Summary

In the introduction of the book there is outlined preliminary methodological framework. Most fertile method of analysis of Vasily Rozanov’s works seems to be a hermeneutical approach supplemented by some elements of deconstruction. Review of the literature also points out that there is little attempt at a holistic approach to Rozanov’s phenomenon. The existing interpretations are normally based on one of the periods of his work. So far, the commentators often accused Rozanov of many contradictions. This dissertation is an attempt to show that Rozanov’s works have a coherent character, because all of his works revolve around a central theme that best expresses the metaphor of the “Tree of Life”. The whole Roznov’s work was an attempt to describe it.

The work starts with an analysis of the first book of Rozanov “On Understanding” (1886). Rozanov starts it with criticism of positivist science and philosophy, and proposes a “hermeneutic platform” that would overcome their shortcomings. He introduces the concept of understanding, which conceives as a manifestation of the primordial activity of mind. In the first step, the mind meets the mere existence. Considerations about it resemble the Heidegger’s thought because Rozanov distinguishes between the existence and the being. However, he soon starts to wander, losing sight of the ontological difference between existence and being. Another mind’s ideas create the set of transcendental patterns that determine the experience. However Rozanov breaks transcendentalism, stating arbitrarily that these schemes correspond to external reality. Further, the thinker introduces a key metaphor for his own work such as “seeds”, and the idea of potentiality related to it. The metaphor of seeds and the trees growing out from it turns out to be the key to the whole work of Rozanov. This is because it captures the essence of life. Despite its novelty, the book remained unnoticed. However, analyzing Rozanov’s thought, it must not be omitted, because it contains the seeds of its future development.

The main drawback of the Rozanov’s first book was its detachment from reality. To overcome it, and to link the abstract idea of understanding with the real world was the main goal of the next Rozanov’s text: “Place of Christianity in History” (1890). It was discussed in the second chapter. Understanding coming out of the thinking of existence has become a
reflection on the meaning of history. The history was created by two tribes: the Semites and the Aryans, representing opposing traits: subjectivity and objectivity. Overcoming these contradictions and its reconciliation was the Christianity. Thus, it proved to be the ideal of history.

In the next chapter we discuss “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor by F.M. Dostoevsky” – another Rozanov’s book. Rozanov transfers there the hermeneutic platform from the historical level to the religious level to ask a question about the meaning of life. Rozanov recalls there “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor” from “The Karamazov Brothers” by Dostoyevsky. For him it is a testimony to the collapse of faith, which affected whole the Europe. It is also a testimony to Dostoyevsky’s crisis of faith. Rozanov is committed to overcoming it. He asserts that Dostoyevsky was able to submit only the dark side of the soul, and he could not describe its rebirth and return to God. At the same time Rozanov was finding in his work some irrational moments that allowed him to free himself from the constraints of reason and a purely intellectual perspective of “On Understanding” to refer towards “new horizons”. The thinker wanted to utilize these elements in a “positive way” to reborn on the basis of them the “Christian civilization”. However, “other worlds”, toward which Rozanov wants to go, seem to be different from the image of the world assumed by Christianity. At the end of the chapter I recall the fragments Rozanov’s work “Old Believers Psychology” (1896), dedicated to the Russian sects. Rozanov describes the experience of Khlysts sect who had sought contact with God in rapture and ecstasy.

Then I take on the conversation about the creative meeting of Rozanov with conservative ideas of K. Leontiev. Reaching for the work of Leontiev, Rozanov undertook another attempt to find a “method”, which will allow to understand the logic of history, and thus will let to put the Christian ideal into practice. Rozanov takes over an aesthetic criterion from Leontiev, which is the beauty, having to be the most universal measure of life and history. The beauty was in fact a manifestation of the power of life. Rozanov drew from Leontiev that criterion, but offered his own method of treatment of the civilization crisis. The attitude towards creation has become the bone of contention. Leontiev wanted to keep the old forms of life but Rozanov believed in the sense of creating new forms. The essence of life for Rozanov was growth, which can not be reduced to the repetition of old forms. Rozanov returned to Leontiev’s idea again in 1917, writing that “the aesthetic criterion” is not a measure of beauty only but also of the “Tree of Life”.

