Abstract

This dissertation makes an argument for the significance of ancient and modern tragedy in the work of Russian (“first-generation”) Symbolist poets and religious thinkers associated with the Russian religious renaissance. Main authors studied are Konstantin Bal'mont, Nikolai Berdiaev, Valerii Briusov, Sergei Bulgakov, Viacheslav Ivanov, Maurice Maeterlinck, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, and Nikolai Minskii. While interest in tragedy may be traced to the popularity of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* in turn-of-the-century Russia, I argue that poets and thinkers gravitated to “tragic thinking” for not only aesthetic, but predominantly religious reasons. A particular mode of mythopoesis, tragic plots and characters offered narratives for poets and thinkers to examine the modern individual’s spiritual search. This inner search for spiritual transcendence is characterized by a focus on inner struggle (exemplified in modern tragedy), rather than externally imposed threats to the individual hero (ancient tragedy). I claim that this inner spiritual struggle, being connected to the ascetic tradition of Russian religious culture, calls for greater scholarly attention to the Symbolist reception of Nietzsche’s “Apollonian principle.”

Chapter One deals with Nikolai Minskii, his philosophy of meonism, the relevance of Russian Symbolist reception of Maeterlinck in the context of Minskii’s changing conception of tragedy, and his modern tragic drama, *Al'ma*. Chapter Two examines Dmitrii Merezhkovskii’s tragic philosophy of love in the context of his literary work and essays on world literature. His translations of Greek tragedy reflect his formulation of a non-sexual erotic love. Chapter Three is devoted to Valerii Briusov’s dystopian tragedy *Zemlia* (*Earth*). Through analysis of previously unknown Mesoamerican and spiritualist subtexts of *Zemlia*, I read Briusov’s drama as an ironic response to early Symbolist Christian interpretations of tragedy. In the conclusion, I focus on the special case of the Moscow Art Theater’s stage adaptation of Dostoevskii’s *Besy* (*Devils*). The religious-philosophical response to this production is presented as the final chapter in the Symbolist reception of tragedy: the “novel-tragedy” and the drawbacks of tragedy as theater.
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Introduction

Part I: Reconstructing a Symbolist Worldview

This dissertation traces the appearance of tragedy in the work of “first-generation” Symbolists. At the turn of the century, Russian poets and thinkers were gripped by a growing anxiety about mortality, debates about the role of religion in contemporary life, and fears of the end of a progressive vision of history. These concerns brought about decadent artistic movements and the flourishing of Russian religious thought. Both of these trends sought to confront what Vladimir Lossky called “the triple barrier of sin, death, and nature.”¹ In a well-known essay on past and recent literary trends, “O prichinakh upadka i o novykh techeniiakh sovremennoi russkoi literatury” (On the reasons for the decline and on new currents in contemporary Russian literature, 1893), Dmitrii Merezhkovskii tried to capture the mindset of this generation. In the following passage, Merezhkovskii has singled out Nikolai Minskii as a promising new poet, whose work was emblematic of the new spirit:

The sacred object of the past generation – populist realism, civic motifs in art, the question of social justice, – has in no way disappeared for people of the contemporary generation, who are similar to Minskii: they are only carried to a wider arena. The question of the infinite, of death, of God – everything that the positivists wanted to violently reject, everything that appears in Tolstoi, Turgenev, and Dostoevskii in such an attractive artistic form, has arisen again, but no longer with the previous beauty, almost without images, in all of its tragic nakedness, sharpened, unbearably tormenting – in a philosophical tract, similar to a confession, and also in the philosophical lyric, similar to a page from the diary of a person who is ill with a slow but deadly disease.²

² “То, что было святыней прошлого поколения – народнический реализм, гражданские мотивы в искусстве, вопросы общественной справедливости, – вовсе не исчезает для людей современного поколения, подобных Минскому: они только переносятся на более широкую арену. Вопросы о бесконечном, о смерти, о Боге – все, что позитивисты хотели насилием отвергнуть, все, что является у Толстого, Тургенева, Достоевского в такой обаятельной художественной форме, вновь возникает, но уже без прежней красоты, почти без образов, во всей своей трагической наготе, обостренное, невыносимо-мучительное – в философском трактате, похожем на исповедь, и в философской лирике, похожей на
Akim Volynskii, editor of the idealist journal Severnyi vestnik (Northern Messenger) made a similar point in his Bor'ba za idealizm (The Struggle for Idealism) about contemporary metaphysical fears and how tragedy could address them:

The tragic worldview is the only true, the only possible one, because life is a tragedy, because the relationship between the individual principle of the personality and the nameless principle of divinity is resolved tragically, because there is only one joy in life, which does not disparage human dignity: the joy through the tears of tragic sadness.3

But Merezhkovskii did more than the influential Volynskii to promote the religious significance of tragedy; he tried to prove that art devoted to metaphysical despair (primarily literary and dramatic in form) was in actuality a healthy development in Russian literature and not a sign of its decline.

In promoting the tragedy of the human condition, he also implied its religious significance, rather than its possible social or material causes. Merezhkovskii’s motive is first to persuade his readers of the illusions of socially-conscious art in the spirit of the materialist-populist legacy of the 1860s. Much of his insistence, then, on ancient or early modern literature is in support of the artistic commitments to mythological grandeur by way of critiquing depictions of tragedy resulting from everyday social problems. It is enough to quote from a programmatic article in Mir iskusstva by Sergei Diagilev to show that a diverse set of modern artists responded to the proponents of socially useful art with the same disdain: “They demand that we remake symphonies into celebratory marches and folk songs, that from paintings we uncover charts for visual study, and from epics prescriptions for all the dirty sicknesses of a rejoicing civilization.”

On that note, Merezhkovskii gives his own example in “O prichinakh upadka…” from a recent exhibition of critical realist painters. The painting depicts a drunkard at the threshold of a tavern:

He wants to enter, but a woman with disheveled hair and an unnaturally tragic face, probably, the wife of the workman, does not let her husband in. Having wildly thrown back her head and stretched out – as certainly Potapenko or Zlatovratskii would have said – “pale, emaciated hands,” she blocks the door of the tavern with her whole body. For the completion of the conventional tragic element, a frightened child clings to the rags of the unhappy mother and with a pleading gaze looks at the cruel-hearted father. The painting was realized exceptionally badly, with a disregard for technique, with some kind of dead, wooden colors.


5 “Он хочет войти, но женщина с растеряными волосами и неестественно трагическим лицом, вероятно, жена мастерового, не пускает мужа. Дико забросив голову и раскинув, как непременно сказал бы Потапенко или Златовратский, "бледные, изможденные руки", она всем телом своим закрывает дверь кабака. К довершению условного трагизма за лохмотья нечастной матери цепляется испуганный ребенок и умоляющим взором смотрит на жестокосердного отца. Картина была прескверно написана, с пренебрежением
A chart that laid out this artist’s tendency would be redundant judging from such a review of the painting. The public’s reception, according to Merezhkovskii, differs significantly:

But the public came to a stop before it: sympathy was apparent on the faces of the women of our intelligentsia. They spoke in French about the sufferings of our poor people, about drunkenness, they explained the tendency of the artist. The accessibility and banality of the tragic element exerted its eternal effect on the crowd.  

His claim is that the practitioners of this “общедоступный, банальный трагизм” do not elicit the sincere moral response of the public, but instead prevent it entirely. Merezhkovskii insists on the representation of monumental and universal loss, rather than on a socially-contingent one. What was needed, he thought, was Greek tragedy and not modern social drama. His fears are echoed in George Steiner’s claim in *The Death of Tragedy*, that “the social resolution of tragedy means its death as an idea.” This tension between ancient and modern notions of tragedy is as relevant to Russian Symbolism as it was to German Romanticism.

In this same study, Steiner pointed to the Romantic mission to “restore tragedy to its former honors” and we can think of the neo-Romantic Symbolist mission similarly without making a complete identification between the two. The difference between the Russian Symbolist fascination with Greek tragedy and the German Romanticist in this regard is the permeating influence of the Russian Orthodox tradition. A religious-moral understanding of tragedy – and tragedy is and was variously considered a political, social, and religious category across the Western tradition – does not cancel out but further affirms individual responsibility for

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6 “Но публика перед нею останавливалась: на лицах интеллигентных дам было видно сочувствие. Говорили по-французски о страданиях нашего бедного народа, о пьянстве, объясняли тенденцию художника. Общедоступный, банальный трагизм оказывал свое вечное действие на толпу” (Ibid.).
7 George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Knopf, 1961), 8.
8 Ibid., 121.
acts, voluntary or involuntary. This difference is partly conveyed in the ascetic tendency of Russian views on tragedy during this period, which will be clarified below. According to Steiner, at the end of Romanticism the Rousseauist tradition had succeeded in encouraging the view that guilt was not caused by wrong action, but came about “because his education had not taught him how to distinguish good and evil, or because he had been corrupted by society.”\(^9\) In other words guilt is attributed to some kind of social or environmental factor that could be avoided, or perhaps should be forgiven. Hence “crime leads not to punishment, but to redemption,” whereas, “in authentic tragedy, the gates of hell stand open and damnation is real.”\(^10\) Russian Symbolists who wrote about tragedy as a key contribution of their movement were not descended from this first wave of revolutionary romanticism that Steiner mentions, nor do they take up its banner of “radica[l] optimism.”\(^11\) Their view of tragedy is fueled by ancient terror that places them at the very beginning of Romanticism, not at its decadent end. In the cases of Viacheslav Ivanov and Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, this view of tragedy was also cast back to ancient predecessors rather than modern practitioners (Steiner names Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, and Pirandello as the playwrights responsible for the turn-of-the-century triumph of modern tragedy.\(^12\))

Ivanov and Merezhkovskii (at least early on in his career) considered tragedy the apogee of Symbolist art. But like Schelling before them, both poets insisted that the future of tragedy in the contemporary world was located in ancient Greece. In March of 1904, before he had completed his stylized ancient tragedy \textit{Tantal} (\textit{Tantalus}, 1905), Ivanov began work on the unfinished tragedy \textit{Niobeia} (\textit{Niobe}), the second in a three-part trilogy (the third tragedy was \textit{Prometei} [\textit{Prometheus}, published in 1919] with an accompanying essay on the subject of action

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\(^9\) Ibid., 128.  
\(^10\) Ibid., 127-28.  
\(^11\) Ibid., 128.  
\(^12\) Ibid., 124.
in tragic drama). He had, however, preempted the completion of the trilogy by writing a preface in which he justified the archaic form he had chosen for all three works. Ivanov wrote,

> The form of ancient tragedy seemed to the author in its essential features a form of the future reborn people’s theater. To befriend it, the author thought, we must take the path of independent creative works; on this path it is natural to begin with the reproduction of Hellenic myth in its Hellenic clothes, insofar as this myth is the general and everlasting achievement of the Hellene and the Barbarian: the former sought and the latter is now seeking.\(^{13}\)

Here Ivanov stressed the paradoxical futurity of the form of ancient tragedy. However, his sense of the text’s practical performance value is abstracted from his conviction that ancient tragedy would allow the transformation of the contemporary “people’s theater” into a divine rite.\(^{14}\)

The ubiquity of ancient Greece in Ivanov’s life and work is perhaps better known, but the Greek past exerted a powerful influence on Merezhkovskii and Minskii, as well. As P.P. Pertsov wrote in a review of Merezhkovskii’s essays, *Vechnye Sputniki (Eternal Companions)*, “The soul of Mr. Merezhkovskii lives by the vague memories of beauty and the bright life of times gone by; it senses the current day surrounding it faintly.”\(^{15}\)

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that both sought out for tragedy, their attraction to ancient Greece can be traced to the prominent role of tragedy in German Romantic theory and later for Nietzsche, who responded to this tradition. The Greeks, Friedrich Schelling argued, “felt themselves powerless in the face of the titanic forces of nature,” Julian Young explains.\textsuperscript{16} Modernity on the contrary “lacks fate” because “we believe that human ingenuity can, at least in principle, control them [the forces of nature].”\textsuperscript{17} This argument would seem to approximate Steiner’s about the decline of Romanticism and the beginning of (Greek) tragedy’s “death,” but Young accounts for Schelling’s nuanced distinction between ancient and modern views of tragedy. In modern tragedy, fate, what had previously been beyond our control, has been internalized, making the “only plausible seat of fate for the modern playwright […] the inner world of the soul.”\textsuperscript{18} This point is very important for understanding the philosophical and religious import of tragedy as presented in this dissertation: the modern internalization of fate makes it difficult to insist on the dramatic and external potential of the tragic effect. This idea motivates the discussion of Maurice Maeterlinck in Chapter One in the context of Minskii’s philosophy and drama. To take Schelling’s distinction further, this internalization of fate is the very fear of death (the fear of necessity) as such that motivates the figures examined in this dissertation and that is why the religious significance of tragedy, the striving to transcend the earthly, is also within the bounds of their tragic worldview.

In Part II of this introduction, I take a closer look at a key term in Viacheslav Ivanov’s writings on tragedy – self-affirmation. I will argue that this term is central to an understanding of the inner spiritual search that defines tragic thinking.

\textsuperscript{16} Julian Young, \textit{The Philosophy of Tragedy from Plato to Žižek} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 79.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 80.
To make the claim that tragedy during Symbolism was more of a religious and philosophical concept than a dramatic one is not to say that Symbolists were not interested in tragedy as a literary genre. Often the intersection of these two understandings of tragedy occur simultaneously, perhaps due to the migration of the term to the context of everyday life. In pursuit of such intersections, it is appropriate to quote Raymond Williams about how to approach the much larger topic of tragedy in the history of Western thought: “To examine the tragic tradition […] is to look, critically and historically, at works and ideas which have certain evident links, and which are associated in our minds by a single and powerful word.”¹⁹

**Scholarly Interventions and Intersections**

Most of the scholarly criticism on tragedy in the Russian Symbolist period has focused on the impact of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* or that philosopher’s most influential Russian disseminator, Viacheslav Ivanov.²⁰ But before Ivanov published his series of essays entitled *Ellinskaia religiia stradaushchego boga (The Hellenic Religion of the Suffering God)*,²¹ interest in tragedy and its philosophical import was widespread among other Symbolist poets, and not only in response to Nietzsche, but also to his “teacher” Arthur Schopenhauer and the dramatist and thinker Maurice Maeterlinck. The focus on “tragic thinking” in this dissertation is intended to contribute to previous research that touches on developments in modernist Russian theater, the Symbolist movement, and turn-of-the-century Russian religious thought.

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There are several directions in which this topic might have gone. I might have made the early modernist theater my focus, commenting on Ivanov’s ideas about tragic drama (especially his emphasis on the chorus) and attempts to conceive of their performance on the Russian stage. I might have looked at interest in creating works in the tradition of the Gesamtkunstwerk, culminating in Scriabin. I might have also chosen to focus on the apocalyptic and philosophical-historical connotations of tragedy in the work of Andrei Belyi and Aleksandr Blok. Instead I have opted to single out members of the “first generation” of Russian Symbolism for two reasons. First, these figures paved the way for the “second generation” of Russian Symbolists (Ivanov, Belyi, Blok), and, in some cases (Belyi, Blok) their influence is reflected in the themes of their work. A closer examination of their tragic thinking broadens our understanding of the second group (and here, Ivanov’s belonging to the older generation in spirit and by birth must necessarily challenge the periodization of “second” versus “first”). Second, these writers exemplify diverse interpretations of tragedy that go beyond the two most common implications of tragedy among the second-generation Symbolists: apocalyptic thinking (channeled through the writings of Vladimir Solov’ev) and Ivanov’s call to reconstruct the ancient religious community in resurrecting the divine rite of tragedy through the role of the chorus. The tragic visions of Minskii, Merezhkovskii, and Briusov presented in this dissertation have a closer relationship to questions of how to live and love in an apocalyptic, or at least deeply pessimistic mindset. Without accounting for the diversity of the tragic orientation of Symbolists, Ivanov’s consistently well-formulated work on tragedy might be taken as the sole locus of tragic thinking. Such a conclusion would oversimplify the complexity of the Russian Symbolist worldview. As

G.P. Fedotov in *The Russian Religious Mind* attempted to convey “the wholeness of religious personality,” I aim, through the lens of tragedy, to provide an account of the inner spiritual experience of the authors treated in this study.

