

Adam Drozdek
Pittsburgh

ELAGIN: BETWEEN MANSORY AND ORTHODOXY

Jełagin: między wolnomularstwem a prawosławiem

STRESZCZENIE: Iwan Jełagin był jedną z najważniejszych postaci początków ruchu wolnomularskiego w Rosji. W swoim krótkim życiorysie twierdził, że książka *Des erreurs et de la vérité* była ważnym etapem w jego duchowej przemianie, wymieniając cztery prawdy, o których uczy jej autor. Jakkolwiek bardzo mało, jeśli w ogóle, znaleźć można w książce Saint-Martina odniesień do tych prawd, to jednak wpływy idei Saint-Martina widoczne są w zachowanych dokumentach Jełagina. Jełagin uznawał także Stanisława Ely za swojego przewodnika duchowego. Jednak książka Ely niewiele oferuje dla zrozumienia w duchowej biografii Jełagina, czy też bardziej konkretnej roli Ely jako nauczyciela rosyjskiego masońa. W artykule przedstawiono również niektóre idee Jełagina prezentowane w jego *Rozmowach* i w jego osobliwej historii Rosji. Wynika z nich, że w przeciwieństwie do niektórych wolnomularzy – np. A. Nowikowa – dążenia Jełagina do duchowego samodoskonalenia nie przywołyły go nazbyt blisko do kościoła prawosławnego.

KEYWORDS: Russia, mansory, orthodox, public theater, creation

Ivan Elagin was born in 1725 in a family of old nobility. As a boy, he was educated by a private tutor. In 1738–1743, he served in the Cadet Corps, a culturally rich environment, where a theater was established through the initiative of Sumarokov. Kheraskov, another future literary luminary, was also at that time in the Corps. Afterwards, Elagin joined the Nevskii regiment in St. Petersburg, where he became a secretary in 1748. In 1751, he left the regiment to become an adjutant of count Aleksei Razumovskii (empress Elizabeth's favorite). In 1758, he was arrested for allegedly conspiring against the empress Elizabeth and being a partisan of the princess Catherine. He was sent to his estate. In 1762, with the ascendance of Catherine II to the throne, he returned from exile and became a member of the court chancellery and of the committee of wine and salt. In 1766–1779, he was a director of court theaters and orchestras. In 1768, he became a secret counselor

and senator of the first department. In 1773, he supervised the construction and the development of a public theater. In 1783, he was accepted as a member of the Russian Academy as recognition for his literary work. For the same reason he was elected an honorary member of a Leipzig learned society. At the end of his life, he became an owner of an island in Petersburg, which today is called the island of Elagin. He died in 1793¹.

A mason

Elagin also had a parallel life as a committed mason. As a youth, in 1750 (D 94, 95)², he joined the masons hoping to find equality with people of high standing and to find among them patrons and friends³. “For many years I searched in the lodges the promised light and imaginary equality” without finding any (P 99). He did not see any learning, but only clubbish atmosphere, strange rites, silly events, obscure teachings contrary to reason, and “service that started for Minerva [but] ended as a holiday for Bacchus”. He stopped attending the lodge and tried to find the truth in writings of famous authors, but these were anti-Christian writings that did not understand the mysteries of this true religion (100). Teachings of new philosophers and encyclopedists made him “forget the faith in which [he] was born,

¹ Cf. Tatiana Bakounine, *Le répertoire biographique des francs-maçons russes (XVII^e et XIX^e siècles)*, Paris: Institut d’Études slaves de l’Université de Paris 1967, p. 135; В.П. Степанов, Иван Перфильевич Елагин, [in:] *Словарь русских писателей XVIII века*, Ленинград: Наука 1988, vol. 1, pp. 304–309.

² The following abbreviations will be used:

D – П[етр П.] Пекарский, *Дополнения к истории масонства в России XVIII столетия*, Санкт-Петербург: Типография Императорской Академии наук 1869.

E – Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, *Des erreurs et de la vérité*, Edimbourg 1775.

O – Иван [П.] Елагин, *Опыт повествования о России*, Москва: Университетская типография 1803 [1790].

Ou – Иван П. Елагин, *Опыт повествования о России*, (unpublished fragments), [in:] Т[атьяна] В. Артемьева, *Идея истории в России XVIII века*, Санкт-Петербург: Санкт-Петербургское отделение Института человека РАН 1998, pp. 225–253.

P – И[ван] П. Елагин, *Повесть о себе самом „Русский архив“* 1864, no. 1, cols. 93–110.

S – Bruder Seddag [Stanislav Ely], *Brüderliche Vermahnungen an einige Brüder Freymäurer*, Philadelphia 1781; in references to this work, the second number is a reference to its Russian translation, Брат Седдаг [Станислав Эли], *Братские увещания к некоторым братиям св[о]б[о]дн[ы]м к[а]м[е]нищ[и]кам*, Москва: В вольной Типографии у И. Лопухина 1784.

T – Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, *Tableau naturel des rapports qui existent entre Dieu, l'homme et l'univers*, Paris: Édition de l'Initiation 1901 [1782].

³ Such were the only motives that Catherine II ascribed to those who joined masons in her mockery of masonry in the person of Radotov in *The deceived*, act 5, scene 13; cf. Александр В. Семека, *Русские розенкрейцеры и сочинения императрицы Екатерины II против масонства*, „Журнал Министерства народного просвещения“ 339 (1902), no. 2, pp. 380–381.

[forget] the fear of God,” and all that he learned in school (P 101). He finally met an Englishman (102) who directed him back to faith. He also said that masonry was a teaching revealed only to the few. The teaching is not written down; it is preserved in London in the Ancient Lodge that is known only to the few and it is difficult to join it and even harder to know its mysteries. The Englishman departed very soon and Elagin did not have a chance to become his pupil. In 1772, when an English lodge was established in Russia, Elagin was appointed by the London lodge as a provincial grand master of the English system which eventually included 14 lodges (103). Having doubts about this system, in 1776, he joined his lodges with the lodges of baron Georg von Reichel, and Elagin became a state grand master of 18 lodges.

Elagin spent a lot of money to buy masonic books and manuscripts in all of Europe only to learn that the masonic truth cannot be purchased; all these writings contained human teachings, and many of them were plain silly (P 104). A brother NN, who was probably von Reichel⁴, put him on the right path and taught him that “masonry is the oldest teaching called sacred wisdom; that it contains all other teachings and arts as it is explained in our ancient English catechism published by Locke”. This teaching is hidden in allegories and symbols; it is preserved from the beginning of the world by the patriarchs (105) and transmitted by them and preserved in temples of Chaldeans, Egyptians, Persians, Phoenicians, Jews, Greeks and Romans, and in Eleusinian mysteries, and taught in Solomonic, Eleatic, Sinaitic, and Johannine schools, in the desert and in Jerusalem and in the revelation of the Savior; taught in schools of Thales, Pythagoras, and Plato, and taught by the sages of India, China, Arabia and by druid sages (106). For five years (1777–1782) Elagin studied books assigned by NN and the Scriptures. He studied the fathers of the church:

Origen, Eusebius, Justin, Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, John of Damascus, venerable Macarius, and many others along with Fleury’s history [of the church] became exegetes for my lack of understanding. Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, Socrates, Epictetus, Plato, Hermes Trismegistus and Orpheus himself, Homer and Zoroaster with the help of Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch, Cicero, Pliny and many other like them poured into my soul new and salvific reflections.

