Barge Haulers on the Volga* to the self-sacrifice love for the immortality of humanity in *Ivan the Terrible...* It was within the determination of such parameters of classical artistic composition that Repin defined irony as the dominating idea that should be used as a medium of exchange, not a fad, not religion, and surely not money. He knew that without such ironies, everything else in society would smell of fraud and would rot away. However, if society were to exchange ideas through such a variety of thoughtful anomalies, then you would have a course of civilization that would constantly increase its treasure of creative artistic and scientific discoveries. Repin was right. He could deal with any subject he would choose because, by dealing in ironies, society constantly created more than what was necessary for its own reproduction. Such was Repin's economic idea of national credit and social profit.

On the other hand, Repin also understood that if his society exchanged ideas without such ironies, as the mode of exchange of an authentic language-culture, then, he would be living like a barbarian in a dark age, and it would be the course of empire that would advance and overwhelm the world as opposed to freedom. Thus, ironies must become the standard currency for truthfulness and morality in any human society. That is what Repin contributed the most in immortalizing the Russian and Ukrainian cultures; and he understood that a society without irony was a society without a future, a society of brutish speculators that were not morally fit to survive. So, as Repin did in making visible the invisible, let us discover and develop the science of paradoxes, as one would discover a hidden national treasure. The time has come for irony to become the currency of national economies; and thanks to which, an ironic discovery a day will keep the speculators away. I guarantee it!

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