**Tragic thinking**

I have used the term “tragic thinking” in an effort to avoid the implications of another common term: “philosophy of tragedy.” This last phrase describes what philosophers in the Western tradition have tried to understand about the effect or effects of tragic drama, defining tragedy by deciding whether or not a particular text or myth has achieved a desired effect according to one or another philosopher’s definition of tragedy’s ultimate meaning. The writers under examination in this study do not philosophize about tragedy in order to ascertain the effectiveness of a work of art. They are cultivating a particular worldview not dissimilar from what Fedotov has called the “spiritual life,” often consistent with one of his ways of defining the nature of this life as “ascetic-mystical.”

The term “tragic thinking” is not meant to evoke the emotive connotations that it might have in a non-scholarly context. Likewise, I do not mean to trace the depressive mindset that seems to have plagued many early modernist poets (especially Merezhkovskii as a young man). By “tragic thinking,” I am referring to a mode of intellection, not so much a system, by which the writers treated in this dissertation attempted to resolve what for them were fundamentally irresolvable problems related to the question of what kind of spirituality could serve the modern individual. For Minskii and Merezhkovskii – and for religious thinkers who came later (Nikolai

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24 See Julian Young, *Philosophy of Tragedy*, 1-2.  
Berdiaev and Sergei Bulgakov) – tragic thinking, as its phrasing suggests, was an ongoing inner process that bore little resemblance to the daring tragic personae of the Russian Symbolist lyric. Lev Shestov and Berdiaev were probably the most active proponents of “philosophy as the philosophy of tragedy,” but there was no consensus about the stakes of the development of inner spirituality, which is the site of the struggle implied in tragic thinking. Investigating spirituality is not exactly to assume that the authors in this study have had mystical experiences; for mysticism is some kind of contact with God and the relevance of tragedy would wane if this state were achieved or prolonged. In the Preface to A Treasury of Russian Spirituality, Fedotov claimed that to study spirituality is not to study the relatively “rare phenomenon” of mysticism, “spirituality is applied to the religious life in its innermost and deepest strata, the life with God and all spiritual experiences arising from this source. Prayer is the center, the core, of spirituality – and this is true not of mystical prayer alone.” Another figure examined in this study (however, to a lesser extent), Zinaida Gippius, so closely identified her poetry with spiritual self-searching that she called her poems prayers.

What seems especially important about tragic thinking are: (1) the conceptualization of transcendence was ultimately extremely abstract and based on symbolic concepts (male vs. female, and other dualisms frequently encountered in Symbolism) and (2) the process of

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27 Edith Clowes writes, “The difference between his own use of tragedy and Shestov’s was Berdiaev’s belief in a (rather Apollonian) form of ‘transcendent individualism.’” See Edith Clowes, “Groundlessness: Nietzsche and Russian Concepts of Tragic Philosophy,” in Nietzsche and the Rebirth of the Tragic, ed. M. A. Frese (Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press): 126-37; 132. Her comment about Berdiaev as comparatively more Apollonian than Shestov is in line with my proposal in this dissertation to focus on the Apollonian characteristics of tragedy rather than its Dionysian principle.
transcendence is played out in the inner life of the individual. In this regard, this dissertation takes emphasis away from the role of the chorus in the development of modernist theater and has greater relevance for how poets conceived of the spiritual mindset and actions of the individual (the lyric mode, not always in a poetic context). In examining the implications of tragedy for the individual, I suggest a particular reconsideration of early Symbolism in Russia. This was a movement defined by the pull of self-discovery and the search for the spiritual self among its poets and most serious thinkers. A closer look at the individual experience of tragedy brings out its connections to the spiritual tradition of asceticism, a topic of great relevance to forging more complex links between Russian Symbolism and the Russian religious renaissance.

Tragic thinking seems to have rested upon a form of asceticism that was closely linked to pessimism. If it was agreed that life was fundamentally tragic, how could one find consolation without embracing pessimism and forfeiting the value of life? For an Orthodox theologian tragedy implies a separation from God, not, as for these poets and thinkers, the process of uniting with Him. Spiritually-minded Symbolist poet-philosophers like Minskii and Ivanov agreed that one’s earthbound identity must be relinquished in order to achieve union with God. This mystical perception means that for many the process of divine union itself is tragic, at least at its initial stage, in that it privileges one’s divine nature and advocates a rejection of life. This imperative to adopt an ascetic relationship to the world was for many deeply troubling for its ostensible

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pessimism. But withdrawal into oneself in search of God – modeled best in the tradition of the desert fathers of early Christianity – was supposedly far from a tragic struggle to wrench oneself away from worldly cares and attachments. Indeed, this tragic interpretation of personal sacrifice has no basis in Orthodox thought. Vladimir Lossky argued that there is no such conflict in the striving of the faithful toward God. He wrote, “both the heroic attitude of the great saints of Western Christendom, a prey to the sorrow of a tragic separation from God, and the dark night of the soul considered as a way, as a spiritual necessity, are unknown in the spirituality of the Eastern Church.”

In the following chapters, I also focus on a set of themes that are connected to the ascetic (Apollonian) and “non-Dionysian” principle often invoked in references to tragedy at the turn of the century. These themes are: a fascination with death, the attempt to uphold asceticism against romantic love, and the struggle to conceive of a non-destructive (affirmative) form of the self-sacrificing Dionysian principle. Despite Merezhkovskii’s energetic project to unite the two,

30 Lossky, The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church, 226.
exploring these themes means acknowledging the victory of “asceticism” (целомудрие) over “sensuality” (сладострастие). In the following section, I will outline one abstract formulation of the struggle to affirm life (despite the imperative to reject it in search of spiritual transcendence) in the thought of Viacheslav Ivanov.

**Part II: Tragic Thinking and Self-renunciation**

It is possible to trace the contours of the sacrificial act implied in the individual search for divine union in either positive (life-affirming) or negative (life-denying) terms. The works of Ivanov and Minskii are representative of these two models of sacrifice. The names of these poets are often brought up in relation to the infamous blood rite ceremony that took place at Minskii’s apartment in 1905. But beyond their personal misadventures, Ivanov and Minskii gave pride of place to the psychological and religious experience of sacrifice for the divine, not confining this experience to artistic creation alone. Given the kind of metaphysical poetry that they wrote and their dedication to writing philosophy, both poets could lay claim to the sought-after title “philosopher-poet.” Perhaps addressing this affinity, N.O. Lossky puts them in the same small section in his *History of Russian Philosophy*. Minskii’s ideas about self-renunciation owe a great deal to Maeterlinck, who was one of the key figures in French (more accurately, Francophone) Symbolism. Along with his second wife, Liudmila Vil'kina, Minskii was Maeterlinck’s translator and main Russian promoter. Ivanov, it is well known, was a recognized scholar of Dionysus and ancient tragedy, as well as author of stylized tragedies based on

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32 In Robert Bird’s words, “Minskii’s wife ‘donated’ her blood, which the guests then passed around in a chalice. This supremely decadent rite, apparently intended as a proto-ecumenical bonding ceremony, succeeded in creating a scandal for its almost self-parodic esotericism […]” See Robert Bird, “Imagination and ideology in the new religious consciousness,” in *A History of Russian Philosophy, 1830-1930*, eds. G.M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 266-84; 277.

unfinished or lost works by Aeschylus. Through his study of the ancient cult of Dionysus, Ivanov introduced readers of the journal Novyi put'/New Path (later renamed Voprosy zhizni/Questions of Life), as well as peers to the origins of tragedy in the cult of Dionysus.

Unlike Minskii’s (to be discussed in Chapter One), Ivanov’s model of tragic sacrifice was the most influential and the most straightforward and consistent formulation. This view of tragic suffering is inextricable from what Ivanov calls “the tragedy of individualism” and a recurring concept in his writings: “self-affirmation” (самоутверждение). The Russian term most likely has its origins in the verbal concept, rendered as either Selbstaffirmation (in Schelling’s coinage34), Bestätigung, or Bejahung, that appears in German idealist philosophy.35 However, the

34 For more on Schelling in Ivanov’s thought, see Victor Terras, “Vyacheslav Ivanov’s Esthetic Thought: Context and Antecedents,” in Vyacheslav Ivanov: Poet, Critic and Philosopher, eds. Robert Louis Jackson and Lowry Nelson, Jr. (New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1986), 326-45; 338. Schelling’s Selbstaffirmation, a borrowed word in German, is an unlikely source for Ivanov’s use of this term.

35 At the beginning of his Lectures on the Philosophy of Art, Schelling does not refer to the individual’s self-affirmation, but rather to God’s: “To be real = to be affirmed. Now, God is by virtue of his own idea; that is, he is his own affirmation, and since he cannot affirm himself finitely (since he is absolute), he is the infinite affirmation of himself.” See F.W.J. Schelling, The Philosophy of Art, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 23-24. Schelling’s point might be compared to Fichte’s claim about the activity of thought and its direct relationship to concrete subjectivity: “the Ego is and posits its being, by virtue of its mere being. It is both the acting and the product of the act; the active and the result of the activity; deed and act in one; and hence the I am is expressive of a deed-act; and of the only possible deed-act, as our science of knowledge must show.” J.G. Fichte, The Science of Knowledge, trans. A.E. Kroeger (London: Trubner & Co., Ludgate Hill, 1889), 68-69. This “[…] activity of the I – an assertion, [is] an animate act of will. This assertion is simply a ‘self-assertion,’ an ‘absolute’ and ‘necessary’ affirmation of its existence – at once being and ground. […] self-affirmation as ‘I’ is the primordial act, an underground activity that is itself the ground of its original being.” See Jon Mills, The Unconscious Abyss: Hegel’s Anticipation of Psychoanalysis (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 2002), 35. For Ivanov, the articulation “I am,” as well as the affirmative answer “yes” that occurs throughout his work, has ultimately ethical and ontological relevance rather than Fichte’s epistemological focus. For the significance of “I am” in Ivanov’s work, see A. Dudek, “Na puti k ‘vnutrenemu cheloveku’: Kontseptsii samopoznaniia v tvorchestve Viacheslava Ivanova,” in Viacheslav Ivanov: issledovaniia i materialy, vyp. 1, eds. K.Iu. Lappo-Danilevskii and A.B. Shishkin (Sankt-Peterburg: Izd. Pushkinskogo Doma, 2010), 53-64.
apparent inferences to this term in Ivanov’s writings most likely refer to Nietzsche’s work (who is responding to Schopenhauer) and thus to the key concept of affirmation (of life or the will), rendered as Bejahung.

Ivanov’s references to self-affirmation suggest its positive, heroic qualities, though it remains a fundamental denial of life, a radical kind of self-renunciation. This contradiction throws light on the often overlooked role of asceticism in Ivanov’s creative and religious philosophy, which is usually understood in terms of its Dionysian, erotic mysticism. For the remainder of Part II of this introduction, I focus on Ivanov’s critical writings, but further investigation of his ambivalence towards asceticism could extend to the explicitly erotic focus of much of his poetry. By examining more closely Ivanov’s ambivalent understanding of self-affirmation in the context of his aesthetic philosophy, I hope to introduce several themes of this dissertation, including the ascetic trend, the close ties between tragic thinking and spiritual transcendence, and the problems of representation tied up in such a philosophically rigorous conception of artistic creation.

Ivanov and “Self-affirmation”

Viacheslav Ivanov provides an ideal comparison to Minskii in that his writings represent the infusion of the decadent hero and the Symbolist poet’s persona – stereotypically dreamy, sickly, and impressionistic – with heroic pathos. In addition to authoring the aforementioned lectures on Dionysus, Ivanov wrote numerous other essays dedicated to the theory of tragic drama, such as “Nitsshe i Dionis” (Nietzsche and Dionysus, 1904), “Predchuvstviia i predvestiia: Novaia organicheskaia epokha i teatr budushchego” (Premonitions and forebodings: The new organic epoch and the theatre of the future, 1906), “O sushchestve tragedii” (On the essence of
tragedy, 1912), and “O deistvii i deistve” (On the act and the rite, 1919), to name the most important.

Ivanov’s Christian reading of Nietzsche’s Dionysus was extremely attractive to his generation of poets. The following passage from the essay “Nitsshe i Dionis,” provided below in Robert Bird’s translation, describes the god both as scapegoat and archetypal god-man (богочеловек):

The “son of God,” the inheritor of the father’s throne, mutilated by the Titans in the cradle of the ages; the same god in the image of a “hero,” i.e. a godman, born in time from an earthly mother; the “new Dionysus,” whose mysterious appearance was the only possible hope of a consoling divine descent for the Hellene, who knew not Hope: this is the god of ancient philosophical and theological doctrines who is so close to our religious understanding of the world. In the universal, naturalistically tinged belief, he is the god of the martyr’s death, of hidden life in the pregnant depths of death, and of an exultant return from the shadow of death, of “rebirth” and “palingenesis” [rebirth].

Though Ivanov addresses both natures of Dionysus, the focus on triumphal resurrection still outweighs the role of self-renunciation in the god’s other guise as martyr. For Ivanov, in Dionysus’s death there is “hidden life;” nothingness is endowed with the seed of resurrection.

The present goal is to account for Ivanov’s attempts to move away from the negative connotations of the Dionysian sacrifice, which he puts forward consistently with help from the concept “self-affirmation.” Why for Ivanov an act of self-affirmation necessarily implies one of self-sacrifice, though he consistently suggests otherwise, will be a focus of this discussion. One should note that Ivanov’s use of the concept self-affirmation is largely consistent and responds to Nietzsche in clear but indirect ways. For this reason, scholarship on the paradoxical status of Nietzschean affirmation helps to provide the necessary context for a productive questioning of Ivanov’s use of the concept.

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In his chapter “Catharsis” in *Russian Prospero*, Robert Bird acknowledges the paradoxical affiliation between self-affirmation and self-renunciation: “Since the resulting plethora of phenomenal existence is illusory, man can achieve no true self-affirmation except by passively acceding to unity with the cosmic whole.”

Bird describes a process that appears in several of Ivanov’s essays, but does not account for the ambiguous, contradictory nature of self-affirmation. Much like his generation’s numerous attempts to bridge the gap between Nietzsche’s life-affirmation and Christianity’s otherworldly orientation, Ivanov struggled to resolve his philosophical teacher’s own search to discover a life-affirming vision of suffering, one that does not collapse into pessimism.