These authors are worth studying since “in them you will find everything that is needed to be successful in our learning”. It is even better when they are studied in

⁴ Георгий В. Вернадский, *Русское масонство в царствование Екатерины II*, Санкт-Петербург: Издательство имени Новикова 1999 [1917], р. 184.

the original (107). In this Stanislav Ely was very helpful, because he taught Elagin “all what is needed for understanding of secret meaning of allegorical speech, Mosaic and prophetic writings”.

In this way, the light was partially revealed to me, which appears to our eyes freed from a ribbon upon initial entry into our order. In this way, I overcame the darkness spread before us [that covers] hieroglyphs, symbols, allegories, and rituals which were seen and used in our lodges; I understood the Egyptian legends, the writings of the authors of *Des erreurs et de la vérité, Tableaux naturels* of Welling, [writings] of Robertus Fluctibus [Robert Fludd]⁵, of Elias Artista in his truth and errors, and others considered mysterious. In this way, many parables and words spoken by our Savior, Jesus Christ, became clear to me; his coming to us, suffering and death; the mystery of his life bringing cross; his resurrection from the dead and ascendance to heaven. The trumpet of John the Evangelist, the voice of John lamenting in the desert, and proclamations of apostles proclaiming peace and new blessing for man not by vain speech but by perfect faith aiming at our perfect happiness, captured mind, heart, and soul and filled them with holy reverence (108–109).

It is also worth mentioning that in the middle of Elagin’s five-year studying period, Cagliostro was in Russia for half a year⁶. He came to Petersburg under the pretense of having been a doctor and a colonel of the Spanish army⁷. He left Petersburg in April 1780. He was a charlatan on the European scale and duped many people also in Petersburg. He claimed, for instance, that he could produce gold, which Elagin believed (D 78). In the process, Cagliostro extorted from him several thousand rubles⁸.

Des erreurs et de la vérité

Interestingly, in the opening paragraph of his brief *curriculum vitae* Elagin stated that the book *Des erreurs et de la vérité* was instrumental in finding his way to serve others. In his view, those who criticized the book have eyes and do not see, have ears and do not hear. They are arrogant and do not understand the mysteries

⁵ If a comma is supplied, then this would read “... *Tableaux naturels*[, writings] of Welling, of Robertus Fluctibus ...,” which would still contain an error since the singular should be used, *Tableau naturel*, which is Saint-Martin’s work, the fact likely unknown to Elagin.

⁶ В.Р. Зотов, *Калиостро: его жизнь и пребывание в России*, „Русская старина“ 12 (1875), no. 1, p. 51; *Письма Императрицы Екатерины II к Гримму (1774–1796)*, „Сборник Императорского русского исторического общества“ 23 (1878), pp. 212–213.

⁷ Зотов, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁸ Н.В. Дризен, *Иван Перфильевич Елагин (1725–1794)*, „Русская старина“ 80 (1893), no. 10, p. 138.

in the book like those who criticize the Scriptures, since they hold to the literal interpretation only. Others, who knew some mysteries, criticized the book as a concealed Jesuit system and as being opposed to authorities (P 94). The book “reveals the true knowledge ... Imitating the style of ancient sages, particularly Pythagoras, [the book] provides true understanding of the creation of the universe, the unity and essence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the primeval man – in a word, it contains all our teachings and presents all of them in a symbolic way” (95).

Des erreurs et de la vérité was published in 1775 by a *ph[ilosophe] inc[onu]* and was soon published in Russian, also as authored by a *neizvestnyi filosof*, an unknown philosopher⁹. This was the first book of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin in a series of many books written by him. It appears that the identity of the author remained unknown to Elagin. The book became a must reading in the masonic circles and even led to coining the name of Martinists as a moniker for at least some branches of masonry, which is interesting and even ironic since Saint-Martin himself had no interest in masonry¹⁰. Because of the importance Elagin ascribed to the book in his personal development, it is useful to look briefly at the solutions proposed by Saint-Martin to the four philosophical and theological problems listed by Elagin. However, because of the obscurity of the book, references are also made to the second Saint-Martins book, the *Tableau naturel* which can be considered a commentary on and elucidation of the *Erreurs*.

One fundamental truth that Elagin found clearly expounded in the *Erreurs* is the unity and essence of God. The *Erreurs* speak about the good principle that it is “the essential unity; it is goodness, purity, and perfection itself [that] cannot suffer in itself any division, any contradiction, any blemish” (E 30). The power and all virtues constitute the essence of the good principle, which includes wisdom and justice (16). The good principle has all the power and all the value that it draws from itself. The evil principle is nothing when the good one reigns (11). Evil has no force by itself; the good has universal power which extends over evil. Having vastly different powers, these two principles are not coeternal; otherwise, the good principle could not have an upper hand over evil (12). Therefore, the good principle is characterized by immeasurable superiority over everything else, unity, indivisibility, and existence before everything else, including evil. The good principle does not in any way cooperate with evil; thus, the latter was not caused by the former; otherwise, a seed of evil would have resided in the good principle (13). Whence evil, then? This vexing theological problem of theodicy was solved by

⁹ [Луи Клод де Сен-Мартен], *О заблуждениях и истине, или воззвание человеческого рода ко всеобщему началу знания*, Москва: Типография И. Лопухина 1785.

¹⁰ Arthur E. Waite, *The life of Louis Claude de Saint-Martin the unknown philosopher and the substance of his transcendental doctrine*, London: Philip Wellby 1901, p. 67.

Saint-Martin in a fairly traditional way: evil is the result of free will of intelligent agents (16, 26).

Not once do the *Erreurs* refer to God as God. This omission is rectified in the *Tableau* when it states that people call God the Being that is the supreme principle, the source of all forces, a necessary Being, the source of all action, the Being from which all other beings continuously emanate (T 10-11). This Divinity is the uncreated and living source of all beings (43).

Although material proofs are insufficient to prove the existence of God (T 42), nevertheless, the *Erreurs* use a faint physico-theological reference when they state that the visible nature presents to the eyes a grand Artist (E 70). Since we see so much regularity in nature (150), there must be a powerful and intelligent hand which guides material beings; this hand placed above them by a True Principle indestructible like this hand, living by itself and the law which emanated from them both is a rule and a measure of all laws that operate in the corporeal Nature (151). Also, all people on earth recognize the existence of a superior Being (206, 213), which may be considered the proof derived from physico-theology: all people can see and appreciate harmony and orderliness of the universe and they ascribe this to God. Only in later works did Saint-Martin state more explicitly that it is man and not nature that should be asked about the essence and the plans of the Creator. The best proof of the existence of God stems from the sentiment of admiration and love in the human soul. Whence would it come if there were not a superior being? Admiration and love can only exist in freedom; thus, God is also free¹¹.

The creation of the universe is, according to Elagin, clearly presented in the *Erreurs*. However, although occasionally reference to creation or production is made, the *Erreurs* speak primarily about emanation, although in a dogmatic rather than in an explanatory way. An emanation is simply assumed as a plain fact which then leads to such statements as that all forces emanate from the primal force (E 58); particular principles emanate from the first principle (104), that is, from God; intellectual faculties of man are “the sign of the prime principle from which they emanate” (239); “the universal Principle, or a Center [is that] from which constantly emanate other Centers” (255). This is all very unhelpful in explaining the nature of bringing entities into being. The *Tableau* is slightly more helpful in that respect. It warns that emanation should not be understood the way this process takes place in nature where the source becomes smaller when something emanates from it, like, say, vapor from some substance (T 41). Emanation of human thoughts, volition, and actions does not alter human essence. The same phenomenon is true for the divine life: it can produce life endlessly without ever ceasing to be the source of life

¹¹ Ad[olphe] Franck, *La philosophie mystique en France à la fin du XVIII^e siècle. Saint-Martin et son maître Martinez Pasqualis*, Paris: Germer Raillière 1866, pp. 139–140.