The next chapter analyzes Rozanov’s dispute with the ideas of V. Soloviev. Rozanov turned against the universalist conception of Soloviev, calling for the unification of the
churches. The main Rozanov’s charge against Soloviev was the recognition that postulated by him religious freedom is a powerless idea. Strength in fact it is a sign of life. Therefore, the demand of freedom turns against life itself, destroying its forms and weakening it. Rozanov performed here so in defense of his concept of the “Tree of Life”, which needed a solid foundation. It also reveals the nature of Rozanov conservatism, which did not confine itself to preserve the existence of the old forms, but to ensure a solid ground forms for new ones. Soloviev answered to Rozanov by ironic article in which he bared his opponent’s obscurantism. Then the Rozanov preached passionate criticism towards Soloviev.

In the next chapter I analyze two articles demonstrating the kind of Rozanov’s “madness”. In the first one he attacks Leo Tolstoy in offhand way, ordering him to “humble” before God and return to the Church. The Orthodox church as the only one has the key to solve the problem of death being insistent of Tolstoy. In the next article, Rozanov detects the mystical significance of the tragic events of 1896, when during the celebrations of the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II, more than a thousand people were killed. Their death was supposed to redeem all faults of the Russian people and renew tsar’s ties with the nation. These ultraconservative articles are in fact testimony to the degeneration of conservative ideas in the Rozanov’s mind and foreshadow his break with the conservative camp.

In the next chapter the analysis is subjected to a text that very clearly reveals the “dialectic of contradiction” that describes this period of Rozanov’s thought: “Beauty in Nature and its Meaning” (1895). This text has also become a direct announcement of a breakthrough in the Rozanov’s views. The thinker writes there that beauty is correlated with the intensification of vital energy and it increases in particular during the copulation. However, in the next step, Rozanov puts his reflections on the anthropological level. And here is made a kind of “sublimation” of organic energy into mental one. Its peak is religion, where the energy is transferred somehow outside itself – into the realm of the transcendent. This dialectic conceals a fundamental contradiction. On the one hand, the highest manifestation of energy was to be copulation, on the other hand – the God.

This text and the previous ones prepared the ground for action against Christianity. Rozanov for the first time dared to stand out against it in the article called “Dead and Dying” (1898). The reason of such situation has become illegitimate children recognized by the Orthodox Church as conceived in sin. Meanwhile, procreation and fertility have become for him an expression of the essence of life. Therefore Rozanov considers that Christianity turns against life and starts to be against it.
The next chapter is devoted to analyzing the phenomenon of gender in the work of Rozanov. Rozanov discovered this subject in 1897 in his letters to S. Rachynski. The thinker called there the act of procreation as transcendent act, in which man and all nature would communicate with the transcendent and divine realm. This happens because it is God who is the source of life and the moment of conception somehow “flows” it to the ground. The sex able to multiply life would be a “window to the transcendent world”. It is also a new answer to the question about the essence of the idea of potentiality.

The thinker developed these threads in his book “In the World of the Obscure and the Uncertain” (1901). The first thing that the thinker considered was the problem of language. Rozanov says that there is no language that could adequately describe the sex and manifestations of its activity. We must not settle for the anatomy only as it is a phenomenon, not only biological but also spiritual, metaphysical. Gender is the soul, and the soul gender. It is also a hidden center of existence and has ontological dimension. It is finally bridge that unites a man with God. Procreation repeats the act of creation being from nothing. A sperm turns out to be the embodiment of the idea of potency.

His findings have come into conflict with the Christian religion. Rozanov took an attempt to reconciliation that would revive the religion itself. It is provided in the next section. The thinker insisted that the source message of Christ was distorted in the course of history. The starting point was a recognition of gender as a general source of religiosity. The next step was to attempt the revival of the spirit of the Old Testament, which, according to Rozanov was permeated with gender and procreation. The first order of God (even in paradise) was the order of reproduction. The thinker also drew attention to the circumcision. Another moment of the reform of Christianity was to be re-read the meaning of Christ’s birth, which happened bodily, through gender. Meanwhile, Christianity split body and spirit, recognizing that the first one was sinful. The consequence of this division was also dogma of religion, which made her dead.

The essential support of reinterpretation of Christianity was to be a further renewal of the family and marriage. This matter is described in separate chapter. Marriage and the family creates gender – and that, within this its activity should be manifest. However, this thesis made the fundamental problem: Rozanov was not able to give reasonable arguments why life of gender should be reduced to sexual activity in marriage. And if this can not be justified, Rozanov’s “metaphysics of gender” becomes an explicit invitation to sexual promiscuity. This problem was pointed out by S. Sharapov and D. Merezhkovsky. Rozanov also challenged sex relationship and marriage writing about “not natural” relationships and not
denying their metaphysical charter. Then the thinker tries to justify the marriage on the basis of ethics, but this attempt is also a failure. It turns out that the main problem of gender lies in its spontaneity, which is impossible to control. Further I discuss an ontological and existential problem of description of the activity of sex which appears in the Rozanov’s deliberations, as well as proposal of the “feminization” of culture.