In Nietzsche’s philosophy, affirmation is directly related to the problem of asceticism, which for him always means the life-denying “detractors of the body,” as they are referred to in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche mocks the philosopher’s ascetic ideal in a passage that refutes the Christian tradition of the desert fathers. He claims that the contemplative hermit’s withdrawal from the human community brings him rather to the sinful affirmation of his own existence. Nietzsche claims that the philosopher’s attempt to deny human existence in pursuit of a higher spiritual ideal leads only to egotism. Thus the philosopher (or hermit) nearly elevates philosophy (and himself) over the entire world. This result constitutes a false affirmation because it says “No” to the world and to the suffering that it is accused of causing. In this vein Nietzsche scholar Tyler Roberts assents: “To affirm life in the hope that we

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38 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 87. “In beholding the ascetic ideal, the philosopher sees before him the optimum conditions for the highest and boldest spirituality, and smiles – in the process, he does not deny ‘existence,’ but rather affirms [bejaht] his own existence and nothing but his own existence, and this perhaps to the extent that he is not far from the sinful wish: pereat mundus, fiat philosophia, fiat philosophus, fiam!...”
are able to end suffering – or to affirm life only from the perspective of that goal (‘it was difficult, but it was worth it’) – is not to affirm this life.”\(^{39}\) Roberts discovers parallels between a theology of the Cross and Nietzsche’s affirmative vision of suffering through a critique of theodicy. His view of Nietzschean affirmation thus takes into account the religious foundations that so many Russian thinkers, including Ivanov, wished to see in the work of the infamously atheist philosopher:

Affirmation consists in the simultaneous rejection of the aversiveness and the fruitfulness of pain, the desire for transcendence, and the desire for return. This is not simply a matter of accepting the suffering that is one’s lot for the sake of the whole of one’s life, but it involves, at the very least, the active cultivation of the vulnerability and empathy that can affirm the inevitability of suffering. On this view, suffering is integral to the affirmative life, it is the ground in which such life can be cultivated.\(^{40}\)

By dispensing with the Christian notion of guilt, Roberts explains, Nietzsche is able to develop his life-affirming vision of suffering. Since guilt purportedly offers a “reason” for suffering and a reward for the transcendence (renunciation) of life, it cannot be an affirmation of that life.

The following statement about Prometheus from Ivanov’s later essay “O deistvii i deistve” shows the way in which Ivanov explained the self-affirming tragic hero’s guilt. For Ivanov, Prometheus does not simply accept suffering as the consequence of his transgression, and those of his ancestors, against the gods, he rebels as if against the “concrete,” earthly image of himself:


His first rebellion, first guilt, is rising against his own existential being, as a “concrete” existence (in the meaning that Hegel gives to this word). He who “does not need peace, but rather the seed of discord,” begins his deed with an inner schism and affirmation. For Ivanov, the tragic hero must repay his own guilt in denying his previous, earthbound self. He is therefore only responsible for expiating a crime committed against himself. Because in the process the hero sheds his false self in favor of his “true” self, the act of suffering is nevertheless affirmative.

In “Predchuvstviia i predvestiia,” Ivanov explained how individualism threatens to corrupt authentic self-affirmation:

The crisis of moral imperatives revealed unbounded horizons of mysticism, understood as the free self-affirmation of suprapersonal will within the individual. Individualism sought to integrate the personality’s emotions, while at the same time isolating and differentiating the personality in the social plane. But mystical supraindividualism builds a bridge from individualism to the principle of universal sobornost’ [...].

Authentic self-affirmation, then, is the “willful act of mystic self-affirmation,” he claims in the same essay, the arrival at “supraindividualism.” The act of self-affirmation, or self-willing, is ascetic; it has to be at root an act of humble self-effacement. It is not Byronic self-assertion, but on the contrary, as Ivanov writes in “Krizis individualizma” (The Crisis of Individualism, 1905),

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42 This rejection of a false self is a possible interpretation of the role of the Doppelgänger in Ivanov’s work: if the hero has the benefit of two selves and casts off the less desirable one, this apparent self-renunciation is life-affirming.
the willful subjugation of one’s will: “We would be incomplete, like Macbeth, and powerless, like Lear, if we still imagined that personal self-affirmation were possible outside of its co-
subjugation to universal truth, or a different freedom, besides that which comprises our worship of the Spirit.”45 In such a way the paradoxical ascetic self-renunciation of the self-affirming person does not lead to the consolidation of human will. Rather it allows transcendent “supraindividualism” toward a reintegration with the whole. Extending this idea to the artist’s task, Ivanov explained that “Like Joseph,” this new artist “must be humble to the end and, as it were, to the point at which his outer image melts; […] he must be only an obedient dreamer and a vigilant, reverent guard and guide of the World Soul as it conceives directly from the Holy Spirit.”46

Self-affirmation is as important for Ivanov’s theory of artistic creation as it is for his literary and scholarly work on the psychology of the tragic hero.47 Like the tragic hero, the artist’s creation is self-sacrificial, initiating divine communion and the eventual reintegration with the World Soul, represented by the feminine principle of Mother Earth. As Ivanov indicates, this movement toward and then away from the Divinity when diagrammed takes a pyramidal shape. In terms of artistic creation, the pyramid describes the Neo-Platonic model of ascent and descent, whereas, in the case of the tragic hero, it would schematically represent the plot of

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45 “Мы были бы незельны, как Макбет, и бессильны, как Лир, если бы еще мнили, что возможно для нас личное самоутверждение, вне его соподчинения вселенской правде, или иная свобода, кроме той, которая составляет служение Духу” (Ivanov, “Кризис individualizma,” in SS, t. 1, 840).
47 Ivanov’s focus on the initial act of the hero is closer to what one scholar says of Nietzsche’s Apollonian principle: “In all, the defining characteristics of the Apollonian, therefore, are surprisingly militaristic: heroism, pride, strength, defiance, genius, and contempt for weaklings. With these the artist defeats all that threatens the dissolution of his individual being.” See Robert Luyster, “Nietzsche/Dionysus: Ecstasy, Heroism, and the Monstrous,” Journal of Nietzsche Studies, no. 21, (Spring 2001): 1-26; 5.
tragedy. As the prelimin ary act of the hero, self-affirmation unleashes a chain reaction of events building to inevitable catastrophe.

Since many of Ivanov’s examples of spiritual transcendence are conveyed through his theory of the creative act, such an identification between the moment of self-affirmation and the creative process is possible. In “Simvolika esteticheskikh nachal” (The Symbolics of Aesthetic Principles, originally titled “On Descent”), an essay devoted to the subject of the creative act, Ivanov did not write in concrete terms about the psychological aspects of ascent. But quoting Goethe in this earliest statement on the subject, Ivanov wrote, “The ascending, spiraling line, the elation of impulse and overcoming, is dear to us as a symbol of our finest self-affirmation, our ‘mighty decision: to strive untiringly to the highest being.’”

In Ivanov’s discussion of ascent, the event of self-affirmation has a Dionysian veneer. Ascent begins with “the mystical epiphany of inner experience, which may be either a clear encounter or a face-to-face vision of higher realities only in exceptional cases, and which remains beyond the bounds of the artistic-creative process proper.”

This state “must not be confused with the artist’s Apollonian dream.”

If the act of self-affirmation is the pivotal moment of accepting suffering upon oneself through renunciation of one’s individuality (symbolized in the Dionysian hero’s violent dislocation from the chorus), why does it not receive more attention in Ivanov’s writings? One explanation is that Ivanov was generally less interested in the Apollonian, the god of ascent, because of its asceticism. But despite his ostensible reliance on the (Nietzschean) dialectic of Apollo and Dionysus, Ivanov privileges the Dionysian experience as the chief element of artistic creation. To foreground the Dionysian is also to elevate the erotic aspect of creation over the

50 Ibid., 71.
preliminary contemplative asceticism that is suggested in sacrificial renunciation. By devoting less attention to the Apollonian, Ivanov did not clarify the crucial element of sublime “ascent” toward the divine prior to the chaotic, Dionysian “descent” and conception of the work of art.

Summarizing Ivanov’s clearest explanation of ascent and descent in “O granitsakh iskusstva,” Victor Terras, perhaps unintentionally, remarked on the ambiguity of ascent with his description of it as “an ascent toward an epiphany which takes the creator’s spirit through several regions of Being [my emphasis].” In one instance, Ivanov appeared to undermine the chiefly ascetic quality of ascent: “In general ascent is the accumulation of strength, while descent is its radiation. Spiritual apprenticeship as such cannot be anything but constant ascent; but the wholeness of life demands ascent and descent in equal measure.”

Though Ivanov insisted on the necessary balancing act of ascent and descent, he did not address the profound solitary, hermetic experience of ascent, which calls the individual to turn away from the world for the purpose of discovering divine presence within the self. Ivanov wrote, “human self-affirmation is false insofar as its subject is the limited personality. It is necessary to find one’s true ‘I’ in order to affirm oneself in it. Christianity teaches that such an ‘I’ is inwardly present in man: ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is within you.’”

Achieving one’s new “I” by affirming God within, Ivanov argues, means ensuring the masculine strength necessary to implant the World Soul with its seed, an erotic metaphor for the creative act and a religious one for resurrection. The artist’s ascent is the way to the “man’s true self-affirmation in the Father, as a Son who has no will but that of his

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51 Terras, “Vyacheslav Ivanov’s Esthetic Thought,” 332.
54 Ibid., 161.
Father,” but its problematic connection to asceticism reveals a point of tension in Ivanov’s notion of ascent.

The “rupture and separation” of the artist’s ascent is the inaugural tragic event of artistic creation. It represents a resolute ascetic “‘No’ to the Earth” before achieving reintegration with it once again. “An essentially tragic principle,” argues Ivanov, “ascent is preeminently human. It is animated by a will and thirst for the impossible.”

Man can find his preeternal, true will only after he has surrendered his personal will and lost his self; only then does he become the passive tool of the god that lives within him, his bearer, his thyrsus-bearer, god-bearer. Then, for the first time, he says a true “yes” to his inner god, a suprapersonal “yes” no longer to the world, but to the supraworldly; and it is only then that one wills creatively: for to will creatively is to will will-less.

The paradox of self-affirmation is this “willing will-lessly,” meaning that one’s will has been delivered over to God. Ivanov’s understanding of self-affirmation is thus contradictory: this act is both heroically self-assertive and characteristically will-less. As Robert Bird has pointed out, the self must play a necessarily passive role in undertaking the greatest assertion of its being. For his part, by self-affirmation, Ivanov does not describe an active subject as much as one who is activated by a force as if dormant within him, a situation bearing some resemblance to Maeterlinck’s inner fate (see Chapter One). Describing this paradox in “Kop'e Afiny” (The Spear of Athena, 1904), Ivanov wrote,

55 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 7.
58 Ibid., 12.
59 Incidentally, the model of affirmation as an inner, hidden process is conveyed in Roberts’s discussion of Zarathustra: “Zarathustra’s affirmation is not the result of a calculating knowledge that determines it is better to affirm than to deny, for it takes place only as the boundaries of the self are broken, as the self is overtaken by the ‘Yes.’ This ‘Yes’ is not something he controls, but something that occurs in him, an affirmation that strikes in ‘lightning bolts that say ‘Yes’ and laugh ‘Yes.’ Zarathustra gives all he has to the soul, and he bids it to say ‘Yes,’ but it is only the soul that can make the affirmation” (Roberts, Contesting Spirit, 189).
[...] in the art of the cell ‘will-less assertion’ of the genius crosses the boundaries of empirical daring (essentially analytical) and reaches an inner, or prophetic freedom. But this last emancipation of the personal impulse is, at the same time, its absolute renunciation from all that is personally-willed.\(^{60}\)

This implicit tension in Ivanov’s numerous presentations of the act of self-affirmation reveals the unresolved status of asceticism in his theory of the creative act and the spiritual ordeal of the Dionysian hero. He presents this striving as analogous to the initial Apollonian act and underscores its Dionysian nature, despite the necessarily passive nature and ascetic role of the “I” when seeking Divine communion. One conclusion to draw, at least in a preliminary way, is that Ivanov sought to make visible or external certain aspects of a private and internalized struggle. In some ways, Ivanov’s ambiguous usage of the concept self-affirmation is a problem of terminology. In mystical terms, the act of self-affirmation is surely understood as a kind of self-renunciation. In this vein Vladimir Lossky wrote: “the root of asceticism is the ‘free renunciation’ of one’s own will, of the mere simulacrum of individual liberty, in order to recover the true liberty, that of a person which is the image of God in each one.”\(^{61}\) For Lossky, this free

\(^{60}\)“[…] в искусстве келейном «безвольный произвол» гения переступает пределы эмпирического дерзновения (по существу аналитического) и достигает свободы внутренней, или пророчественной. Но эта, последняя, эмансипация личного порыва есть, вместе с тем его безусловное отречение от всего лично-волевого” (Ivanov, “Коп’е Афіни,” in SS, t. 1: 727-733; 731). See also, Ivanov’s letter to Briusov: “Myth-creation itself imposes its truth; but it does not experience its correspondence to the objective essence of things. It incarnates postulates of consciousness and, in affirming, creates. Therefore, art for me is predominantly creation, if you like – world-creation – an act of self-affirmation and will, – an action, but not knowledge (such is faith); not ‘the pure will-less perception,’ but ‘the will-less self-will of the creator,’ a matter of the personally will-less, universal willing” (Мифотворчество само налагает свою истину; соответствия же ее объективной сущности вещей вовсе не испытует. Оно воплощает постулаты сознания и, утверждая, творит. Поэтому искусство для меня преимущественно творчество, если хотите – миротворчество – акт самоутверждения и воли, – действие, а не познание (какова и вера); не ‘reine willenlose Anschauung,’ а «творца безвольный произвол», дело лично-безвольного, вселенского воления). Ivanov to Briusov, 19 February 1904, Literaturnoe nasledstvo. Valerii Briusov, t. 85, ed. V.R. Shcherbina (Moskva: Nauka, 1976): 447.

\(^{61}\) Lossky, Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church, 122.
renunciation is the end-goal of spiritual life. Ivanov, on the other hand, believing that the way to God is through the creative act, sees the ascetic act of self-affirmation as just the initial, prefatory step toward the final erotic reintegration with the Earth. For Ivanov, the individual’s casting-off of the false “I” is ultimately rewarded with transcendence; there is consolation, or hope, to be found in leaving the old, earthbound “I” in the dust. But descent, though it promises rebirth and reintegration, is not the same ordeal as ascent because the self has been altered and changed forever following descent. It is this personal ordeal in the artist-hero’s life – the ascetic ascent – that will be the subject of the following chapters.

Chapter Outline

For Minskii and Merezhkovskii, the thirst for divine union has stronger ties to the ascetic tradition of Russian Orthodoxy than Ivanov’s Nietzschean and aestheticized model of spiritual ascent. Their view of this spiritual striving differs from Ivanov’s, which finds its roots in the romantic pose of the Dionysian hero, whose attachment to the earth is the source of his anguish and the foundation of his tragedy. In Chapter One, I examine Nikolai Minskii as by far the most abstract presentation of tragic thinking and its links to asceticism. In Chapter Two, I move to Merezhkovskii’s understanding of tragedy as primarily sexual in nature, which affects, among other things, his translations of Greek tragedy. In Chapter Three, I consider Valerii Briusov’s Zemlia, whose science fiction, spiritualist tragedy Zemlia presents the end of civilization’s development and a requisite critique of Zarathustrian (Ivanovian) life-affirmation. In addition to offering a parody of Ivanov’s Nietzschean model, Briusov, with his quasi-theosophical trajectory and vision of history, will act as a foil to the previous chapters. In the conclusion, I will turn to a later event in the modernist history of tragic thinking in Russia: the 1913 production of Nikolai
Stavrogin at the Moscow Art Theater and the question of the place of tragedy as a genre of thought and art in Russian modernism.