(43). This could simply be explained by the infinity of God: subtracting a finite portion from infinity does not undermine the infinitude of this infinity. Although God is immaterial, He is an immaterial substance, and a portion of this substance is apparently imparted onto the emanated beings: “If man emanates from the Divinity, then it is an absurd and impious doctrine to consider man to be drawn from nothingness and created as matter” (43). In this way, the *creatio ex nihilo* becomes a criminal and impious doctrine¹², and the ancient doctrine that nothing comes from nothing apparently stands. Therefore, when God is referred to as the Creator (87, 305) and the only Author and Creator of all things (43), creation should be understood as a synonym of emanation.

The third truth that, in Elagin’s view, was well expounded in the *Erreurs*, was the immortality of the soul. It is, however, puzzling, why Elagin included this topic as revealed in Saint-Martin’s book, since there is virtually nothing in it related to the subject. Only some brief remarks somewhat connected to the theme can be found. The book states that man was sentenced to a punishment, not to death (E 102). Since the fall, man is a mixture of two natures and thus is at the same time mortal and immortal (50). Unity is a generating Principle of man. “This Unity, possessing everything in itself, also communicates to its productions a total and independent existence. It can, as a leader and principle, extend or contract their faculties, but it cannot impart (*donner*) them death, because its works are real, and that which is cannot not be” (89). Immortality is just assumed and no discussion of the problem is provided; no proofs of the immortality of the soul are presented¹³.

The fourth truth that in Elagin’s opinion is clearly explained in the *Erreurs* is the idea of the primeval man.

According to Saint-Martin, our body is the organ of all our sufferings and is the reason of all our limitations; it is an *envelope grossière*; but it is also our guard, and without it we would be exposed to much more danger (E 43). And yet, the corporeal life of man is in almost incessant privation and suffering. However, the idea of Justice, that is, the just and loving God, indicates that this is a state of punishment and expiation and thus there was another state of man before that (31). In this primal estate, man was made to be happy and lived without work, in calmness and peace (32), and yet it was not all peaceful. The *Erreurs* describe “the estate of man in his glory by a figurative tableau” (34).

Man existed before nature, “before birth of the smallest germ” (E 34). Man is elevated above all nature because man has only a father, whereas other beings have a father and a mother. Also, in his original state, man had to “constantly *battle* to stop disorder and bring all back to the *Unity*.” Other beings had to obey man. For

¹² Cf. Franck, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

¹³ Cf. Waite, *op. cit.*, pp. 200–201.

protection in this battle, man had an impenetrable armor that he could replicate. He also had a spear made out of four metals that could burn like fire and strike two places at once. The land in which man battled was covered with a forest formed of 7 trees each having 16 roots and 490 branches. These trees constantly brought fruit which provided excellent nourishment to man (35), but they also provided protection. This was a “throne of glory,” a happy state. Being in the center of the universe (T 262), man could see all his adversaries without been seen (E 36). The principal Law of this man was to carry his sight continuously from the Orient to the Occident, from North to South, i.e., to determine latitudes and longitudes in all parts of the Universe. In this way he knew what was going on and could purge evildoers from his empire (249); also, he saw the power and glory of the first Cause that charged him with these functions since being One in essence, it only wanted for its Unity to rule, whereby all beings would be happy (250). However, it was not to be. When man left this place, he lost his rights and the place was taken by another agent. At the moment of his fall, man lost his spear (E 36), and his armor was replaced by another one which was not impenetrable. His father promised him that he could recover the original state by his efforts but only after recovering the spear which is now in possession of the agent that took his place. And that should be the main occupation of humans (37). Man cannot now read the thoughts of his superiors and subjects as during his glory days (252). Each man gets at birth a book of ten pages that contains “all the light and all Sciences of what was, of what is, and what will be”. Since his fall man cannot read this book very easily (253). The light shed by the *Erreurs* is designed to help man recover the ability to read this innate knowledge and follow its wisdom. After all, man is an image and likeness of the first thinking Being (262), whereby “man is the sign or visible expression of the Divinity itself” (T 36), and so he should strive to the full shining of this image.

How did this fall happen, this loss of the original happiness? The fall resulted from man’s freedom when man conceived a thought contrary to the supreme Law and willingly adhered to it (E 34). The first man was an adulterer by rejecting the Law prescribed for him and following an opposite law (320). This was an intellectual adultery (327), although such a statement does not explain much and so does not an assertion that “the crime of man was the abuse of the knowledge he had about the union of the principle of the Universe with the Universe. We cannot even doubt that the privation of this knowledge was the true punishment for his crime” (T 58). In any event, freedom led to the fall; the same freedom imposed an obligation to work continuously to fix his crime (74). Thus, all is not lost. A principle of action is innate and man has also in him a seed of light and truths (48), whereby at least partially the truth can be recovered even in this fallen world. If man had

courage and the will not to descend from this elevation for which he was born, evil would have been nothing to him; and, in fact, he does experience dangerous influences only in the proportion in which he distances himself from the good Principle” (15); “evil has no other principle and no other existence but the will of the free Being (17).

Why should this have happened? God created man as good. However, because this was a derived or created goodness, man was good but not equal to God and His goodness; man “was inferior to him, but he was not evil.” By coming from the good principle, man could not be equal to it in respect to goodness and power. Man could also reject the good law submitted to him by the superior principle which could not become evil since it did not receive the good law from the outside; this principle was the good law; it was goodness itself (28).

Elagin wrote some comments on Saint-Martin’s book¹⁴, and yet it is still quite puzzling how he could consider it as providing true understanding of any serious theological or philosophical matter, in particular, the four topics listed by Elagin. There is very little on the essence of God (not to mention that “God” is not even mentioned) in the *Erreurs*; there is really nothing on the creation of the world; nothing on the immortality of the soul. There is some discussion of the primeval man, but it is presented in such a bizarre imagery that it confuses the reader rather than explains anything. It appears that because of the book’s reputation, it was in good form to praise it whether the praise was heartfelt or not. After all, Elagin himself confessed that only after many years of studying was he able to understand the *Erreurs* (P 108). Saint-Martin himself opened his book with a rather bold claim that the book is “a ray of their (people’s) own torch … to illuminate them with regard to false ideas concerning the Truth” (P 108). If someone is not illuminated, his blindness can be blamed, as Elagin did (P 94), and yet there is not much that can be found in Elagin’s own writing which would indicate a serious impact of this illuminating reading.

Stanislav Ely

Elagin ascribed a very important role to Stanislav Ely (*Станислав Ели*), in his, Elagin’s, spiritual and personal life since Ely, a medical doctor, not only helped Elagin in his search for the light of truth but also healed Elagin from a deadly disease. Ely was to him “an enlightened teacher, perfect friend … [and] a very respectable brother” sent to him by the Most High Architect. Ely’s “excellent knowledge of the Hebrew language and Kabbalah and the depth [of his knowledge of] the-

¹⁴ Some manuscripts about the *Erreurs* are preserved (D 55).

osophy, physics and chemistry” opened Elagin’s eyes to the meaning of the Scripture (P 108).

