

# Grigory Pomerants

## Love, Icon, and the Third Level of Being



### Historical and Intellectual Context

Grigory Pomerants (1918–2013) belongs to that generation of Russian thinkers whose biography was inseparable from catastrophe. A volunteer in 1941, a soldier at the front, later a dissident intellectual in the Soviet Union, and a commentator of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Pomerants elaborated a religious-philosophical anthropology forged in the crucible of war, totalitarianism, and ideological absolutism. His reflections cannot be separated from the experience of twentieth-century ideological violence.

At the core of his thought lies a paradox: the most dangerous force in history is not crude evil but righteous idealism detached from love. This is formulated in one of his most cited aphorisms:

“The Devil begins with froth on the lips of an angel rushing into battle for a just and holy cause.”

The “angel” signifies moral purity and transcendental orientation. The “froth” signals the moment when zeal exceeds love—when righteousness becomes intoxicated with itself. Pomerants immediately clarifies the diagnosis:

“Everything turns to dust: people, ideologies, — but eternal is the spirit of hatred in a righteous struggle, and that’s why evil on earth has no end.”

Here he articulates a structural insight into ideological history: hatred masked as moral necessity perpetuates itself beyond the mortality of systems. The ideological content decays; the affective energy of hatred survives. In this sense, Pomerants offers a phenomenology of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence. Evil persists not because of doctrinal error per se, but because of an emotional surplus justified as moral urgency.

This line of thought intersects with Dostoevsky's critique of utopian rationalism in *Notes from the Underground* and the Grand Inquisitor episode in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Pomerants explicitly engages this tradition in his account of "the underground" and the destruction of the rational "Crystal Palace." He writes:

"Man attains vision via 'a great doubt': in Zen-Buddhist teaching he struggles with a problem, rationally insoluble, hangs above the void in despair; by letting go at this point he breaks through to 'insight,' where harmony and wholeness of being are experienced. Through this death of the Old Adam 'the spiritual lungs of the New Adam' can come to life. The enlightened state can only be reached after enduring the 'underground' (see Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*), by breaking loose from inertia, by striving towards the Heavenly 'Crystal Palace' (the Kingdom of God) after the Crystal Palace (ideal social structures), created by man's rational mind, has been destroyed."

Rational constructions of perfection must collapse before genuine spiritual illumination occurs. The "Heavenly 'Crystal Palace'" cannot be engineered, insofar as it is an interior state.

## **Love as Ontological Authority**

The center of Pomerants' philosophy is not skepticism but love. His theological anthropology is explicit:

"God is love. God is conscience, the voice that we hear in silence, in the contemplation of the integrity of nature, in the contemplation of icon art, in the experience of books that awaken the conscience, in the recollection of childhood and adolescence fear of offending love. The only indisputable authority is the authority of love. This single and indivisible spirit of love – for one's native people, for one's native country, for the creative force that creates kinship – must be preserved and maintained."

This statement operates on multiple registers.

First, it identifies God not as metaphysical hypothesis but as experiential conscience. God is encountered in silence, art, memory, and moral shame—"the recollection of childhood and adolescence fear of offending love." This recalls the apophatic tradition of Eastern Christianity, where God is not grasped conceptually but encountered existentially.

Second, Pomerants insists that "The only indisputable authority is the authority of love." This is a radical political and ethical claim in a century of totalizing authorities. Authority, for him, is not institutional, doctrinal, or coercive; it is affective and relational.

Third, he binds love of God and love of people in a non-dual reciprocity:

"Love for God and for people are similar. Love for God illuminates love for people, and love for people suggests images of love for God. Such is the summit of love, where man is an icon to man, and the icon does not obscure God."

The phrase “man is an icon to man” is crucial. In Orthodox iconology, the icon is not a representation but a window. Pomerants extends this to anthropology: the human being is a transparency of divine presence. This is elaborated in the editorial commentary:

“In the icon apparent incompatibles are combined: the virgin has the eyes of a widow and the mouth of a young girl; Christ on the cross appears to be about to fly away—thus youth and age, death and resurrection are brought together. So too are the conflicting elements within man integrated when the icon of Christ is formed within man.”

The icon integrates contradiction. The spiritual life, then, is not elimination of opposites but their transfiguration. This corresponds to Pomerants’ insistence that good does not operate through combat:

“It is naïve to imagine that good and evil go against each other, like two troops with unfurled banners. In fact, good does not fight and does not win. It shines on everyone and is more willing to stay on the side of the vanquished. And that which fights is always involved in evil.”

Here Pomerants overturns the martial metaphor of morality. If good “does not fight and does not win,” then ethical transformation cannot be achieved through domination. The moment goodness takes up arms as goodness, it has already entered the logic of evil. This reinterprets the earlier aphorism about the angel with froth on his lips: moral violence corrodes the moral subject.

## **Gift and Risk**

Pomerants’ anthropology of love extends into a philosophy of happiness radically opposed to possession. He writes:

“Happiness lives only in exchange, in the transfer from one to another. It cannot be owned like a house or an estate, separated from others. Only by giving, without asking in return, can you bring one to life. Only at the risk of losing happiness can it be multiplied. Grasped in the hands, clenched in a fist, hidden from others, it disappears.”