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Ivanov’s notion of self-affirmation as a positive formulation of self-renunciation (самоотречение, or самоотрицание), signifying an act of radical humility, is the guiding
principle of meonism, Nikolai Minskii’s philosophy of non-being. There is no evidence that by “self-renunciation” Minskii is referring to kenosis (the radical humility exemplified by Christ), but there is clearly some overlap between these concepts.

In this chapter, I will analyze Minskii’s philosophy of “meonism” as a reaffirmation of divine being through the negation of the self. Establishing features of meonism as related to apophatic philosophy, I will contextualize Minskii’s positive concept of “affirmative,” or optimistic self-renunciation in Maurice Maeterlinck’s influential philosophical writings. This context shows the intellectual background informing Minskii’s tragedy, Al’ma. Finally, I discuss Al’ma itself, Minskii’s largely unread meonistic “masterpiece,” with the aim of working out the dramatic potential of philosophical models of self-renunciation and their resistance to pessimistic collapse. This discussion leads to a reworking of the romantic paradigm of heroism as derived from great action: in Al’ma, Minskii’s presentation of the passive inner drama of the soul may be considered a critique of the tragedy of action and its foregrounding of the protagonist’s active self-affirmation.

**Self-renunciation and Meonism**

Self-affirmation and self-renunciation might seem to constitute very different acts of sacrifice in the individual’s spiritual journey toward God, but they describe the same event of transcendence. Minskii’s two philosophical works, *Pri svete sovesti: mysli i mechty o tseli zhizni*...
(By the light of conscience: thoughts and dreams on the goal of life, 1890) and Religiia budushchego: filosofskie razgovory (The religion of the future: philosophical conversations, 1905), are different articulations of meonism, a philosophical system amounting to the total renunciation of the self. A “meon” (μὴ ὄν, or non-being, a concept borrowed from Plato’s use of it in The Sophist and other dialogues) is the negative, or spiritual essence toward which all existence strives. Every appearance and concept has its corresponding meon; not only does each of us strive toward the negation of our existence, but so does the entire universe. According to Minskii, it is impossible to attribute any value to life without these corresponding signs of its negation: “meons are the most desired, cherished, and holy things that life gives us” (мэоны суть самое желанное, заветное, священное изо всего, что дает нам жизнь). Minskii claims that when our souls perceive meons – “the understanding about what is absolutely contrary to the world” (понятия о том, что абсолютно противоположно миру) – we experience both joy and sorrow in the ecstatic communion with “non-being,” or the Absolute (God). Compared to Ivanov’s presentation of the hero’s sacrificial act as life-affirming, Minskii’s model is ascetic and, at least on first glance, life-denying. Another comparison is suggested in Ivanov’s idea of merging with God prior to the union with feminine Chaos (the World Soul.

63 “Not even just us, but the entire world in its movement and striving to development bears witness to the inner necessity of negating itself and the desire of wrenching itself from its forms, ceasing to be that which it is and becoming something else” (И не только мы, но весь мир своим движением и стремлением к развитию свидетельствует о внутренней необходимости отрицать себя, о желании вырваться из своих форм, перестать быть тем, чем он есть, и стать чем-то иным). N.M. Minskii, Pri svete sovesti: mysli i mechty o tseli zhizni (S.-Peterburg, 1897), 193. In other words, all things strive beyond the possibility of mortality or empirical existence, a central idea in Plotinus.
64 Ibid., 192.
65 Ibid., 193.
Mother Earth), which in Ivanov’s thought is marked by erotic imagery. For Minskii, the soul’s union with God, at least initially, is not presented as such.66

Though meonism failed to make a serious impact on the religious-philosophical debates of the time, the term reappears independently of Minskii among the next generation of religious thinkers, in the work of Vladimir Ern and, more significantly for this chapter, Viacheslav Ivanov.67 They came to employ meonism as a pejorative blanket term for the rationalist and transcendental-idealist traditions.68 Ivanov associated meonism part of the time with false, “idealistic” symbolism, which Ivanov, Ern, and Pavel Florensky, seem to have conflated for their own ideological purposes (see “Dve stikhii sovremennogo simvolizma” [Two Elements of Contemporary Symbolism]).69 In “Religioznoe delo Vladimira Solov’eva” (The Religious Task of Vladimir Solov’ev), Ivanov claimed that “gnoseological relativism carried over into life turns into ontological meonism” (гносеологический релятивизм, перенесенный в жизнь, обращается в мэонизм онтологический); here meonism is a calque for subjective idealism. In Bor’ba za Logos (The Struggle for Logos, 1911) Ern claimed:


67 Pamela Davidson points out that Ivanov first employs the term “meon” in a poem by that name dedicated to Minskii. He also used it in the early essay “Kop'e Afiny,” published in Vesy, no. 10 (1904): 6-16. See Pamela Davidson, Vyacheslav Ivanov and C.M. Bowra: A Correspondence from Two Corners on Humanism (Birmingham: Centre for Russian and East European Studies, 2006), 113n69.

68 For a discussion of Ern’s use of this term, see Christopher Stroop, “Providential Empire: Russia’s Religious Intelligentsia and the First World War” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University, Stanford, 2012), 47. In a footnote to her translation of Florensky’s Obratnaia perspektiva (Reverse Perspective), Misler likely mistakes his use of the term. Florensky probably refers to “meonism” as Ern, with whom he was close, understood it. See Pavel Florensky, Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art, ed. Nicoletta Misler (London: Reaktion, 2002).

69 This essay is Ivanov’s polemical response to the debates about “realistic” versus “idealistic” symbolism. See V.I. Ivanov, “Dve stikhii sovremennogo simvolizma,” SS, t. 2 (Brussels: Foyer Oriental Chrétien, 1974), 536-61.
If for Berkeley the external world became a μὴ ὄν, that is, an illusion, merely practically required for the development of spirits and regularly conjured by kind Providence with the highest goals, then Kant in the Analytics finds a transcendental explanation both of this illusion and of this regularity.  

As Thomas Seifrid explains: “[the] ‘meonism’ that appears in Berkeley and blossoms in Hume finally entrenches itself in Kant’s transcendentalism, which Ern regards as the culmination of (Western) rationalism.” By the time Ern came to use the term fairly regularly as a synonym for “rationalism” or “illusion,” the meaning of meon in the Neo-Platonic and Christian understanding of the divine non-being that Minskii originally evoked was forgotten. The meon thus began a new life that signified the dregs of Kantian idealism.

Though later joining in solidarity with Ern’s notion of the meonic, Ivanov’s use of the concept is irregular. Ivanov clearly found enough value in Minskii’s meon to write the poem “Meon,” which he dedicated to Minskii. By referring to Minskii’s intended meaning, Ivanov places himself, however briefly, in Minskii’s “idealistic” camp, which had by the second-generation iteration of Symbolism provoked debate. In “Kop’e Afiny” (The Spear of Athena), a year before publishing “Meon,” Ivanov wrote:

It is not necessary to be overly partial to a metaphysical type of thought in order to unmask life as becoming and, it follows, nonexistence; in order to comprehend one’s empirical existence as a “meon” (non-being); in order to be conscious that the synthetic condition of becoming is existence and that it exists for the searcher, similar to the mathematical boundary of infinitely approaching integers, a certain “I” is in me; like a postulate of my not-“I,” or of my I as a meon.

He who has been imbued with this pathos of self-searching, no longer knows personal self-will: he is immersed in the whole and the general.

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72 “Не нужно быть чрезмерно пристрастным к метафизическому образу мышления, чтобы обличить жизнь, как становление и, следовательно, небытие; чтобы осмыслить свое
Ivanov begins this passage with the observation that life is an illusion: what we perceive as life, is in actuality becoming, which he defines as non-existence. This “condition of becoming,” though “synthetic,” is still necessary, Ivanov argues, because it allows for the dialectical acknowledgement of a “not-I,” a perception of one’s true self. In this way the reader can understand Ivanov’s reference to the asymptote (“the mathematical boundary of infinitely approaching integers”): as one approaches the limits of the empirical, one is primed to sense this “postulate of my not-‘I.’” This search in Ivanov’s presentation is an inner activity; a renunciation of the will must accompany this search for the inner “meon.”

Going further, the above passage may be considered an apophatic statement, though Ivanov’s focus is on knowing oneself through recognizing elements of oneself that are “not-I.” In its most basic meaning, apophatic theology is based on the premise that God can be known only through what He is not. Vladimir Lossky insists on this meaning of existence in relation to God (non-being):

(...) it is a refusal to accept being as such, in so far as it conceals the divine non-being: it is a renunciation of the realm of created things in order to gain access to that of the

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эмпирическое существо как мэона (не-сущее); чтобы осознать, что синтетическое условие становления есть бытие и что существует для ищущего, подобно математическому пределу бесконечно приближающихся величин, некоторое Я во мне; как постулат моего не я, или я — мэона.

Кто проникся этим пафосом самоиспыания, тот уже не знает личного произвола: он погружается в целое и всеобщее” (Ivanov, “Kоп’е Афины,” in SS, t. 1, 727-733; 733).

Further establishing the logic of how becoming and non-existence are the same thing is beyond the scope of this chapter. For more on this connection in Russian religious thought, see the work of Sergei Bulgakov in Svet nevechernii (Unfading Light), where he conveyed the Platonic understanding of non-being as simply “alterity” and Hegelian “becoming,” whereby human existence is momentarily united with its divine negation. See Sergei Bulgakov, Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 191.
uncreated; a more existential liberation involving the whole being of him who would know God.\textsuperscript{74}

Lossky’s accounting for the apophatic basis of mysticism helps a reader better grasp the particular narrative of transcendence put forward in the above quote from Ivanov’s work. In that passage, Ivanov forgoes allusions to the erotic connotations that transcendence as artistic creation normally has for him. In addition, his discussion of non-being is not about art at all, only the individual event of a soul moving toward divinity.

These ideas form the background of Ivanov’s poem “Meon” when he frames the poem from its (that is, the meon’s) perspective. The poem might therefore be read as a sympathetic interpretation of Minskii’s philosophy. Ivanov later retitled “Meon” “Semper morior, semper resurgo” for his collection \textit{Cor Ardens}. The latter version ended with two four-line stanzas; when it was first published in \textit{Voprosy zhizni (Questions of Life)} in 1905 the last two quatrains were presented as a single eight-line stanza:

\begin{verbatim}
Мэон
Меж мгновеньем и мгновеньем A
Бездна темная зияет B
По змеисто-зыбким звеньям A
Тухнет свет, и свет сияет B
Над струистою могилой. C

Сладко, вспыхнув лунной силой, C
Вновь тонуть мне в силе темной, – D
Малой искрой миг единый E
Мреть – и меркнуть – над огромной D
Колыбельною пучиною. E

Ходит бездной дух-гаситель, F
Ходит бездной воскреситель F
На божественном приволье... G
Погасая, воскресая, H
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{74} V. Lossky, \textit{The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church}, trans. the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (London: J. Clarke, 1957), 38.
Meon

Between moment and moment
Gapes a dark abyss.
Along serpentine-rippling chains
A light dims, and yet shines
Over a flowing grave.

It is sweet, ignited by the lunar force,
For me to sink once again in the dark force, –
Like a small spark, for a single instant
To flicker – and grow dark – over the enormous
Cradle-like chasm.

A spirit-extinguisher goes by the abyss
A savior goes by the abyss
On the divine expanse…
Extinguishing, resurrecting,
It is sweet to me
To entrust my will-lessness to the reliable waves…
I am a strip of bright thought
Over the profound Impossible.

The rhyme scheme of “Meon” is entirely feminine, marked at the end of each line in the Russian version above. In the context of trochaic rhythms, these rhymes help foster greater unity between the individual lines and, of course, between the stanzas – an apt means of describing the meon, suspended between being and non-being. In addition to this greater dynamic of light and darkness over the abyss, the poem is told from two alternating perspectives. In this sense the Cor ardens version produces a more coherent reading with Ivanov’s choice to break the final eight-line stanza into two quatrains. In that version, it is more apparent that the final two quatrains continue the alternation of the first and second stanzas. The perspective of the first stanza

75 V.I. Ivanov, “Meon,” Voprosy zhizni, no. 8 (1905), 20.
resembles that of a third-person narrator, describing a small light over the abyss, whereas the second stanza is told from the perspective of the lyric “I,” who is eventually transformed into “a strip of bright thought.” The organization of the rhyming lines helps to bridge this divide of perspective. For example, the final line of the first stanza finds its pair in the first line of the second stanza, as though the rhyme straddles and unites the poem’s different perspectives.

Ivanov may have chosen these perspectives to convey the meon’s realization of a true “I” through the process of merging with the divine. In this way Ivanov’s reference to Lomonosov’s “Evening meditation” (Vechernee razmyshlenie) in the line “Like a small spark, for a single instant” indicates not the diminished role of the human, but rather the discovery of its integral connection to the divine universe. Throughout the poem, the meon seems to be involved in a continual process of self-sacrifice and resurrection conveyed in Ivanov’s use of the present tense and key verbal adverbs (“For me to sink once again in the dark force” and “Extinguishing, resurrecting”). Consistent with Ivanov’s understanding of self-affirmation, the loss of one’s will initiates not only the process of continual resurrection, but also reveals the true self. This last achievement of self-affirmation in the final lines of the poem is marked by the only time that “I” appears in the nominative case, accompanied by the transformation of the mysterious, fragile “light” (свет) at the poem’s beginning to “a strip of bright (светл[ая]) thought” in the night sky. Such a reading finds support in the editors’ commentary to this poem, which notes that Ivanov “perceived a connection between non-being and selfless sacrifice and Chaos, out of which a Star is born.” In other words, Ivanov in “Meon” presents Minskii’s meonism in terms of its self-affirmation in the Divinity, rather than Minskii’s understanding of this act as self-renouncing. An important difference is that Ivanov places emphasis on resurrection rather than the humble

76 “[…]*usmatrival связь не-бытия и жертвы бескорыстной с Хaosом, из которого рождается Звезда*” (Commentary to “Meon,” SS, т. 2, 708-09).
sacrifice that brings it about, establishing an ambiguity between the self-affirming exercise of will and the self-willed sacrifice of the poem’s “I.” Additionally, rebirth, a key component of Ivanov’s notion of the erotic foundation of spiritual communion, is reinforced in the fertile element of Chaos in the poem. Occurrences of the adverb “sweet” (сладко) likewise testify to the meon’s hunger for Divine union, as well as the erotic completion of this union. Ivanov evokes dark Chaos with paradoxical imagery, demonstrated in the phrases “flowing grave” and “Cradle-like chasm.”

**Minskii’s Meonism**

Minskii is not normally considered as a serious religious thinker and his status as a philosopher was dubious to many of his contemporaries. Indeed, his relationship to theological problems that are primarily classified under the rubric of Orthodox thought, such as negative (or apophatic) theology or the virtues of the ascetic life, are not often discussed. But in fact, Minskii was closer to this Orthodox tradition than some of his literary and poet peers, who, according to Georges Florovsky, were largely discredited dabblers in mystical fluff. In his *Ways of Russian Theology*, Florovsky provides a critique of what he deemed misguided Symbolist religious thinking “On the Eve” (the title of Florovsky’s chapter on Silver Age religious philosophy) of revolution and in contrast to those more socially and politically engaged thinkers – Berdiaev and Bulgakov to name two – with whom he would later correspond. But I would like to argue that, unlike his peers Merezhkovskii and Vasilii Rozanov, Minskii did make a contribution to

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religious thought with meonism, though admittedly his theory is not explicitly tied to Orthodox theology. I will attempt to clarify certain features of meonism, despite their intentional vagueness, as a strain of apophatic theology.  