Pinas Ely (Slanislav Ely) was a native of a Bohemian city of Kolin¹⁵. He studied in Frankfurt an der Oder, where he defended his dissertation *On opobalsam and ben tree oil*¹⁶. He then apparently conducted some research on mineral water in the Polish territory¹⁷. In 1776, he moved to Russia¹⁸, where two years later he passed an examination in the Medical College. In 1778, he conducted research on mineral water in Shklov (Mogilev District). As a medical doctor, he rallied against the artificial feeding of babies supporting this with his work on nonmaternal milk and containers¹⁹. He was an imperial court counselor, a member of the Medical Chancellery of the Economic College and of the Petersburg Free Economic Society²⁰. In 1786, he became a director of the Medical Chancellery²¹. Apparently, in this capacity he conducted a research and made some proposals concerning the profitability of sheep farms²².

¹⁵ Pinas Ely, Collino-Bohemus, as it states on the title page of his *Dissertatio*.

¹⁶ Pinas Ely, *Dissertatio inauguralis physico-medica de opobalsamo et oleo balanino*, Francofurti ad Viadrum: typis I. Ch. Winteri [1770]; also as Pinas Ely, *De opobalsamo*, [in:] Johann-Friedrich Cartheusser, *Dissertationes physico-chymico-medicae*, Francofurti ad Viadrum: C.G. Straus 1774, pp. 51–79; sections 10–15 are not included.

¹⁷ A manuscript has been preserved, Pinas Ely, *Beschreibung eines bey Posen entdeckten mineralisch-salinisch-martialischen Gesundbrunnen*, Jo[hann] von Boecler, *Catalogus bibliothecae quoad maximam partem physico-medicae*, Hamburg: Typographia Appelii 1806, p. 619.

¹⁸ Я[ков] Л. Барков, *Переписка московских масонов XVIII-го века 1780–1792 гг.*, Петроград: Издание Императорской Академии наук 1915, p. 310.

¹⁹ Станислав Эли, *Физико-медицинские примечания о вреде, происходящем от употребления рожков для кормления младенцев, по проистекающих от того частии весьма жестоких, частии же и смертоносных детских болезней*, Санкт-Петербург: Вильковский и Галченков 1785; a brief summary is in Harwich L.Ch. Bacmeister, *Russische Bibliothek zur Kenntniß des gegenwärtigen Zustandes der Literatur in Rußland*, St. Petersburg: J. F. Hartknoch 1787, vol. 11, pp. 221–224; see also Александр Н. Антонов, *Охрана материнства и младенчества*, Ленинград: Научно-практический институт охраны материнства и младенчества Ленинградского облздрава 1929, vol. 1, pt. 1, pp. 172–174; David L. Ransel, *Village Mothers: Three Generations of Change in Russia and Tataria*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2000, p. 22.

²⁰ All these organizational affiliations are listed of the title page of his *Физико-медицинские примечания*.

²¹ Я[ков А.] Чистович, *История первых медицинских школ в России*, Санкт-Петербург: Типография Я. Трея 1883, p. cccli; *Русский биографический словарь*, Санкт-Петербург: Типография Главного Управления Уделов 1912, vol. 24, p. 215.

²² Станислав Эли, *Изложение верной и неуцербляемой прибыли, от овчарных заводов проходящей, в подробном ежегодном расчете представленной*, Санкт-Петербург: При Императорской Академии наук 1796.

Ely was also a mason, an author of *Fraternal admonitions to some Freemason brothers* published in German under the penname of Brother Seddag and quickly translated into Russian by Elagin²³.

In his slim book Ely stated that God, supremely wise Artist of this creation (S 10/15), is not a cause of evil. Evil is a result of darkness stemming from man's distancing himself from the light (12/18). Man has reason, whereby he is able to choose good over evil and he would always choose good if he sought the advice of "the teacher who lives in him," who is "the powerful spirit of God that illuminates man whose power incomparably surpasses [man's] reason and is able to penetrate where reason must stop" (13/20-21). In this sense, Ely could claim that self-knowledge would also be knowledge about the divine. He did claim that only someone who knows oneself can be a teacher and know the true man, since he is a true man oneself and the true man knows the Father and the Son. "A teacher of truth is light and life" (21-22/34-35). However, very few people truly know themselves (22/36). Our spiritual eye is weak, but not by nature (39/65). God put an ability to see in every man (39/66, 41/69). However, this ability may not be noticed if it is not searched for and an effort is not made to apply it (40/67). To awaken this ability, man "has to love the truth, the reality, and constancy – love sincerely, magnetically" (42/70). Love is the way, but there has to be love to find it so as there has to be magnetic force in iron for it to be drawn in magnet (42/71). Should man get there, he will turn his back on innumerable weaknesses and passions which weaken the soul in which resides this ability to see (43/72). Man will see then that God is the source of all good, a cause of that there is no physical evil, that this God is not a cause of our moral evil, but that its cause is in the darkness based on our willingness to distance ourselves from the light, so that we owe it to our will (43/73), but also to our environment: parents, friends, entertainment, and particularly fashionable books that lead us astray (44/74). Keep passions away from yourself, as much as possible, such as pride, envy – Ely urges his readers (45/75); build yourself another temple (1 Cor. 3:16, 45/76).

The house founded on the solid cornerstone is the source of knowledge (S 23/37), whereby Ely referred as much to masonry as he did to Christianity and to Christ as the cornerstone. People in this house seek self-improvement, act for the sake of virtue, and strive for true knowledge, the knowledge that can benefit society (23/38). All people have an ability to gain knowledge (76/123), but few are chosen, which depends on the level of lethargy of this ability (76/124-125). "No one can require that everything be suddenly revealed to him from the outside, but by inner impulses, true zeal and love for knowledge a mason must pull himself from one

²³ Elagin confirms Ely's authorship of this work (P 108 note 7). On Elagin's translation, see Вернадский, *op. cit.*, pp. 491–492.

level of knowledge of his art to another and strive more and more to be a mason” (78-79/128-129). Truth can be seen only through virtue, love of God and man, self-knowledge, genuine love and passion for truth, one’s own thinking, and good deeds (64/107). It is a sign of laziness to ask someone to reveal the truth without one’s own effort to find it (65/108). “A progress in true knowledge of the inner mystery can be reached only through virtuous deeds, will, desire and effort in one’s own thinking and in no other way” (68/113). If true knowledge is due to purity of life then morally wholesome life can be equated with the possession of knowledge. In this sense, masons can claim that they are not interested in self-enrichment and elevating their own status in society (17/27) and that the masonic order always does wise, laudable and virtuous things when each mason fulfills his duties based on true fear of God and on love of man and thus on actions benefitting all people (60/101), useful for the fatherland and for the state that protects us, duties based on humility, which promote knowledge of citizens of the world (61/102). The greatest task for a mason is to fulfill God’s commands, serve neighbor out of love, and thus act for the common good (79/129).