The next chapter shall analyze further period of Rozanov’s creativity (1905-1911). The thinker gets rid of the illusions about the possibility of combining gender metaphysics with Christianity and openly speaks against religion and against Christ. Again, here it goes after the “aesthetic method” by Leontiev. The real manifestation of the essence of Christianity, which uncovers the above method is proving to be a monastery, which pursues the ideal of asceticism and is an expression of turning away from the world. Further Rozanov analyzes the cases of religiously motivated suicide among sects that also were supposed to be proof of the hidden essence of Christianity, on its “subconsciousness”. The same applies to occur in the history of Christianity cases of castration. The hidden motive of these acts would have to be convinced that earthly life is imperfect and sinful and therefore you should abandon them and give only to God. Here is the hidden logic of Christianity. Rozanov makes responsible for it the Christ, thus openly acting against him. He turns upside down the logic assigned to Christianity: if Christ forces us to choose between the world and Himself, the world or earthly life should be chosen. At the end of the chapter I discuss the controversy about the meaning of Christianity, which was made by other thinkers of the period with Rozanov, like: N. Berdyaev, D. Merezhkovsky, A. Glinka, P. Florensky, K. Chukovsky. I also do the comparison between Rozanov and Nietzsche.

In the next chapter I discuss the next period in the Rozanov’s works (1911-1916). It brought a kind of revolution in the form: Rozanov began to write the so-called “fallen leaves” – fragmentary intimate records, designed to reflect every movement of the soul. As the hermeneutical key to the “Tree of Life” the thinker found here himself. In the “fallen leaves” you can see an attempt to write a new “Scripture”. Rozanov tried to save the river of thought, not making a difference between their content: often preached contrary thesis. This outraged many contemporary intellectuals who accused him of “biologization” thinking, but did not see the ontological dimension of Rozanov’s experiment on himself. This chapter’s goal was an ontological interpretation. “Fallen leaves” was also an attempt to overcome the literature, as well as the essence of language as such: strive to close the gap between thought, word and body. It was finally “literary” attempt to return to paradise and reconciliation with God.
The next section is an attempt to describe the two religious utopia contained in the Rozanov’s work. The rejection of Christianity resulted in the creation of a religious vacuum. Wishing to fill it with some content the thinker turned to ancient Israel (Judaism) and ancient Egypt by searching for them the religion that affirms fertility and earthly life. About such a character could provide circumcised of penis, mainly practiced by Jews, which, according to Rozanov, would make Judaism a phallic religion. This would mean also that the apparent harmony between the Old and New Testaments is an illusion, and Christianity and Judaism are very different. Besides, the chapter touched Rozanov’s anti-Semitism, who at the beginning of 10th years of the twentieth century got carried away feeling prevailing in the society. At the end of his life the thinker became once again a philo-Semite. An analogous role in his work played the fascination with Egypt. Also, there Rozanov looked for affirmation of the power of fertility and life. He took the mythical figures of Osiris and scarab, giving them the power of the rebirth of life. The thinker proposed here also own method based on the creative intuition. It should be noted that these utopias describe not only the historical reality of Israel and Egypt, but are a reflection of the idea of the Rozanov.

In the closing chapter of work I analyzed “The Apocalypse of Our Times” – the last Rozanov’s work. The thinker wrote it after the October Revolution, seeing it as the destruction of Russia. The reason of Revolution turned out to be Christianity – and the thinker once again appears here against it, especially against Christ. He repeats his thesis, putting them to final conclusions. Rozanov announces Christ the false Son of God, and himself the Antichrist, who defends God the Father. According to the thinker, the world could save only the restoration of the ancient cults of fertility and life affirmation.

In conclusion, I am trying to show that the Rozanov thought turned from the outset around the metaphor of the “Tree of Life”. This is what had to propel all his thinking. It appeared in various masks and disguises, but it’s still told about a certain coherence and consistency minded thinker. Beyond inherent contradictions and variation in the Rozanov’s work, emerges a permanent image of the “Tree of Life”.