Unfortunately, meonism has not received much scholarly attention, probably due to the difficulty of conceptualizing its theoretical applications. However, as the earliest attempt at Symbolist philosophy, meonism deserves serious consideration. This portion of the chapter is intended to remedy the absence of a broad scholarly assessment of meonism, apart from those attempted in already published accounts.

One major difficulty in defining meonism is the existence of many available definitions. Nicolas Slonimsky, Minskii’s nephew who went on to become a noted conductor and musicologist, defined meonism as, “a mystic belief in the unbelievable.” For Tomas Venclova, meonism was “an eclectic philosophic doctrine [...] in which the influence of Nietzsche and


80 Slonimsky, Perfect Pitch, 41. Rosenthal mentions meonism as part of the “host of political and social theories which purported to combine individual freedom and social integration by means of art, love, and faith.” See Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, “Theatre as Church: The Vision of the Mystical Anarchists,” Russian History/ Histoire Russe, vol. 4, pt. 2 (1977): 122-41; 123; Avril Pyman notes that meonism might best be viewed as “an aesthetic credo rather than as a philosophic or religious statement. It was about the purpose of art rather than the purpose of life.” See Avril Pyman, A History of Russian Symbolism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 26. Though Minskii’s poetry did mirror his philosophical interests, there is no evidence that his philosophical activity existed solely as a vehicle for his aesthetics. In fact, his intellectual interests were social and political in nature; his art served the purpose of promoting these moral convictions.
Hindu philosophy is perceptible.”

This association with Nietzsche, with whom Minskii, at least publicly, did not agree, is a frequent assumption about meonism in the critical literature. Minskii has been thought to have closely followed several Nietzschean precepts, but many of the philosopher’s key ideas remain absent in his work.

Among the striking claims that Georgii Polonskii makes in a long essay on Minskii is his view that certain characteristics of meonism are found in Nietzsche’s amor fati:

Minskii’s “meonism” prophesies the same optimism of despair as Nietzsche’s amor fati, with the only difference that the latter turns toward the will and the biological element of the human being as its goal, whereas meonism replaces this will and element with the striving for that which does not and cannot exist, which in an uncertain way stirs every human being.

However, Minskii’s orientation toward divine non-being is incompatible with Nietzsche’s meaning. For Nietzsche, amor fati is the triumph over suffering in the individual’s consciousness of the meaninglessness of that suffering.

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82 “I am afraid of Nietzsche, I am afraid not so much of his new lie and untruth, as much as of a return with him to the old and the already experienced. Anything, but not what came before, not the previous love and not the previous cruelty, for the soul thirsts for a new earth and a new sky” (Боюсь Нитче, боюсь не столько новой его лжи и неправды, сколько возврата с ним к старому и пережитому. Все, только не прежнее, не прежняя любовь и не прежняя жестокость, ибо жаждет душа новой земли и нового неба). N. Minskii, “Fridrikh Nitshe,” Mir iskusstva, nos. 19-20 (1900, t. 4): 139-47; 140. Here Minskii finds Nietzsche’s eternal return disturbing: eternal suffering would make the idea of God impossible.
83 N.O. Lossky claims that “like many other Russian writers of the time [Minskii] was carried away by Nietzsche’s doctrine of the superman,” but there is no convincing evidence of the Übermensch in Minskii’s philosophy. See N.O. Lossky, The History of Russian Philosophy (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1951), 337.
One explanation of meonism is significant. In his *Literaturnye vospominaniiia* (Literary reminiscences), P.P. Pertsov’s definition of meonism conveys its strong connection to the Symbolist worldview: “an original philosophical conception, [...] a distinct ‘philosophy of non-being,’ based on the idea of the duality of universal life and all of its manifestations.”  

In *Pri svete sovesti*, Minskii modeled this universal dualism on the then popular distinction between worldly materialism and the transcendent ideal: “In every transformation of forms the very material negates itself in the name of the non-being of the meon; thus in every phenomenon a material, positive principle is inseparably connected to something ideal, negative.” Meonism, then, might be better understood as an articulation of well-known Symbolist preoccupations with categories of the material and spiritual. But as a theory it goes one step further in advocating a way to bridge these realms that goes beyond the limits of art.

As Pertsov’s insight shows, it is possible that those in Minskii’s circle did the most to help him craft a better explanation of his philosophy. Long after the initial publication of *Pri svete sovesti*, S.A. Vengerov, who would eventually become Minskii’s in-law, made a request that he formulate his philosophical “credo” without the “whimsical mixture of scientific thought and the flight of poetic fantasy” (причудливая смесь научного мышления и полета поэтической фантазии). Minskii’s response, just a few pages long, is probably the clearest summation of his philosophy:

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86 “В каждом превращении форм материя сама себя отрицает во имя небытия мэона; таким образом в каждом явлении начало материальное, положительное неразрывно связано с идеальным, отрицательным” (Minskii, *Pri svete sovesti*, 213).
87 S.A. Vengerov, “‘Meonizm’ N.M. Minskogo...,” 340. Vengerov wrote, “One could say about meonism approximately what someone said about chess: for a philosophy in meonism there is too much poetry, for poetry too much philosophy” (Про мeonизм можно сказать
We do not know anything about what lies outside the universal, transcendental divinity, but we know with surety that in pace with the increase in the activity of our rationality and our will, ideas and feelings arise in us *sui generis*, different from all sensory and metaphysical phenomena. [...] In the meonistic consciousness we discover that life consists not in a materialistic idyll of comfort and knowledge, but a mystical tragedy and that our goal is contained not in self-affirmation in happiness, but in self-negation through knowledge of the divinity.  

Minskii expresses himself more clearly in this later attempt, but a systematic definition was always irreconcilable with his mystic leanings.

In effect, meons represent what Minskii understands as the human yearning for contact with the Divine. He suggests that the very existence of meons, if that is not a contradiction in terms, brought about life itself. For life to come into being, however, the meon must negate itself, almost in the way that two negatives create a positive. In turn, life must negate itself in order to merge with the inherently “positive” meon. Perhaps this way of thinking about the self-sacrificial meon is what Minskii means when he writes, “Being, as a concept, something thoroughly negative, meons become something positive to the highest degree in accordance with

приблизительно то, что кто-то сказал про шахматы: для философии в меонизме слишком много поэзии, для поэзии слишком много философии). See S.A. Vengerov, “Nikolai Maksimovich Minskii,” in *Russkaia literatura XX veka, 1890-1910*, T. 1, 334-35. N.M. Mikhailovskii was disappointed that a poet, “once bright, clear and so promising” (когда-то яркий, ясный и многообещающий), had abandoned his craft in exchange for “zigzagged literary activity” (эиззагообразная литературная деятельность). See N.M. Mikhailovskii, “Ob ‘Al'me: tragedii iz sovremennoi zhizni’ g. Minskogo,” *Russkoe bogatstvo*, no. 5 (1900): 110-28, second pagination; 120. See also N.M. Mikhailovskii, “O sovesti g. Minskogo,” *Russkoe bogatstvo*, no. 10 (1897): 161-180. For his part, Volynskii claimed to have asked in vain for Minskii to indicate key passages that might better explain his theory. See A. Volynskii, “Kritika,” *Severnyi vestnik*, no. 2 (1896): 70-80; 76.

88 “Мы ничего не знаем о внемировом, трансцендентном божестве, но мы знаем с уверенностью, что по мере того, как возрастает деятельность нашего разума и нашей воли, в нас возникают идеи и чувства *sui generis*, отличные от всех проявлений чувственных и метафизических. [...] В меоническом сознании мы открываем, что жизнь не материалистическая идиллия комфорта и знания, но мистическая трагедия и что цель наша заключается не в самоутвержении в счастье, а в самоотрицании через познание божества” (Minskii, *Pri svete sovesti*, 342-43).
the inner feeling that accompanies them.” This statement is an example of the kind of difficulty that Minskii had in presenting meonism to its first critical audience.

What is confusing about meonism is that often Minskii describes the meon as having its own agency without explaining that this seemingly externalized activity is occurring within the human soul. The following passage, then, should be read as the awakening of the meon within the soul:

[...] the selflessly loving meon by its power of free will must take on the great mystery of self-sacrifice; in order for the world to come into being, the meon must from eternal love make itself and its attributes incomprehensible, contrary to all that exists and can be conceived of.

Minskii’s view is that the soul does not perform this voluntary sacrifice out of despair or profound pessimism, but from a desire for a higher, moral good, and, ultimately, union with God.

The properties and meaning of meonism are also clearer in Minskii’s later concept of dvuedinstvo (dual-unity), which responds to opposing notions of Christian morality being debated at the time. From Pri svete sovesti to his talks delivered at the Religious-Philosophical Meetings, Minskii’s thought went through various stages and came to a head with dvuedinstvo. Minskii framed the problem thus in his article “Dvuedinstvo nравственного идеала” (The dual-unity of the moral ideal):

How could it happen that love for God and love for the human being are two testaments of Christian morality, which are among themselves inseparably merged, like warmth and

89 “Будучи, как понятие, чем-то насквозь отрицательным, мэоны становятся чем-то в высшей степени положительным по тому внутреннему чувству, которое их сопровождает” (Ibid., 193).
90 “[...] бескорыстно любящий мэон силою своей свободной воли должен решиться на великое таинство самопожертвования; чтобы мир мог возникнуть, мэон должен из бесконечной любви [...] сделать себя и свои атрибуты абсолютно непостижимыми, противоположными всему существующему и мыслимому” (Ibid., 203).
light; how could it happen that they historically oppose one and the other, like two warring principles?\footnote{“Как же могло случиться, что любовь к Богу и любовь к человеку, два завета двуединой христианской морали, которые между собой неразрывно сливь, как теплота и свет, как могло случиться, что они исторически противостоят одна другой, как два враждебных начала?” N. Minskii, “Dvuedinstvo nравственного идеала,” Novyi put’, no. 4 (1903): 71-96; 80. “В общих чертах два пути, две воли христианской нравственности могут быть определены следующим образом. Первая мораль – утилитарная, положительная – имеет целью удовлетворение разнообразных жизненных потребностей; вторая – мистическая, отрицательная – имеет целью отречение от потребностей. Первая зовет к обществу, к людям, в мир. Вторая – в пустыню, в келью, в затворе. Заповедь первой – любовь к ближнему. Заповедь второй – любовь к своему сокровенному <<я>>, как к образу Божию” (Ibid., 75-76).}

This challenge of remaining true to one’s spiritual ideals through ascetic withdrawal and the instinctual desire to live in the human community is the heroine’s dilemma in Al’ma, to be discussed in the final section.

Like other religious thinkers of the time – namely Rozanov and Merezhkovskii – Minskii hoped that religion would acquire a new role in society. All that was needed in their view was an intellectual climate free of Church dogmatism. In the same essay, Minskii articulated the two moral pathways that led to disagreements among the intelligentsia and the clergy at the Religious-Philosophical Meetings:

In general the two paths, the two wills of Christian morality can be defined in the following way. The first moral – utilitarian and positive – it has as a goal the satisfaction of diverse life needs; the second – mystical and negative – it has as a goal the renunciation of needs. The first calls us to society, to people, to the world. The second – to the desert, to the cell, to the enclosed space. The commandment of the first is love of one’s neighbor. The commandment of the second is love for one’s own hidden “I,” like the image of God.\footnote{V.I. Ivanov, “Kop’e Afiny,” in SS, t. 1, 733.}

The second love for the “inner ‘I’” is the “negative” path, the ascetic path toward what Ivanov called in more positive terms “the pathos of self-searching.”\footnote{V.I. Ivanov, “Kop’e Afiny,” in SS, t. 1, 733.} The apparent irreconcilability between utilitarian morality (represented by Church dogma) and what he names “mystical”
morality (the ascetic withdrawal from society) is for Minskii only a problem of perspective. The ideal of renunciation (идеал отречения), he explained, even for the Brahmins, had utilitarian qualities. It sought to relieve suffering through withdrawal from the world. Minskii reconciles this problem by reframing the meaning of the ascetic, mystical ideal of God’s self-renunciation, which he bases on the same principles that give meonism self-sacrificial qualities:

Only in Christianity did the moral ideal of holiness reach its full glow, borrowing this glow from mystical reason. As soon as a new dogmatic truth about God, sacrificing Himself for the sake of the world, appeared to this reason, a mystical feeling arose ecstatically in contemplating this truth, and the mystical will, in order to make this flight of ecstasy easier, started to cast off from the soul the ballast of desires, struggles, and spiritual feats. In the practice of the hermit fathers – a moment of usefulness was retained in the hope of atoning for both one’s own sins and those of others. However it is not escape from sin that comprises the pathos of asceticism, but the bliss of voluntary willlessness and dispassion, the consciousness of one’s absolute personality.

Seeking out a balance between the earthbound utilitarian ideal and the ascetic ideal, Minskii gives greater weight to the latter than many of his peers. Locating the inherent altruism of absolute willlessness, Minskii in this passage returns to the moral underpinnings of the heroine’s apparently selfish actions in Al’ma.

But it is important to understand meonism in the context of Minskii’s skepticism toward positivist knowledge and the moral dogmatism of the Christian Church. In his preface to the first edition of Pri svete sovesti, Minskii set out to reveal “the supreme goal of life” (верховная цель жизни), in the process rejecting utilitarian altruism and materialist detractors of spirituality.

94 Minskii, “Dvuedinstvo nravstvennogo ideala,” 87.
95 “Только в христианстве нравственный идеал святости достиг полного блеска, заимствуя этот блеск у мистического разума. Как только этому разуму открылась новая догматическая истина о Боге, искупившем мире, о Боге, принесшим себя в жертву ради мира, вслед за ним и мистическое чувство прониклось восторгом в созерцании этой истины, и мистическая воля, дабы облегчить полет экстаза, стала выбрасывать из души балласт желаний, борьбы, подвигов. В практике отшельничества – момент полезности сохранялся в надежде замолить грехи свои и чужие, однако не бегство от греха составляло пафос аскетизма, а блаженство добровольного безволия и бесстрастия, сознание своей абсолютной личности” (Ibid., 88).

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When viewed in light of the later theory of *dvuedinstvo*, it is clearer that Minskii intended for meonism to have not only a mystical, but also an ethical grounding.

The previous comparisons of Minskii to Ivanov demonstrate the affinities between the way they think about sacrifice, despite their coming to very different conclusions about the significance of this initial act of divine communion. Self-affirmation, as performed by the tragic hero or the artist, seeks to accept a better, truer divine nature through the renunciation of a previous self. The active heroism of this self-affirmation corresponds to the initial asceticism that prepares the hero for his participation in some kind of divine, erotic union, repeating the process of sacrifice and renewal *ad infinitum*. Such a focus on affirmation and renewal permits Ivanov to find joy in tragedy, not pessimistic rejection. Minskii’s meonism, however, seeks to restore the passive element in the individual’s ascetic preparation for spiritual union, while also striving to transcend the pessimistic withdrawal from life implied in renunciation. In *dvuedinstvo*, it can be argued that Minskii makes a better case for the self-renouncing ascetic ideal, but he does not gesture toward the larger significance of self-sacrifice, except to insist on its ethical foundations.

The remainder of this chapter will examine the challenges posed to Minskii’s dramatic experiment with meonism and the larger question of the dramatic value of both modes of tragic sacrifice: the self-affirming (demonstrative of heroism) or the self-renouncing (of martyrdom).