True knowledge has to be the knowledge of essence (S 25/42). Scientists admit that they have to limit themselves in their investigations to measurable properties. But when it comes to the inner essence and to invisible workings of things their methods are useless. Which physicists investigated true elements? Which chemists investigated *spiritus salis rerum*, the foundation of knowledge since dissolution of coagulation cannot take place without it? Which academic metaphysicians can tell us about spiritual essence of spirits (18-19/29-31)? Physics should know the elements and their essence, life, and spirit. All knowledge is based on two pillars: theology and physics (26/43). For instance, we should realize that water is primal mother of all things and earth is our mother (28/46). How could the earth engender so many things (28/47)? We got used to natural things, but how is it that a seed brings forth a plant (35/61)? How is it that we fortify ourselves when we eat (36/62)? Also, who is blind to the greatness and light of the sun is not a true mason (30/50). Those who appreciate it, appreciate and honor their Father (31/52). Few people see a wonderful design of the entire world, although the highest goodness of the Almighty enables every man to see it because He made man in His image (28/47):

Who properly searches, he truly finds. But there are many now, who must learn how to search for searching, that is, how they should search; although it is not necessary to search far, only a few know its track, since most [people] did not find themselves; but who finds himself, he finds the way to the truth and who finds the truth, he does not need to search here or there, but he is able to find everything since on his way there is no here or there (53/89-90).

Such physico-theological investigations should lead to the conviction that

we have to elevate ourselves from below upwards and turn inside from the outside if we want to hope to acquire high and deep knowledge. Read, my brother, read the holy Creation, read its succession of stages, read it with the clear inner eye of sages who have their eye in the head (as wise Solomon had said, S 82/134). If you wish to read the history of creation then read the first verse: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth [as Ely quoted in Hebrew], and read it for several years, and only after that read still further (83/135).

The study of Scriptures leads to the study of nature and vice versa. One must not be separated from the other since they are two books supporting one another and allowing to reach the true essence of things. Nature should be the book to read (106/168); however, it should be interpreted in the light of the Scriptures since in it “you can truly find all that can make us wise, virtuous, happy, and blessed.” The Scripture should be understood “according to its inner, true meaning, not in the Voltairean fashion. May he laugh, brother! May he laugh: you laugh back and have pity on the ridiculous ridiculer” (106-107/169-170). On the other hand, although

only the Word of God and admiring knowledge of its impact can make one virtuous and blessed” (84/136), the knowledge of the Scriptures is inadequate if “it is not known according to its real, inner, essential meaning and light (26/43).

The message Ely tried to convey is that purely rational investigation of nature and of books, including the Scriptures, is insufficient to acquire knowledge of truth, that is, of the essence of things. Pure life and moral conduct is an indispensable prerequisite, and Ely urged his masonic readers to live just such a life. However, that is usually not sufficient either. Pure life is a foundation but cannot automatically result in the gift of discernment. An illumination must take place, which can stem directly from God – as in the case of prophets – or from a sage who becomes a teacher. Who seeks someone who can reveal the truth must make himself worthy of such a man. This is done 1. by suppressing pride because it makes us blind (93/152); 2. by not flattering the unrighteous, but admonishing them (97/156); 3. by doing good to the poor (97/157); 4. by helping widows and orphans (98/157); 5. by trying to be useful to all people and particularly to countrymen; and finally 6. by being obedient to authorities and keeping the laws of the land (98/158). As Ely said of himself, he did not know much, but what he did know, he knew with certainty (89/145); with the knowledge he possessed he could take upon himself the role of a teacher, and, apparently, Elagin’s life met the criteria specified for a pupil; thus, Elagin’s introduction into masonic mysteries began with a new force.

If Ely was so concerned about people's knowledge of the truth, why not just publish what he knew to enlighten all of mankind with one book? If some truths are published, they cannot be understood without preparation and without God's illumination, he claimed (20/32). With natural eyes people can see only symbols (63/106) and, of course, "words and signs are not things themselves" (70/116); therefore, people should not be satisfied with allegoric words, but they should learn their inner meaning (72/118). And because the worst barrier to the light of the Sun of all suns is moral evil (49/83), moral life must be a necessary preparation for acquiring true knowledge. Besides, all goods can be misused (91/148) and not everyone is worthy that everything is given him (91/150), and thus secrets of the universe ought not to be freely given away to everyone. And so, quite true to this principle, Ely revealed in his book very little of specifically masonic knowledge, and what he did reveal is rather incomprehensible to the uninitiated²⁴. In that sense, the book is largely a pep talk encouraging masons to live good and pure lives with the prospect of fathoming mysteries of the universe after the appropriate time comes²⁵. In that respect, Ely's book offers very little for understanding Elagin's spiritual biography concerning Ely's precise role as his teacher. Surely, the personal relationship between them must have been much richer and more profound than it can be garnered from Elagin's brief reference to Ely and from the letter of Ely's own book.

The *Conversations*

As a grand master, Elagin was obligated to explain the masonic doctrine to members of his lodges. Since he himself was not altogether clear about some masonic tenets, he planned to prepare a textbook of sorts in which masonic teachings would be systematized. The plan of the *Doctrine of the ancient philosophy and theosophy* (*Учение древнего любомуздрия и богомуздрия*) was fairly ambitious:

²⁴ Here is one numerological example: number 4 "testifies about the most perfect number 10 [= 1 + 2 + 3 + 4], whose essence it is: this 10 constitutes 55, the number of the greatest perfection from 1 to 10 [55 = 1 + 2 + ... + 9 + 10]. Now, from this 55, 5 shows the outside and 50 [shows] the essence of the right-angled triangle. Then, there is in 4 the equality of 28 [= 4·7], which shows the power of the fourfold 7 from 45 as the threefold 3 times 5 [3·(3·5) = 45] ... From this/these 73 come 67, whose outpouring [is] 13, so that everything is One; finally, from this, 14 can be known, from which flow most intimately united, strong 4 and 9, and thus the result 13 [= 4+9] as the source of the salty sea," etc. (S 58-59/98-99).

²⁵ Cf. the statement made in 1792 by a Rosicrucian Ivan P. Turgenev: the Rosicrucian teaching "consists in acquiring a great mystery or magisterium, which only the one will get who through an improvement of his spiritual moral character will distinguish himself with becoming as perfect as it is humanly possible", Вопросные пункты бригадиру И.П. Тургеневу, [in:] М[ихаил] Н. Лонгинов, *Новиков и московские мартинисты*, Москва: Типография Грачева 1867, p. 0144.

the book should be divided into five parts, part i into 8 conversations (беседы), the remaining four parts into 10 conversations each (D 96–97).

The plans, however, were curtailed and modified as the time went by and only very little of it was actualized. There are preserved four notebooks of *Conversations* marked (D 97) as parts I, II, III, and IV and some additional notebooks. Part I, history of masonry, includes three conversations in the first volume and the entire part I, except the beginning, in notebooks. Elagin began the history of masonry from Adam: “our teaching was revealed already in the Eden” and presented the history through Noah to the Templars and then to the 18th century England and Scotland. Part II is about the teachings of masonry; in eight conversations he explained hieroglyphs of the first two degrees of masonry (98). Part III, in additional notebooks, includes extracts from other masonic authors about the first four degrees and some mystical interpretations of numbers. Part IV includes only 12 pages of mystical interpretations of Hebrew words. There is also part V that has 16 pages of a translation. Thus, there is little of what is original here and most of it is translation (99). By his own admission, in preparing his *Conversations*, Elagin used material from masonic books and explanations from various mystical books, secular and spiritual, given in allegories, especially in the Old and New Testament (P 97).²⁶ *Conversation* II of the first part is *The story about myself* (P 93–110). *Conversation* I of part I is largely a polemic with the Rosicrucians (D 101), and here is what he wrote in this conversation.