Happiness is not an object but a relation. It is not substance but circulation. The phenomenology is exact: the attempt to secure happiness destroys it. This is mirrored in his reflections on creativity and love:

“The happiness of creativity is in creativity itself, even without recognition, without success. The happiness of love is in love itself, even without reciprocity. The ability to do so is part of the mystery that lovers exchange.”

Intrinsic fulfilment replaces external validation, insofar as creativity and love are autotelic; their meaning lies in enactment. This resonates with his later metaphor:

“I realized that to love means to write new poems and new music, where every repetition is a lie. I am a bow, God is playing, and every moment you have to guess anew what the violin

expects from you. Feel every movement with the heart – so that it comes from the heart and finds a response in the heart."

Love is improvisation. The self is an instrument, not the composer. The rejection of repetition—"every repetition is a lie"—suggests that authentic love cannot be reduced to formula or ideology. It must be recreated in each moment.

## **Silence and Depth**

Pomerants' tripartite anthropology culminates in what he calls the "third level." The editorial text summarizes:

"The first level (the rational) and the second level (the emotional) are penetrated by the third level, or spiritual level. According to Pomerants this area of experience is like the pause among sounds where wholeness is found; it is an entry into a new world where the ordinary is miraculous, where one's burden is lightened, where God's law enters the heart. Life on the 'third level' is eternal suffering and joy, eternal redemption of sins, grief for wrong done to God. Man must try to find inner resurrection: 'Man must die for the icon to be born ...' All the 'my' must be burned so that resurrection can begin: 'What rises is not I in something, but someone in me.'"

Akin to kenosis, the ego must burn for the icon to emerge. The "pause among sounds" metaphor suggests that depth is not another content but a dimension. It is discovered through silence. Hence his statement:

"The meaning of prayer is not in requests, but in constant appeal to one's depths. Real sin is a detachment from one's own depth."

Sin is superficiality. Salvation is depth-awareness:

"We are all overgrown with shells to protect ourselves from the rough shocks of the outside world. But one day we notice that this shell also protects against that which gives meaning to life – from the meeting of an open heart with an open heart, from the tenderness that the soul craves."

Defensive structures become existential prisons. Modern man, armoured against suffering, is simultaneously armoured against love.

## **Pluralism Without Relativism**

Pomerants resists dogmatism while affirming truth:

"I realized that each of us is given only fragments of truth and it is pointless to argue whose fragment is greater. The one who understands his insignificance and the boundless superiority of the integral truth over our children's games of truth is right."

Contra relativism, truth is integral; human access is fragmentary. Hence:

“Our business is to follow the chosen road, but not to blaspheme other people's roads. They diverge in the valleys, and at the top they converge and merge completely where time becomes eternity and space becomes the point of the whole. And when we feel this point in our chest, we feel love for the other who is on a different path, and we do not allow jealousy and hatred to distract us from the path upward.”

The metaphor of convergence at the summit allows for religious pluralism grounded in eschatological unity. It also undercuts ideological exclusivism.

## **The Present as Eternity**

Against both secularism and escapist religiosity, Pomerants writes:

“People have forgotten how to be happy. At first, earthly happiness was declared a substitute for eternal life. Then they rushed in the other direction and began to look for a special eternity, outside of time, after time, as if eternity could be before or after, as if it were not all here and now.”

Eternity is not chronological extension but qualitative depth. Similarly:

“Many people think about tomorrow (or yesterday), about what misfortunes have happened to them or may be, what external conditions of happiness they lack, and pass by the happiness that everything is in the present, in today, and not in things, but in our ability to respond to things – simple, natural, gifted: to the sky, to wood, to man”

The capacity to respond—this is the locus of happiness. Not possession, not anticipation, but presence.

## **The Vocation of the Enlightened**

In “The Man from Nowhere,” Pomerants envisions the intellectual as prophetic outsider. The editorial text notes:

“He is a homeless, rootless wanderer and seeker after truth who brings enlightenment to society, awakens it from inertia, fights for conditions in which man can mature fully. Pomerants calls the Soviet intelligentsia ‘men from nowhere’: they must act as the Chosen People, the salt which must not lose its savour, the leaven in the lump. They are to be transformed inwardly and so change their society.”

The transformation is inward before it is social. This parallels his use of Alexander Pushkin’s poem *The Prophet*, in which the poet is purified, wounded, and ignited before speaking. Illumination precedes proclamation.

## **The Indivisible Spirit of Love**

Pomerants' philosophy culminates in solidarity grounded in love:

“If an argument reaches an impasse, we need to shut up and think: our love is greater than what we are arguing about. And then, in great silence, a single heaven and solidarity will open up above the earth.”

And in one of his most theologically challenging lines:

“God is beaten in every humiliated person. His insecurity somehow becomes our defence. The cry in our soul falls silent and we begin to hear his cry. And at once all personal questions are washed away by God's question. He dies and rises with us.”

God suffers in humiliation; resurrection is communal.

Pomerants' thought resists ideological absolutism, rationalist reductionism, and sentimental religiosity alike. It calls for inner resurrection, epistemic humility, and an uncompromising commitment to love as the only indisputable authority. To a world infatuated by angels with froth on their lips, his warning remains.