*Can Meonism Be Tragic? The Dramatic Applications of Renunciation*

Compared to the fluid movement between philosophy and dramatic theory in Ivanov’s critical essays, Minskii’s focus on self-renunciation would seem to lack an aesthetic application. His tragedy, *Al’ma* (1900), however, modeled in part on his relationship with the poet Zinaida

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96 It also has important aesthetic relevance for the composition of an artwork (achieved through the artist’s ascent/descent) and the structure of that art work (as modeled in the triangle of tragic action presented at the conclusion of Ivanov’s essay, “O deistvii i deistve,” in *SS*, t. 2: 156-69.
Gippius, was his attempt to explore the dramatic and tragic potential of renunciation.\textsuperscript{97} Making a similar point, one scholar finds the role of renunciation the only quality that endows martyrdom with tragic pathos: “The real test for sacrificial martyrdom lies in the firmness of the martyr’s positive attitude toward life and in his devotion to what he regards as a supreme value.”\textsuperscript{98} \textit{Al'ma} is a modern tragedy about the spiritual development of its eponymous heroine, whose actions point back to meonic philosophy. Al'ma’s self-destructive behavior, to be discussed in greater detail in a later section, force those around her to negotiate their own ideological positions and emotional attachments to her. Though in \textit{Al'ma} Minskii resolutely advocates asceticism as a path to the divine good, he nevertheless shows the difficulty of this choice for individual relationships and perceived societal obligations.

Even before publishing \textit{Al'ma}, Minskii made the connection between meonism and tragedy a hard sell. Simply resigning oneself to death seemed to stop the predominant model of heroic action in its tracks. Volynskii hinted at the problematic dramatic status of meonism in a 1896 review of Minskii’s poetry, a year before the publication of the second edition of \textit{Pri svete sovesti}. Minskii’s latest verse had begun to closely follow his philosophical convictions, prompting Volynskii to write with reference to the “strange dialectic” of Minskii’s poetry:

In the life-drama of the world surrounding us the inspiring motif is something dead that existed but no longer exists, to which it is just as fruitless to strive as to the irretrievable past, which is alive only for a recollection. This drama takes place according to


inevitable, almost mechanical laws, and its holiness for the human consciousness is only in the selfless impulse, but not in the goal of this impulse…\footnote{В жизненной драме окружающего нас мира одухотворяющим мотивом является нечто мертвое, существовавшее, но уже не существующее, к чему так же бесплодно стремиться, как к безвозвратно прошедшему, живому только для воспоминанья. Это драма совершается по неизбежным, почти механическим законам, и ее святость для человеческого сознания – только в бескорыстном порыве, а не в цели этого порыва…” (Volynskii, “Kritika,” 76-77).}

Rather than present a single “impulse” as the main event of this spiritual ecstasy, Volynskii observed the mechanical and static nature of the meonic experience. In this sense, Volynskii seems to have found little to suggest a close affinity between impulses of ecstatic energy and a coherent, progressive narrative of spiritual becoming. This critique was later echoed in Gippius’s review of *Al’ma* in which she claimed that Minskii’s heroine did not strive toward God, but instead remained immobile before Him: “We also need freedom before God, but not in standing before Him, but as eternal movement toward Him. For movement toward Him can be only if we accept and understand life, love it the same, absolutely the same, as we do death.”\footnote{“Нам нужна и свобода перед Богом, – но не как стояние перед Ним, а как венчное движение к Нему. А движение к Нему может быть только если мы примем и поймем жизнь, полюбим ее так же, совершенно так же, как смерть” (Gippius, “Torzhestvo v chest' smerti,” 94).} Gippius disputes the possibility of reaching God through solely ascetic means, making the path of asceticism inherently alien to what she considers to be the truer, tragic striving toward God of the person caught between love of life and love of one’s inner self.

*Maeterlinck*

Of the few reviewers of *Al’ma*, one remarked not only on the strangeness of Minskii’s tragedy as tragedy, but also noticed the influence of Ibsen and Maeterlinck in particular...
Maeterlinck’s distinctive dialogic style can certainly be felt in Al'ma, but his presence in Minskii’s work represents not mere literary imitation, but rather the application of popular dramatic techniques and philosophical ideas by a veritable expert. Minskii was one of the key disseminators of Maeterlinck’s philosophical ideas and dramatic innovations in Russia, translating his essays beginning in the 1890s and then later his complete works, which were published in 1915. For this reason, one can state with certainty that no Russian Symbolist had more control over Maeterlinck’s reception in Russia than Nikolai Minskii. Though Maeterlinck’s writings became known in Russia after Minskii had already published Pri svete sovesti, Maeterlinck’s philosophy and dramatic theory helped give shape to Minskii’s later goal of writing a “meonic” tragedy, a tragedy that portrayed the protagonist not as a hero but a martyr who gives up her life out of a commitment to self-searching.


102 Scholarship devoted to Maeterlinck reception in Russia examines the Symbolist response to his dramatic and theoretical writings, or to various productions in the directorial careers of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold. These studies of Maeterlinck’s reception in Russia are primarily concerned with the theater’s rejection of naturalism and with directorial experiments to achieve its overthrow. But the Belgian playwright’s role in first- or second-generation Symbolist writing as a model of new currents of thought goes far beyond the narrow context of his relevance to theater. Symbolists read Maeterlinck as a philosopher and not only a theorist of the stage.

Maeterlinck began receiving attention in Russia after Octave Mirbeau’s claim in Le Figaro that his tragedy Princess Maleine rivaled Shakespeare. In one of the first critical appraisals of Maeterlinck in Russia, literary critic Ivan Ivanov reiterated the dramatist’s growing popularity in terms that reveal the various re-workings of Mirbeau’s praise: “Maeterlinck is the most characteristic representative of Symbolist drama, the ‘Shakespeare of the decadents,’ as criticism benevolent to the new school names him” (Метерлинк — характернейший представитель символической драмы, «Шекспир декадентов», как его называет критика, благосклонная к новой школе). See I.I. Ivanov, “Meterlink i ego dramy,” Artist, no. 28 (1893): 63-67; 65. For an introduction to Maeterlinck reception in Russia, see N.V. Marusiak, “‘Russkii Meterlink.’ Poeziiia i stsena,” in Moris Meterlink v Rossii Serebrianogo veka (Moskva: Rudomino, 2001), 7-38.
A closer look at a turning point in Russia’s reception of Maeterlinck has relevance to the unique place of Minskii’s tragedy among other Symbolist drama. Beginning in the mid-1890s, writers and poets praised Maeterlinck for setting aside external event and foregrounding in his plays the authentic drama of the inner self. Maeterlinck conveyed this key idea in his most important contribution as a theorist of drama, “Le Tragique quotidien” (Tragedy of the Everyday). A translation of this essay appeared in an 1899 issue of *Mir iskusstva* under the title “Povsednevniy tragizm.” This essay served as a manifesto for not only “everyday tragedy,” but also important dramatic concepts like static theater and “dialogue of the second degree” or “inner dialogue” (разговор второго рода, or внутренний разговор), ideas that would become important to Vsevolod Meyerhold’s early theater studios.

This new kind of tragedy ostensibly went beyond mythological models of tragic heroism, redefining tragedy as authentic, universal experience. As Zinaida Vengerova, a devotée of Maeterlinck and Minskii’s third wife, wrote in “Moris Meterlink” (1899):

Maeterlinck is the tragic writer par excellence, he focuses only on what in the spiritual life of people is the most fateful and inevitable. But everything that people of more immediate cultural centuries had considered tragic has lost its power before his philosophical consciousness.

In her view, Maeterlinck showed how tragedy is not a misfortune affecting only exceptional human beings and requiring a heroic response (Aristotle’s “noble actions and noble agents”), but rather the default state of existence. Maeterlinck, for his most ardent Russian supporters, had outdone Nietzsche in the redefinition of tragedy as ontology.

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104 “Метерлинк – трагический писатель par excellence, он останавливается лишь на том, что в душевой жизни людей самого рокового и безысходного. Но все то, что люди более непосредственных культурных веков считали трагичным, утратило свою силу пред его философским сознанием” (Vengerova, “Moris Meterlink,” 171-72).
Even before Maeterlinck had been published in Russia, elements of his dramatic focus on interiority rather than heroic external action appeared in Minskii’s work. In *Pri svete sovesti*, he remarked on the modern inability to connect with the heroism of great deeds:

> Artists of bygone days were inspired by religion, love of country, the glory of heroes, the tragedy of life, the power of fate. But the muse of our days cries only tears of pity. Ancient art no longer touches us. We pass indifferently beside the proud Apollos, happy Venuses, and majestic Zeuses because we cannot pity them. Homer, Aeschylus and Sophocles do not satisfy us: their heroes, though sacrificing themselves for the sake of duty, are insufficiently sensitive.¹⁰⁵

If in the *Poetics* “fear and pity” are conduits to catharsis, Minskii argued that his contemporary audience could only respond to displays of inner, rather than external, upheaval. However there were consequences to a dramatic focus on the inner life: first, its theatrical representation required new forms and techniques, and, second, the passivity of such an invisible drama might suggest a lack of human agency, as well as the futility of resisting such an inwardly generated struggle.

Indeed, the most criticized aspect of Maeterlinck’s theory of tragedy was that it sounded too pessimistic. Removing heroism from the dramatic equation had the potential end of utter hopelessness: if the hero’s only guilt was in existing, such a no-exit scenario stops action in its tracks. His followers in Russia, however, saw an upside to his most sweeping idea. In one of her

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¹⁰⁵“Художники прежних дней вдохновлялись религией, любовью к родине, славой героев, трагизмом жизни, силой рока. Но муза наших дней только льет слезы сострадания. Античное искусство уже нас не трогает. Мы проходим равнодушно перед грозными Аполлонами, счастливыми Венерами и величественными Зевсами, потому что не можем их жалеть. Гомер, Эсхил, Софокл нас не удовлетворяют: их герои, хоть и жертвуют собою ради долга, но недостаточно чувствительны” (Minskii, *Pri svete sovesti*, 31). The connection between Minskii’s and Maeterlinck’s philosophical views have been suggested but not developed. See Marina Arias-Vikhil’, “‘Siniaia ptitsa’ Morisa Meterlinka: Simvolistskii Shekspir,” in *Dukh simvolizma: russkoe i zapadnoevropeiskoe iskusstvo v konteskste epokhi kontsa XIX – nachala XX veka* (Moskva: Progress-Traditsiia, 2012).
essays, Vengerova tried to present Maeterlinck’s tragic ontology, which was on the surface to many of the time rather pessimistic, with mystical nuance:

[...] it turns out that from the depths of mystical terror, Maeterlinck derives a light that illuminates life and leads to the path of love and the good. This light consists in the powerful call to goodness and love, which resounds in the illuminated soul […] The more the soul grows, the more it comprehends a still higher and eternally inaccessible focus on a goal, which is fate itself – no longer terrifying, as it seems to the blind consciousness, but only mysterious and therefore holy.\[106\]

Vengerova is obviously responding to earlier critics like Merezhkovskii who doubted the spiritual healthiness of Maeterlinck’s stoic martyr-heroes, as if deciphering their destinies in the stars. Referring to the dramatist’s essay “L’Étoile,” Merezhkovskii quotes Maeterlinck’s insistent question, as though uttered by “an ancient fatalist or eastern philosopher” (древн[ий] фаталис[т] или восточн[ый] филосо[ф]): “What is the use of thinking about one’s ‘I,’ on which we have almost no influence?”\[107\] Vengerova, via Maeterlinck, contends that the soul reaches clarity by

\[106\] “[…] оказывается, что из глубин мистического ужаса Метерлинк черпает свет, озаряющий жизнь, ведущий на путь любви и добра. Свет этот заключается во властном призыве к доброте и любви, который звучит в просветленной душе […] Чем более душа растет, тем более она постигает еще более высокую и вечно недоступную ей целесообразность, которая и есть судьба – уже не грозная, как кажется слепому сознанию, а только таинственная, и потому священная.” Zinaida Vengerova, “Meterlink kak khudozhitnik i myslitel’,” in Literaturnye kharakteristikii, kn. 2 (S.-Peterburg, 1905): 1-54; 6-7.

\[107\] “Какая нам польза думать о своем «я», на которое мы не можем иметь почти никакого влияния?” Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, “Neoromantizm v drame,” in Estetika i kritika v dvukh tomakh, t. 1 (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1994), 260. Merezhkovskii’s quotations refer not to “Le tragique quotidien,” which was first published as a sketch on Ibsen’s Master Builder (Maurice Maeterlinck, “A propos de ‘Solness le Constructeur,’” Le Figaro, 2 Avril 1894), but to Maeterlinck’s essay “L’Étoile,” which later appeared in Le Trésor des humbles (1896). A preliminary version of “L’Étoile” (published as Maurice Maeterlinck, “A Propos de l’Oeuvre,” Le Figaro, 24 September 1894), which is closer to the publication date of Merezhkovskii’s essay. What is strange is that Maeterlinck’s essay, “A propos de ‘Solness le Constructeur,’” was not retitled “Le tragique quotidien” until its publication two years later in 1896. According to a bibliography of Maeterlinck’s published articles, “Le tragique quotidien” was not published as a stand-alone article, pointing to the possibility that Merezhkovskii’s inexact title, “Budushchnost' tragedii,” not the regular Russian translation, “Povsednevnyi tragizm,” is simply coincidental. See M. Lecat, Bibliographie de Maurice Maeterlinck, littérature, science, philosophie (Bruxelles, 1939).
discovering its inner fate; she frames this spiritual discovery as self-knowledge and enlightenment rather than stoicism.

For Vengerova and Minskii, there was not only dramatic potential in Maeterlinck’s focus on renunciation, but truly ethical stakes. One Neo-Kantian critic and early sociologist, V.M. Khvostov, seems to have shared this view, writing in his *Etika Meterlinka* (*Ethics of Maeterlinck*, 1911):

In Maeterlinck, I found what was not in Ibsen. Ibsen’s moral worldview is striking for its severity; from Ibsen blows the cold of Norwegian snows and the intractability of Norwegian granite. The ethics of Maeterlinck are an ethics of warm love for a person, an ethics capable of bringing consolation in sorrowful minutes and warming the person, whose soul is beginning to grow cold in the surrounding icy temperature of human indifference and risks becoming coarse in the severe struggle with cruel reality.¹⁰⁸

Unlike many in the 1890s who considered Maeterlinck’s Belgian heritage and Ibsen’s Scandinavian roots as prerequisites to writing about darker subjects, Khvostov injects Maeterlinck with the “Latinate” warmth¹⁰⁹ that he ordinarily was thought to have lacked in

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¹⁰⁸ “У Метерлинка я нашел то, чего не было у Ибсена. Нравственное мировоззрение Ибсена поражает своей суровостью; от Ибсена веет холодом норвежских снегов и неподатливостью норвежского гранита. Этика Метерлинка есть этика теплой любви к человеку, этика, способная принести утешение в скорбные минуты и согреть человека, душа которого начинает охлаждаться в окружающей ледяной температуре человеческого равнодушия, рискует огрубеть в суровой борьбе с жестокой действительностью.” V. Khvostov, *Etika Meterlinka* (Moskva, 1913), 9.