Elagin wrote here in an unembellished language that “through one Schwarz our brotherhood was infected by the Karlsbad, superstitious, and greedy system” (D 102; Elagin called Rosicrucians the Karlsbad system, D 100)²⁷. Reading Old and New Testaments should never stop, but it should be accompanied by having a key to their understanding (103). Elagin planned to divide his *Conversations* into three parts: history of masonry; interpretation of hieroglyphs and symbols; presentation of teachings (107). Elagin was confident that “our [masonic] teaching is simple, divine, sacred ... It is an indelible writing on the tablet or board of our heart by the masterly right hand of the Grand Architect of the Universe” (109). Unrestrained desire of our forefather Adam released evil from its enclosure and endowed it with the will to rage in the corporeal realm and put in us enmity toward others, and we became almost defenseless against demonic temptations. However, we still have some ability to learn and to improve ourselves:

²⁶ It is thus fair to say that Elagin “had a penchant for mysticism,” Виктор С. Брачев, *Масоны в России. За кулисами видимой власти (1731–2001)*, Санкт Петербург: Издательство Стромма 2002, p. 103, and that he “was impressed by mystical investigations of ‘the higher degrees’” of masonry, Леллий П. Замойский, *Масонство и глобализм. Невидимая империя*, Москва: Олма-Пресс 2001, p. 165.

²⁷ Cf. Сергей В. Аржанухин, *Философские взгляды русского масонства по материалам журнала “Магазин свободнокаменический”*, Екатеринбург: УрГУ 1995, pp. 31, 113.

against poisoning of almost the entire human reason and eloquence it was left for us the Old and New Testament. We will open these secret springs of wisdom! We will come with Faith and Hope to the Comforter to the happiness of the most holy Spirit poured by the Eternal Father through the eternal Son or the Word into all thinking beings and we will call upon his help (109–110).

Although without shield and armor for protection from arrows of the enemy, we still have a protective visor. We do not have a castle inaccessible to evil, but we still have a spirit of wisdom breathed into us at the moment of creation. We do not have a spear from four metals and striking in two directions with a flame, but we still have protective teaching transmitted from our ancestors. We do not have seven sacred trees protecting us from death, but we still have the tree of life in the center of our temples (110). Our teaching comes from God since it is the Word of God (112). Elagin ended part I with this prayer:

O Lord! o inexpressible Lord! our Father who art in heaven! Listen to the prayer of your slaves, the prayer of the brotherhood that loves you. Give us your holy blessing. May both [our] teaching and our society united by the bond of love remain inviolably under protection of your blessing! Drive away from us any violent persecution caused by hostile slander! Send us the light which, according to your word, appears from the bottomlessness covered by darkness! May it illuminate our thought and soul. May it be in the chapters to follow our guide and helper in explaining the deeds, actions, allegories and outlines of the teaching of your holy Wisdom hidden in hieroglyphs and rites. Amen (115).

There is here some imagery taken over from Saint-Martin about the position of man before the fall with all implements to serve man well, but there is also a strong emphasis of the foundational value of the Scriptures. There is no scriptural reference in the *Errors*, although there are fairly noticeable scriptural references in the *Tableau*. There is no mention of the Holy Spirit nor Christ in the *Errors*, either, although in the *Tableau* there is some reinterpretation of the Spirit of God (T 174) and although Jesus is never referred to by His name or as Christ, a handful of references are made to the Repairer. Clearly, Elagin steered away from the ascriptive spirit of Saint-Martin.

An attempt to narrate about Russia

On the urging of his friends to provide useful reading for free time, Elagin planned to write a history of Russia since useful occupation in free time and responding to requests of friends are some of the main social duties (O XXXIV).

Only one volume with three parts was published out of 25 parts of *An attempt to narrate about Russia* that have been preserved²⁸. The book includes many theological and philosophical views of Elagin. What bothered him in the preserved chronicles and the histories of his time, was a dispassionate tone and presenting every participant of an event the same way (O VII). Elagin stated that the historian should not be a detached observer of historical events but should evaluate them, grade them according to their importance, praise and condemn, and clearly state with whom he is siding (IX). Moreover, a historian should know philosophy, logic, and grammar (XII), but not just any philosophy like free-thinking philosophy in France, but like that of Leibniz, Grotius, and Pufendorf (XIII). Also, the historian should have knowledge of natural and civic laws and knowledge of common good, which is based on “immutable natural laws which for the sake of happiness of man are inscribed in human hearts,” such as “love God more than anything else, honor Him as the Father who created us, and thus do not forget that we are, equally and not exclusively, His children; thus, we are obligated to love neighbor like a brother or better yet, like ourselves.” In these two commandments God’s politics is expressed showing a way for social unity (XIV). In Elagin’s view, the importance of faith in the public square cannot be overstated. “People are always unreasonable and thus they are not brought to an understanding concerning desired structure by philosophy nor its wounds are healed by profound teaching, but their fury is constrained by sacredness of faith and hardness of civic laws” (XVI). This principle, actually, also refers to the historian who should not succumb to superstition nor to unbelief (XVII); thus, an unbeliever cannot be a historian. In writing this book, Elagin relied not on his own wisdom, but on the philosophy of Pythagoras (XXXV), Plato, Epictetus, Leibniz, and on the moral teaching of the Gospel and immaculate theology (XXXVI). This theology is reflected in the dedication of the book. Usually such dedications are directed to some famous or powerful people. Elagin was unique in that respect when he wrote in his dedication: “Obedient to your prompting, divine Sophia, eternal attribute of the Omnipotent Creator of heaven and earth, I undertook a labor of writing a history about our Fatherland; ... I dedicate this work to You” (III). The topic of the divine Sophia would later become important for Russian philosophers, to mention only Solovyov and Bulgakov, but it was not investigated by Elagin’s contemporary countrymen. However, it was important for the Kabbalists, it was a prominent concept for Boehme, Saint-Martin made references to her,²⁹ and Georg von Welling, whom Elagin mentioned (P 108), included in his

²⁸ В.П. Козлов, “Слово о полку Игореве” в “Опыте повествования о России” И.П. Елагина, *Вопросы истории*, 1984, no. 8, p. 25.

²⁹ Waite, *op. cit.*, pp. 256–257; Saint-Martin also mentioned Sophia when speaking about Boehme, p. 96.

voluminous *Opus* a chapter devoted to Sophia and a hymn to her³⁰. Robert Fludd, whom Elagin also mentioned, also spoke about "the divine and sacred Sophia" and "the true Sophia, which is Christ Jesus."³¹ Elagin's invocation of the Sophia is not unlike the call upon the Muses invoked at the dawn of the European literature by Homer (*Il.* 2.484–492, 11.218, 17.441–442) and Hesiod (*Th.* 36–114).

He opened his history with an account of the Biblical flood which he took as a fact since it is described in three different sources (Sanchuniathon, Hermes Trismegistus, and Moses, O 3). He moved quickly to the Biblical account of the tower of Babel and his account shows how freely he interpreted the Biblical text.