¹⁰⁹ Russian critics considered Belgian writers like Maeterlinck (as well as Verhaeren and Rodenbach) different from their “Latinate” Symbolist counterparts in hexagonal France. Zinaida Vengerova made reference to this racial cliché in defense of the contributions of Belgian writers to French literature: “[...] the ‘northern mood,’ that is, the inclination to contemplation, the immersion in the inner world of the soul, the thirst for holiness and prayers, all the same enter into contemporary French literature, thanks to the fact that France happens to have its Latin north – little Belgium, its relative to her in language, but detached from her by its historical destinies, national attributes, and the character of its population” ([...] «северное настроение», т.е. склонность к созерцательности, углублению во внутренний мир души, жажда святынь и молитв, все-таки вошли в современную французскую литературу, благодаря тому, что во Франции оказался свой латинский север – маленькая Бельгия, родственная ей по языку, но обособленная от нее по своим историческим судьбам, по национальным свойствам и характеру населения). Zinaida Vengerova, “Mistik bezbozhia,” *Novyi put*, no. 2 (1904): 195-
contemporary observations of his character. For Khvostov, the Belgian playwright brings the tragedy of the everyday to the reader, but does not abandon him to the hopelessness of “sorrowful minutes” (скорбные минуты).

Those coming to Maeterlinck’s defense as a purveyor of a kind of optimism were likely reacting against criticism about his increasing popularity at the turn of the century. One scholar of Maeterlinck’s productions in Russia claims that the earlier “tragic” Maeterlinck gradually gave way to the new, “optimistic” Maeterlinck: “During a long middle period, from 1896 to the early 1930s, Maeterlinck’s outlook became more optimistic. He now believed that a combination of divine grace and spiritual discipline could allow humankind to escape the snares of illusion and perceive the divine.”

Maeterlinck’s turn to optimism also coincided, or so his Symbolist readers strongly implied, with the popular acceptance of his plays and his growing fame. Amidst his growing international notoriety and with the publication and performance of Monna Vanna, Symbolist interest in Maeterlinck declined. In a review of the play, the theater critic B.V. Varneke claimed

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205; 195. The national character of these exponents of the northern mood, Vengerova and other Symbolists believed, encouraged the pursuit of metaphysical questions. 

10 The popularity of Ibsen and Maeterlinck in Russia at around the same time revealed two key developments in in Western European literature toward abstract philosophical and psychological questions in drama. As P.O. Morozov quoted in a letter from Ibsen to his biographer Georg Brandes, in one of the first Russian essays to treat Ibsen extensively: “The only goal to which one must strive is inner revolution, the revolution of the human spirit, which would have as a result the complete liberation from absolutely all traditions that disturb its correct development” (Единственная цель, к которой должно стремиться, это революция внутренняя, революция человеческого духа, которая имела бы результатом полное освобождение от всех вообще традиций, мешающих его правильному развитию). P. Morozov, “Genrikh Ibsen i ego dramy,” Nabliudatel’, no. 10 (1884): 48-69; no. 11: 42-60. Quoted in Sharypkin. This perceived “inner revolution” of the soul was in keeping with Maeterlinck’s own theories about dramatizing inner fate, as opposed to external contingencies dictating an individual’s destiny.

that, in *Monna Vanna*, Maeterlinck had entered a new phase and could not even be considered a Symbolist dramatist: “Here remains hardly a trace of Symbolism. The reticence of thoughts, the opacity of images and the ambiguity of writing have given way to bright characters, defined forms and clear situations.” In Marco, the play’s protagonist, and in its quasi-Renaissance setting, Varneke saw a return to the healthy age of the Greeks or that of the Italian Renaissance.

After *Monna Vanna* premiered in Russia, Valerii Briusov expressed amazement at Maeterlinck’s recent popularity compared to his controversial debut, “God! How long ago was the time when Max Nordau screamed at the whole of Europe that Maeterlinck was a ‘pathetic intellectual cripple, who had collapsed finally into childhood.’ And that was written only 10 years ago.” Unlike Briusov, Andrei Belyi, in an obituary for Chekhov who had died a month

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113 Ibid., 664. *Monna Vanna* was hailed as a historicized *Doll’s House*, what one reviewer called “a most talented history of the female soul. A history without historical facts and chronological dates, but history all the same” (талантливейшая история женской души. История без исторических фактов и хронологических дат, но все же история). See Vl. Linskii, “Khronika teatra i iskusstva. Novyi teatr,” *Teatr i iskusstvo*, no. 40, 1902: 718-20; 718. The play was viewed as a departure from the spirit of Maeterlinck’s one-act plays, see V. Mirovich, “Meterlink na stsene Khudozhestvennogo teatra,” *Mir iskusstva*, nos. 8-9 (1904, t. 11): 166-69; 168.

114 “Боже! как далеко то время, когда Макс Нордау на всю Европу кричал, что Метерлинк – «жалкий умственный калека, впавший окончательно в детство». А ведь написано это всего десять лет тому назад.” Avrelii, “Gastroli g-zhi Leblan-Meterlink,” *Vesy*, no. 1 (1904): 61. Briusov wrote elsewhere in 1903, “That which is Maeterlinck-esque, what sets Maeterlinck apart from all poets of all countries and times, here remains very little for him, but then here is a great deal of what belongs to everyone, unoriginal, and conventional. In *Monna Vanna*, Maeterlinck at least paraphrases his philosophical ideas, which are sometimes not without originality. But in *Joyselle*, in the rush for accessibility, he has reduced his teachings to the most elementary points, which have lost every personal nuance” (Метерлинковского, того, что выделяло Метерлинка из всех поэтов всех стран и времен, здесь осталось ему очень мало, но за то здесь очень много такого, что принадлежит всем, шаблонного, условного. В Монне Ванне Метерлинк по крайней мере пересказывал свои философские идеи, иногда не лишенные
earlier, understood Maeterlinck’s new phase as a confirmation of his failure to sustain “otherworldly” experience: “We see with Maeterlinck a clear collapse of similar insights: he plunged into Eternity and wanted to explain it. He explained nothing and had to leave positions that were taken by an attack.” Even Konstantin Bal'mont, who at one point seemed to admire Maeterlinck, was elsewhere far from complimentary. He wrote to L.N. Vil’kina, Minskii’s then wife and co-translator, in 1901, seeming to prefer Maeterlinck’s drama to his philosophical essays:

I read *Le Trésor des humbles* with a feeling of boredom and antipathy. This book was written by a powerless individual who has never known a cry of passion and that is why his renunciation of the passions is phlegmatic and flat, like the country where he grew up. Those few pages and lines that are truly good in Maeterlinck’s book are citations, partly enclosed in quotation marks, partly not. Literary borrowings are entirely permissible when they are colored by the individual mark of sparkling language, like, for example, D’Annunzio. But Maeterlinck’s language is tasteless, like fruit juice without alcohol, but meanwhile, those books, from which he made his own book, are full of the brightest, most soulful drunkenness! What is the sense of this book? He talks badly about what others have said well. He babbles a lot by hearsay about a lot.  

118 “Я прочел «Le Trésor des humbles» с чувством скуки и неприязни. Эта книга написана человеком бессильным, который никогда не знал, что такое крик страсти, и потому его отречение от страстей флегматично и плоско, как страна, в который он вырос. Те немногие страницы и строки, которые действительно хороши в книге Метерлинка, представляют из себя выписки, частью заключенные в кавычки, частью не заключенные. Литературные заимствования вполне позволительны, когда они окрашены индивидуальной печатью блестящего языка, как, например, у Д’Аннунцио. Но язык
Bal'mont’s negative reaction aside, there seems to have been collective concern about Maeterlinck’s turn away from the mysterious mood of his earliest work toward something similar to what we would now recognize as self-help philosophy, all the more suspicious to Symbolists for its popular appeal.

Despite this change in the Symbolist reception of Maeterlinck, Belyi still reserved room in his essay to discuss the Belgian’s contribution to the way Chekhov depicted fate, where, it seemed to him, “even Fate is an illusion” (и Рок – иллюзия) and “pessimism is no longer pessimism” (пессимизм уже не пессимизм). As the dramatist’s main translator into Russian, Minskii attempted to salvage the much maligned image of the Belgian fatalist in a “biographical sketch” published long past the peak of Maeterlinck’s popularity in 1915.

Perhaps given the general malaise surrounding Maeterlinck’s work in Russia as early as 1904, Minskii felt that it was crucial to redefine the tragic vis-à-vis the question of optimism versus pessimism. Seeing continuity in Maeterlinck’s work, Minskii redefines the notion of the tragic as optimistic:

Maeterlinck is one of the central artists of our time because the literature of our time has an insurmountable attraction to optimism, to universal happiness, similar to how almost all European literature in the 19th century was drawn to pessimism, to negation, and universal sorrow. I am here only affirming this easily observable fact, felt by everyone, not touching upon its causes. But there is no doubt that the muses of the contemporary poets are no longer languid fairies with tragically pursed lips and a feverish fire in their

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eyes, but ruddy maidens, happily smiling, content with everything and even a little self-satisfied.\textsuperscript{120}

The dichotomy that Minskii establishes between twentieth-century optimism and nineteenth-century pessimism is perhaps a way of bringing Maeterlinck into a new era, an attempt to overcome his previous “decadence.” Even earlier in \textit{Pri svete sovesti}, and later with \textit{dvuedinstvo}, the task of resolving the distinction between optimism and pessimism had been central to meonism. Minskii wrote, “at the apex of meonism all of the contradictory principles of philosophy are reconciled and merged in a higher synthesis: materialism and idealism, positivism and mysticism, optimism and pessimism.”\textsuperscript{121} He argued that one should be skeptical of the truth of optimism and pessimism as separate paths, since these worldviews, when taken separately, are only “half-true.”\textsuperscript{122} Minskii thus established continuity across the stages of Maeterlinck’s philosophical development when he reasoned that he had always been an optimistic thinker:

\begin{quote}
We see that in Maeterlinck’s work, like flowers on a tree, the moods of pessimism and optimism bloom simultaneously, with the only difference that the first, being grafted from without, wither faster, fall off, and do not give fruit, while the optimistic ones, imbibing the best sap of the happy and childishly pure soul of the artist, have become stronger, flourished, and turned into the fruits of immortal works.\textsuperscript{123}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{120}“Метерлинк один из центральных художников нашего времени, потому что литература нашего времени имеет непреодолимое тяготение к оптимизму, к мировой радости, подобно тому, как почт в течение всего девятнадцатого века вся европейская литература тяготела к пессимизму, к отрицанию, к мировой скорби. Я здесь только подтверждаю этот легко наблюдаемый и всеми ощутимый факт, не касаясь его причины. Но нет сомнения, что музы современных поэтов уже не томные феи с трагически сложенными губами и лихорадочным огнём в глазах, а румянные девы, радостно улыбающиеся, всем довольные и даже несколько самодовольные.” N. Minskii, “Moris Meterlink. Biograficheskii ocherk N. Minskogo,” in M. Meterlink, \textit{Pss}, v perevode N. Minskogo i L. Vil’kinoi, t. 1 (Petrograd, 1915), v-vi.

\textsuperscript{121}“[…] на вершине мэонизма примиряются и сливаются в высшем синтезе все противоречивые начала философии: материализм и идеализм, позитивизм и мистицизм, оптимизм и пессимизм” (Minskii, \textit{Pri svete sovesti}, 213).

\textsuperscript{122}Ibid., 218-19.

\textsuperscript{123}“[…] мы видим, что в творчестве Метерлинка, как цветы на дереве, одновременно распустились настроения пессимизма и оптимизма, с тою лишь разницей, что первые, будучи привитыми извне, вскоре завяли, отпали, не дали плодов, между тем как
Minskii adds to his unconventional reading by speculating about whether Maeterlinck is a tragedian at all:

[...] the tragic naturally comes into contact with pessimism, and indeed many consider the author of The Blind and The Death of Tintagiles a pessimist or inclined to a pessimistic view of life. Meanwhile Maeterlinck is really one of the most convinced, maybe the most convinced and the most authentic optimist in contemporary literature. Setting out to read the works of this “tragic” author, you enter a region of bright, even shadowless light.\textsuperscript{124}

Minskii’s questioning of tragedy as having a pessimistic function finds support in the joyful negation of meonism. He seems to have tried to overcome characterizations of his philosophy as pessimistic: no matter how much he advocated self-renunciation, the ultimate goal was not death, but resurrection through a process of inner spiritual transcendence. Even so, the problem of tragedy and pessimism raises another question about the function of tragic thinking in this period: did tragedy, relating life only through its negative image, represent a healthy examination of life’s contradictions, or the decadent’s harmful rejection of them?\textsuperscript{125}

\textit{Al’ma: A “meonic tragedy”}

Minskii’s \textit{Al’ma} (1900) has been called the “apotheosis of meonism,”\textsuperscript{126} as well as his “most interesting work,”\textsuperscript{127} but despite a few scholarly treatments, it is not considered a major

\textsuperscript{124}“[...] трагизм естественно соприкасается с пессимизмом, то многие считают автора "Слепых" и "Смерти Тентажиля" пессимистом или склонным к пессимистическому взгляду на жизнь. Между тем на самом деле Метерлинк один из самых убежденных, может быть, самый убежденный и наиболее подлинный оптимист в современной литературе. Приступая к чтению произведений этого "трагического" автора, вступаешь в полосу яркого, ровного, бестенного света” (Ibid., iii).


\textsuperscript{126}Polonskii, “Поеziia Minskogo,” 366.
work of early Symbolist art. Subtitled, “a tragedy from contemporary life,” *Al'ma* touches on a variety of hot-button issues from the social and political context of Minskii’s time. These topics include new diagnoses introduced by the developing field of psychiatry, the value of medical science in general, the “Woman Question,” and the means and ends of social activism.

*Al'ma* is composed of three acts, each of which represents a stage in the heroine’s spiritual development. The tragedy’s inner drama is revealed in *Al'ma*’s very name. *Al'ma* used to be called Alia (short for Aleksandra Vasil'evna Lunina, from “luna” [moon]), but she began

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129 As in the dramas of Ibsen and Maeterlinck, Minskii’s drama takes up especially the question of female autonomy. In *Voprozy zhizni*, a translation of Maeterlinck’s essay “Universal Suffrage,” partly testifies to his perhaps lesser known role as an advocate for women’s rights. See M. Meterlink “Vseobshchee izbiratel'noe pravo,” *Voprozy zhizni*, no. 2 (1905): 281-86.
130 These are many of the themes in Ibsen’s dramas, especially in those most popular in the 1890s, *Stroitel' Sol'ness* (The Master Builder), *Nora* (A Doll’s House), *Hedda Gabler*, and *Priveden'ia* (Ghost). In a favorable study on the playwright, Minskii was notably struck by dramatic elements that can be found in Maeterlinck’s work, “Ibsen’s heroes do not complain nor give way to ecstasy, not in any way expressing fully felt emotions, but only speaking about the inner process of their formation. There are not many words, but each is the echo of a complicated inner discord, and the reader or the listener has to strain his attention and guess at much” (Герои Ибсена не жалуются и не восторгаются, вообще не выражают уже назревших чувств, а лишь говорят о внутреннем процессе их образования. Слов не много, но каждое является эхом сложного внутреннего разлада, и читателю или слушателю приходится напрягать внимание и многое угадывать). See N.M. Minskii, *Ibsen: ego zhizn’i literaturnaia deiatel’nost* (S.-Peterburg, 1896), 8.
more recently answering to the “foreign” name “Al'ma.”\textsuperscript{131} Adopting a new identity, one that is significantly a Russian transliteration of the Spanish word for “soul,” Al'ma distances herself from first familial and then later conventional social obligations. Each act is structured around a particular event in her life over the course of six years: in the first, her attempted suicide, in the second, the death of a child thought to be hers at a children’s refuge that she helped found, and in the third, Al'ma’s infection by a patient under her care at a leper colony where she has taken up residence. Accompanying each of these crises is some kind of clinical, “false” diagnosis.