Moses spoke about all people having one language before the Babel, which means in Elagin's opinion that they had the same spiritual and civic law – one political system – and the same language (O 6). God mixed tribes which are commonly called tongues and spread them so that they populate the earth. Common language remained. Creation of 72 languages³² can be understood only allegorically: it would be hard to understand how merciful God could punish humans not only by spreading them over the earth but also with the inability to understand one another, which leads to enmity (38). Although it is clearly stated that God intended to "confound their tongue so that they may not understand each the voice of his neighbor" (Genesis 11:7), Elagin reinterpreted it in direct contradiction to this reading. Multiplicity of languages, however, is an undeniable fact, but according to Elagin, languages became different by different additions depending of the environment (39).

Before Babel, people believed in one God, the Creator of heaven and earth and burning fragrances was all their service to God (O 7). After Babel, images of invisible God appeared, various rituals including burned offerings, which indicated a resurgence of superstition from before the flood (9). Nimrod was the first autocrat (9) and to bolster autocracy, polytheism was introduced to occupy people's mind with festivals for various gods and raise their hope for eternal reward (10; Ou 248). However, all teachers in Chaldea, Egypt, Persia, Israel, all Greek and Roman philosophers, all idolaters in India and China, all Christian writers, and even Arab

³⁰ Georg von Welling, *Opus mago-cabbalisticum et theosophicum in which the origin, nature, characteristics and use of salt, sulfur and mercury are described in three parts*, York Beach: Weiser Books 2006 [1719], pp. 471–481, the hymn: pp. 483–488. The chapter was authored by Christoph Schütz, Petra Jungmayr, *Georg von Welling (1655–1727), Studien zu Leben und Werk*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner 1990, p. 38.

³¹ Robert Fludd, *Mosaicall philosophy: grounded upon the essentiall truth or eternal sapience*, London: Humphrey Moseley 1659, pp. 28, 30, 32; see book 2 devoted to the problem of Sophia/Sapientia/Wisdom. Also, cf. his work *Sophiae cum Moria certamen* 1629; Serge Hutin, *Robert Fludd (1574–1637): alchimiste et philosophie rosicrucien*, Les Éditions de l'Omnium Litteraire 1971, pp. 53, 83, 103, 110; cf. Fludd's hymn to Sapientia, p. 130 note 10. See also Fludd's *Utriusque cosmi historia* (1617) that opens with a prayer to God whom Fludd called *Natura naturans*.

³² Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 16.3, 9–11; Jacob Boehme, *Mysterium magnum* 35.15–18, 71–72, 75.

exegetes of erroneous teachings of Mahomet recognize the existence of one eternal Creator (O 12).

In Elagin's view true philosophers – that included Thales, Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, Solon, Socrates, Plato – Chaldean magi and Jewish rabbis having perfect knowledge about the existence of one God studied books of Moses and discovered other attributes of God and said that these attributes resulted in polytheism (O 17). That is, all idols are but representations of attributes and actions of one being and although they bear different names, they are all the same in essence (Ou 238). Elagin was not quite concerned here about historical accuracy – the knowledge about the Jews and their religion in Greece dates since Theophrastus, and thus fairly late, so none of the Greek philosophers should be included here. In any event, Elagin thought that with various names, Moses wanted to instill in people the fear of God, but priests supposedly added manufactured representations to it. However, philosophers could not reconcile images of the gods with concepts applied to the names of God. They studied Egyptian, Phoenician, and Jewish teachings about the creation of the world and saw similarity between the actions of God described by Hermes and Moses (O 18). Their contemplation moved to “the abyss of God, majesty and omnipotence of the Creator and presented delighted reason to the fiery Ein-Sof, that is, to the palace of the infinite Being of beings that has no beginning.” These philosophers “delineated unbounded circle/environment in the immeasurable light of beginninglessness and infinity and defined indivisible eternity by a point. What a better sensory representation can there be for invisible perfection than the unfading light in a spherical form? Since contemplation of heavenly luminaries and of the lights of the entire sphere of the universe does not present to our understanding a better and more perfect delineation of eternity neither can understanding offer a circle without a center. However, in this unreachable majesty of the vision of God, the holy fear binds powers for further investigation” and reason turns to what is perceptible (19).

Elagin was eager to prove that true religious faith is now in Russia. However, this is a restoration of religious faith that characterized Russians originally, the faith that was temporarily supplanted by idolatry and was not entirely forgotten. To make his case, Elagin used a fairly imaginative reasoning which is not invincible from the historical standpoint.

In his view, Russians lived at first on the river Araks, next to Persians, and then they moved to Volga (O 46). Scythians, who help Trojans, fled after the fall of Troy to the steppes between Caucasus and Volga (53). They were the Alans who with Russians united as Slavs: Slavne = slava + Alans (55). Herodotus said that the religion of Scythians was (67) similar to the Egyptians and Chaldeans; thus, they recognized the Most High Creator and idolatry was to them a representation in a ridiculous form of actions and essence of God. They rejected idolatry and

after coming to the banks of Il'men, built a temple in Holmgardr (Холмоград, Novgorod, 68). Priests, however, hid the exposition of representations and only superstitious idolatry spread over Russia (69). This Holmgardr was famous because the priests, probably knowing some chemistry, could dazzle people (120). They surely practiced ambiguous prediction of the future from various signs (121). In Elagin's view, climate and environment influences mores, but old ones often are preserved too. Thus, he assumed that after separating from the Scythians, customs and morals changed little among Russians (71), whereby the historian can draw from Herodotus' reports on the Scythians (72). Herodotus considered them virtuous (75), characterized by simplicity, bravery, and disdain for gold and for pleasurable life (80). On the other hand, Variags were as aggressive then as the Swedes are even now, as Peter I's wars indicated (88). In this way, Elagin was directly opposed to the theory of the northern provenance of the Russians, although he curiously suggested that probably the Slavs were all over Sweden and returned to the area of Novgorod (135).

True religion was to come to Russia with full force. Elagin supposed that there were some Christians in Kievian territory and in the mid-tenth century Olga, wife of Igor, prince of the Russian city of Kiev, saw a difference between their life and the life of the pagans (O 265). "Inspired by the Holy Spirit", Olga spoke to Christian women and heard from them some teachings of Christ and led by her "love of the true God" spoke to many wise men under whose teachings she wanted to be baptized but was afraid of the reaction of people. She was advised to go to Byzantium under some political pretext (266), which she did, and in 955 she was baptized by the patriarch Theofilakt and assumed the name of Helena (271). Consequently, "like dawn before rise of the sun, she shed the light on the coming of Evangelical blessing ... Like Apostle Peter, she brought to Russia keys of the kingdom of heaven and opened the gate to the habitation of the just" (291).

Elagin added a somewhat strange twist to the familiar story Nestor told in his *Chronicle* about sending envoys to Rome, Jerusalem, and Constantinople and choosing by prince Vladimir Orthodoxy as the religion of the land and accepting baptism in 988. Apparently, Elagin viewed it through the lens of his experience as the director of the court theater, since in his view, it was all an elaborate play prepared by a Greek wife of Vladimir, Svetopolk's mother, who wanted either to make it a penance for her sins or to gain the upper hand over other wives (O 392). She was in a monastery and plays were made there. Nestor must have taken it for a real thing or did not find a better reason for Vladimir's conversion (393), or Nestor could have found an account of this event in a notebook with missing pages (391). Elagin liked the histrionic idea so much that he repeated it by saying that Vladimir asked Byzantine emperors Basil and Constantine to send him their sister Anna to become his wife; in exchange, he promised baptism. They did and on her

prompting he was baptized in Kiev (404) and she could have also presented plays like Svetopolk's mother (406)³³. Be it as it may, an important thing for Elagin was that from the moment of the 988 baptism, Russia has been steadfast in its Orthodox faith and “its Christ-loving Monarchs, providing a model of virtue, fortifying the foundations of faith on which immutably stands their own rule” (425) so much so that the rule of Catherine II would be the golden age about which sages dreamed which is characterized by the rule of virtue and love of man, although Elagin may not live to see it because of his advanced age (XIX). In Elagin's mind, that prospect was not impossible since, as stated elsewhere, Russia was thriving through Catherine's laws and “divine justice and truth” that surrounded her throne “in observance and preservation of the right piety and faith introduced in our fatherland by our ancestors”³⁴.

Masonic Orthodoxy

Elagin certainly belonged to the category of those who sincerely searched for spiritual truth and for firm guidance in life, for the divine foundation. He apparently did not find it in the Orthodox church, at least not in the manifestation of Orthodox doctrine in the lives of believers and clergy. He did not reject this doctrine; on the contrary, he wanted to follow it, but the ruling spirit in the church was not quite conducive to that end. Elagin thus turned to masonry and found that there are so many shades of the masonic doctrine and practice that it is not very easy to choose the right one. However, he was very much impressed by the level of spirituality of at least some of masons and wanted to learn about the foundation of this spirituality. This search brought him, to some extent, back to the Orthodoxy; however, the imprint of masonry remained much too strong on him.

In Elagin's view, the history of true religion began with Adam and was maintained and transmitted through Egyptian priests, Pythagoras, Plato, Jesus, and many others. In this, Elagin viewed this religious history as the history of masonry in which Christianity was just one link. These priests, Pythagoras, Plato, and Jesus,

³³ This and other liberties with historical sources led to a harsh, but not entirely undeserved statement that in *An attempt to narrate about Russia* Elagin lost any sense of criticism (Александр [О.] Круглый, И.П. Елагин (биографический очерк), *Ежегодник императорских театров, Сезон 1893–1894*, Санкт-Петербург: Типография Императорских Санкт-Петербургских театров 1895, vol. 2, p. 116) and that this work was his stillborn child, a product of senile mind, a swan song (Дризен, *op. cit.*, p. 137).

³⁴ Проект Д.С. и члена дворцовой канцелярии Ивана Елагина об определении в неотъемлемое владение дворцовым крестьянам земли и о раздаче казенных деревень, за известную плату, на временное и определенное владение вольным содержателям, *Сборник князя Оболенского*, no. 12, Москва: Университетская типография 1859, pp. 8–9.

were, in effect, great masters of masonic lodges³⁵. It was just a happy historical accident that Christianity continued masonic doctrine. Apparently, this continuation was not perfect if there was a need in Europe and in Russia in particular to establish masonic lodges in spite of the strong presence of Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches. Apparently, for people like Elagin, these churches strove away from the true path and a spiritual renewal was to be accomplished elsewhere – in masonry. Admittedly, cold spiritual spirit in the Russian church, a heavy reliance on rites rather than on inner spiritual life, justified such thinking. However, the practice of believers did not automatically invalidate the doctrine of the church, and this was apparently a conclusion of such masons as Novikov and Lopukhin, for whom masonry was a way leading to wholehearted embrace of Orthodox spirituality, whereas Elagin did not make this step and remained to the end steeped in masonic spirituality.

It is enough to read Novikov's letters and Lopukhin's writings to see that their return to Orthodoxy was decisive. There are, however, only faint reflections of Orthodox doctrine in Elagin's writings. He mentioned in passing that “taking the body and the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ” is the greatest sacrament (O 419) and that he believed in God the Father of the only begotten Son and Word “without whom there is nothing that is,” as stated by apostle John (Ou 236). However, these are very rare statements which could be considered as expressions of his Orthodox faith. He felt more comfortable when referring to God in a more generic, or rather, masonic fashion. In one prayer – inserted in a cut-and-dry context of a discussion of the price of bread – he exclaimed:

The Omnipotent Being by giving us the will for work and for obtaining food through our labor according to unalterable laws of his Wisdom will not take away from us this will he once has given us, and being perfectly merciful, he does not withdraw his mercy from the union of all things he created; consequently, he does not send general hunger to the entire universe. There is only partial fruitlessness and perhaps necessary for us according to his inscrutable judgment³⁶.

This is similar in spirit to a prayer of a mason newly admitted to a lodge:

³⁵ In one manuscript (D 55), Elagin “looks upon the historical Jesus from Nazareth as a mason,” Konstantin Burmistrov, Maria Endel, The place of Kabbalah in the doctrine of Russian freemasons, „Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism” 4 (2004), p. 52. A twenty-century mason spoke about Moses as a master mason and about Christ’s supreme grand mastership, W.L. Wilmshurst, *The meaning of masonry*, New York: Barnes & Noble Books 1999 [1922], p. 179.

³⁶ Проект, pp. 20–21.

Grand omnipotent architect, Supremely Good God who gave us today power for our works, accept the gratitude of our hearts truly touched by Yours and do so that we all go along the path, always thinking about it, that pleases you³⁷.

Ely's advice to make the Bible the source of wisdom, virtue, happiness, and blessedness may not have positioned Elagin entirely on the side of Orthodoxy. Ely recommended reading the Scriptures according to their inner, true meaning, but what it exactly means is up to an interpreter. And Elagin did not have any problem in interpreting Biblical accounts as he saw fit. As already mentioned, the account about multiplying languages Elagin viewed as not referring to languages at all. He could have defended his view by stating that direct contradiction to the letter of the Scriptures is exactly the correct way of seeing the inner, true meaning of an account. However, he probably would not contradict every single account found in the Bible, which poses the problem of specifying the way of correct interpretation of various accounts, and in that respect masonic influences on Elagin's view of the Bible are palpable. That allowed him to speak about the original abyss and Ein-Sof as presumably presented by Moses, which owes more to the Kabbalah than to Orthodoxy. After all, as he stated, "the main essence of Kabbalah is to leave the external and literal sense of Holy Scripture and word of God, and to penetrate the interior thoughts of the Holy Ghost"; that is, the literal meaning of the Scriptures should be abandoned and inspiration for their proper reading should be sought elsewhere³⁸.

Admittedly, allegorical reading of the Scriptures is recommended not only by masons. "The entire Bible has man alone for its object, and thus man is truly the best translation of the Bible that can ever exist."³⁹ So it is with the New Testament. In fact, Saint-Martin wrote a large volume, *The new man*, in which the life of Christ is interpreted as an allegory of a life of a new nature in man that leads to redemption. In that respect, Elagin could have followed domestic examples, to mention Tikhon Zadonskii's writings replete with analogies and metaphors and Dimitrii Rostovskii's spiritual interpretations of natural phenomena and historical events. However, stretched as may have been Zadonskii's and Rostovskii's interpretations, they did not leave the realm of Orthodoxy, whereas Elagin clearly relied on masonry as the source of his rendition of the Scripture.

³⁷ Вернадский, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

³⁸ An unpublished manuscript quoted in Burmistrov, Endel, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

³⁹ [Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin], *Le nouvel homme*, Paris: Chez les Directeurs de l'Imprimerie du Cercle Social, l'an 4^e de la liberté [1792], p. 98.