With Al'ma, Minskii created an existential tragedy in which a person without desires, someone who has achieved total self-renunciation, perishes because of the selfishness of others’ striving. Those around Al'ma prevent her from committing suicide and frustrate her later attempts at self-destruction, thus inhibiting her metaphysical desire for non-being. Her family members and close friends constantly bring her back to traditional social roles, and thus, more existentially speaking, back to life itself. In this way, the ethical implications of Al'ma make it an early dramatization of the “right to die.” The important difference is that Al'ma’s right to die is not founded on a long, painful illness, but on the premise that life is inherently tragic.

A disgust for sexual love is one of the first symbols of Al'ma’s rejection of the world (one that she shared with her real-life model, Gippius). Taking advantage of Al'ma’s ignorance of sexual desire, the character Budaevskii, a former lover, brings her erotic literature and succeeds in seducing her. This corruption later resurfaces as a commitment to chastity against the “monstrosity” of sex and the tyranny of love. Reacting to the pornographic books that Budaevskii sent her, Al'ma says to him:

I read them and laughed without a care. It was amusing to know that somewhere far away people lived and were anxious about this abnormality – it was so foreign to me. But the

\textsuperscript{131} Mikhailovskii, “Ob ‘Al'ma,’” 113.
filthy images all the same remained, if not in my soul, then in my imagination, like the pictures that night revelers draw on the walls of buildings.\(^\text{132}\)

Al'ma quickly recovers from this morbid fascination with sex, choosing instead to retreat from life as quietly as possible.

In his review of the tragedy, Mikhailovskii did not see inaction so much as hypocrisy in Al'ma’s dedicated rejection of her social and familial relationships. The issue for Mikhailovskii is how “struggle,” a necessary qualification for tragic heroism, is achieved in Minskii’s play, in which the heroine explicitly disavows it. As evidence, Mikhailovskii quotes from Al'ma’s speech to Budaevskii about the abnormality of struggle.\(^\text{133}\) If Al'ma refuses active struggle as a means of attaining inner freedom, Mikhailovskii argues, then why does the reader observe examples of practically energetic cruelty? As Mikhailovskii points out, “in actuality Al'ma accomplishes a whole sequence of acts, ones that are besides extremely decisive,” including her dissolution of multiple marriages, self-poisoning, and an odd variant of child abandonment.\(^\text{134}\)

Commenting on Maeterlinck’s assertion of innate human goodness, Vengerova offers an explanation for Al'ma’s seeming hypocrisy. In “Moris Meterlink,” she argued that in each of Maeterlinck’s similar characters, the soul emerges as wholly good, and anything undesirable or ugly is externalized in the action.

This is why Maeterlinck’s *dramatis personae* are not given strong will and they do not commit acts. They live by instinct and they themselves do not know how to act in the

\(^\text{132}\) “Я читала их и беспечно смеялась. Мне забавно было узнавать, что где-то далеко люди живут и волнуются этим уродством – так оно мне было чуждо. Но грязные образы все-таки оставались, если не в душе, то в воображении, как рисунки ночных гуляк на стенах домов.” N.M. Minskii, *Al'ma. Tragediiia iz sovremennoi zhizni. V 3-kh deistviakh* (S.-Peterburg, 1900), 35.

\(^\text{133}\) Mikhailovskii, “Ob ‘Al'me,’” 119.

\(^\text{134}\) “[… ] в действительности Альма совершает целый ряд поступков, притом чрезвычайно решительных” (Ibid.).
next moment, but they act beautifully without fail, according to the inner voice that singly guides them.  

As a result of this singular picture of the human being, Vengerova sees Maeterlinck’s dramas as anti-individualistic; characters in his drama are not exemplary, but typical. For Vengerova, not only the characters, but the events of his dramas are typical, as well; he is interested in only “those moments when individual differences disappear in a shared universal tragedy.” At the conclusion of her essay, Vengerova returns to the idea of “action.” In her reading of Maeterlinck, human action is meaningless as long as deeds are carried out according to the “passing moment” (прехоющая момент), which means that they do not reflect the inner state of the human soul:

The acts of people and the emotions that connect them with the passing moment seem to him external, and to the tragedy of catastrophes, summoned by this external life, Maeterlinck contrasts a more profound tragedy, generated by foundational elements of the spiritual world: by the attraction to beauty and to the eternally present consciousness of death. These claims bring Vengerova’s interpretation of Maeterlinck in line with Minskii’s depiction of Al'ma as capable of making a sacrifice and forgoing heroic struggle.

Returning to the plot, Al'ma first nearly dies after attempting to poison herself. The psychiatrist attending her diagnoses the cause of her suicidal tendencies as “erotomania” and then ironically falls in love with her himself. A different doctor in the second act diagnoses

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135 “Вот почему действующие лица Метерлинка не наделены силой воли и не совершают поступков. Они живут инстинктом и сами не знают, как поступят в следующий момент, но непременно поступят красиво, согласно единственно руководящему ими внутреннему голосу” (Vengerova, “Moris Meterlink,” 157).
136 “[…] те моменты, когда индивидуальные различия исчезают в общей мировой трагедии” (Ibid.).
137 “Поступки людей и чувства, связывающие их с прехоющим моментом, кажутся ему внешними, и трагизму катастроф, вызываемых этой внешней жизнью, Метерлинк противопоставляет более глубокий трагизм, порождаемый основными элементами душевного мира: тяготением к красоте и вечно присущим сознанием смерти” (Ibid., 172).
Al'ma (and the rest of humanity) with a psychological disorder called “aetiia,” what he calls “spiritual anarchy, the end of love and friendship, society and the family” (анархия душевная, конец любви и дружбы, общественности и семьи).\textsuperscript{138} It is this diagnosis that plays the greatest role in Al'ma, although against the heroine’s positive acceptance of the disorder, the doctor classifies aetiia as “belonging to the force of rejection, to loneliness, individualism, and cruelty.”\textsuperscript{139}

In the second act, two wards in the children’s shelter fall ill. One, Olia, suffers from scarlet fever, Minskii’s topical reference to a common childhood disease in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{140} The other child under Al'ma’s care, Zhenia, falsely believed to be her biological daughter, falls ill with meningitis.\textsuperscript{141} The doctor orders both of them quarantined in separate wings of the shelter. Disregarding the doctor’s orders, Al'ma goes from one room to the other without a thought, as her mother-in-law observes, that it might endanger Zhenia. The reason why, it becomes gradually clear, is that Al'ma founded the children’s home in order to escape maternal affection:\textsuperscript{142} after giving birth, Al'ma switched her own child with another in the hope of preventing natural attachment and to promote communal childcare regardless of biological relation. Her attempt to escape from maternity is a subtle critique of sexual reproduction as a continuation of the self; Al'ma’s self-enforced separation from her biological daughter is also a renunciation of her existence as prolonged through reproduction.

\textsuperscript{138} Minskii, Al'ma, 134.
\textsuperscript{139} “[…] принадлежит силе отталкивания, одиночеству, индивидуализму, жестокости” (Ibid., 135).
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 95.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{142} “This child has doubly connected me with fate – with a too powerful happiness and too powerful sufferings. And then I decided to organize this shelter” (Этот ребенок вдвойне связывал меня с судьбой – слишком сильным счастьем и слишком сильными страданиями. И тогда я задумала устроить приют) (Ibid., 147).
In the third and final act, Al'ma’s near-deliberate infection with leprosy is the spiritual feat of self-sacrifice that releases her from the instinctual gravitation toward family and life itself. Instead, she explains to Sofia Semenovna (Sonia),\(^{143}\) her devoted companion at the leper colony: “There is an invisible beauty and I am going towards it” (Есть незримая красота, и к ней я иду на встречу).\(^{144}\) Al'ma’s tragedy is that she is not able to make an offering of herself by her own free will. Though she puts herself in danger of contracting leprosy, it is ultimately a member of the colony who infects her, fearing that she would leave them eventually. When her companion learns of her infection, she poisons herself and Al'ma as well, rather than live to see her die of a debilitating and hideous disease. In the final scene, Al'ma tries to convince Sofia to live on after her death (presumably she would seek medical attention for the poisoning). Her final words to Sonia reveal the meonic philosophy informing her self-sacrifice, “Oh, Sonia, I beg you, do not lower yourself to love your fellow man, whoever he may be. Love that which is faceless, content-less and non-human.”\(^{145}\) Indications of what constitutes this content-less ideal are given in the second, previous act.

Throughout the tragedy, Al'ma seeks to escape life altogether through various channels. Her ideal is as yet unrealized: a utopian future peopled by individuals closely resembling her in stoicism and, strangely, in appearance as well. The artist Budaevskii, Al'ma’s former lover who later marries her more docile sister, Veta, depicts this utopia in a painting. In the second act,

\(^{143}\) It is not explicit in the text, but some seem to have suspected Al'ma’s relationship with Sofia Semenovna to have been romantic in nature. See in *Encyclopedia of Russian Women’s Movements*, eds. Norma Corigliano Noonan and Carol Nechemias (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 62; and Laurence Senelick, *Historical Dictionary of Russian Theater* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 248. This interpretation would not change any of the claims made about Al'ma in this chapter.

\(^{144}\) Minskii, *Al’ma*, 201.

\(^{145}\) “О Соня, молю тебя, не унижайся до любви к человеку, кто-бы он ни был. Люби безличное, бессодержательное, нечеловеческое” (Ibid., 208).
Budaevskii unveils a painting showing a procession of young women, children, old men and youths, “without any content” (без всякого содержания), in which there is “neither event nor legend” (ни события, ни легенды). It bears a striking resemblance to a scene that Minskii sketches in a footnote in Pri svete sovesti:

The satisfaction of one’s desires and the struggle with them present two paths, equally leading to knowledge of meons and therefore equally goal-oriented and rational. In contemporary society, for some reason it is assumed that the ascetic ideal has outlived its age. Such a view of asceticism is an irrational extreme, the opposite of which, according to the law of contrast, is another ascetic ideal, Schopenhauer’s teaching that claims that the ascetic ideal is the only one leading to knowledge of the sacred. There is no doubt that in the future century there will be a philosophical routine according to which people without any prejudices will train themselves in self-renunciation and self-devotion, with the goal of reaching the meon of non-existence and the bliss of not desiring. Such a practice would save society from powerless, debilitating, one-sided pessimism.\textsuperscript{146}

In attaining a state of not desiring, Minskii argues, there can be no pessimistic denial of life’s seeming wretchedness. In fact, the doctor reacts to Budaevskii’s painting with bewilderment at the depiction: “I don’t understand anything. A procession. Youths, girls, and old men. They ascend and descend a staircase, they sit in groups. Do you understand, Veta?”\textsuperscript{147} Veta instantly notices a resemblance between a thousand women’s faces and Al’ma’s. Al’ma responds positively to the painting:

\textsuperscript{146}“Удовлетворение своих желаний и борьба с ними представляют два пути, равно ведущих к познанию мэонов и поэтому равно целесообразных и разумных. В современном обществе почему-то полагают, что аскетический идеал отжил свой век. Такой взгляд на аскетизм есть неразумная крайность, противовесом которой, по закону контраста, явилась другая неразумная крайность, именно учение Шопенгауэра о том, будто аскетический идеал – единственный, ведущий к познанию святоты. Нет сомнения, что в будущем столетии возникнут философские общежития, в которых люди, без всяких предрассудков, будут упражняться в самоотречении и подвижничестве, с целью достижения мэона небытия и блаженства нежелания. Такие общежития спасли бы общество от бессильного и обессиливающего одностороннего пессимизма” (Minskii, Pri svete sovesti, 217).

\textsuperscript{147}“Ничего не понимаю. Шествие. Юноши, девушки, старики. Поднимаются на лестницу, опускаются, сидят группами. Вы понимаете, Beta?” (Minskii, Al’ma, 132-33).
Landysh [Budaevskii’s nickname], your etudes are beginning to please me without end. Nameless people, nameless children. Oh, I understand. But the expression of their faces is so strange. They all walk silently, as if hypnotized or somnambulant. It is as though they think of nothing and see nothing. But what do these eyes and these smiles express?  

It is the orphanage, with its motherless, effectively “nameless children,” that it seems Al'ma has envisioned as a preliminary step toward this utopia of sleepwalkers. Al'ma’s vision of the future is one of homogenous, peaceful introspection over the struggles and cares of her contemporary world. Like a Maeterlinck tragedy, the figures belong to a timeless realm of non-striving, having already reached spiritual insight through internal contemplation and strife.

Reviewing Al'ma, Mikhailovskii remarked on Maeterlinck’s influence on the work and accused Minskii of obvious borrowing. His evidence was based on formal elements in the drama that were undoubtedly imitative, but Mikhailovskii unquestionably dubious of its value, did not address the equally significant philosophical influence present throughout the text. Despite his harsh assessment, Mikhailovskii was actually more charitable than other reviewers. One in particular dodged the issue, questioning Minskii’s authority as a Jewish writer to create a modern Russian drama in the first place. Indeed, Minskii’s references to Maeterlinck in Al'ma, both

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148 It is possible that ‘Landysh’ refers to Fedor Alekseevich Chervinskii. In Contes d’amour, Gippius wrote about the end of their affair, returning an unread letter to him. Asking for him to return hers, “He snatched the poor letter, with that twig of lilies of the valley, and maliciously tore it to pieces” (Он схватил бедное письмо, с той веточкой ландышей, и злобно разорвал его). See Zinaida Gippius, “Contes d’amour: Dnevnik liubovnykh istorii (1893-1904),” in Dnevni, t. 1, ed. A.N. Nikoliukin (Moskva: NPK “Intelvak,” 1999), 47. Minskii may have been associated with lilies, prompting Gippius to further signal symbolically the end of their relationship by sending him a bouquet of yellow chrysanthemums (Ibid., 55).

149 “Ландыш, мне ваши этюды начинают бесконечно нравиться. Безымянные люди, безымянные дети. О, я это понимаю. Но как странно выражение их лиц. Они все идут молча, как в гипнозе или как сомнамбулы. Они как будто ни о чем не думают и ничего не видят. Что же однако выражают эти глаза и эти улыбки?” (Ibid., 133).

150 Minskii was born to an impoverished Jewish family living in Poland. He was orphaned as a young child and adopted by a family whose name, Vilenkin, he took for his own before deciding on Minskii for a pseudonym. See Mil'ton, “Vospominaniiia o poete N.M. Minskom,” 155. A
obvious and subtle, point to the greater significance of this work as Symbolist tragedy, albeit of its own kind.

There does, however, appear to be a probable source for the character of Al’mä in one of Maeterlinck’s most loved tragedies, Aglavaïne and Selysette. The plot is straightforward: the lovers Meleander and Selysette live happily before the arrival of Aglavaïne, a beautiful woman romantically involved with Meleander some time ago. Aglavaïne and Selysette grow close, but both know that one of them must break off from the ménage a trois. Aglavaïne plans to, but never does, and Selysette throws herself from a tower. On her deathbed, she tries to comfort Meleander and Aglavaïne. Nikolai Berdiaev called Aglavaïne and Selysette Maeterlinck’s best work, commenting on “the profound ethical meaning of this drama” (глубок[ое] этичес[ое] значение[е] этой драмы): “[…] in it are revealed those ideal, spiritual foundations of love, which point to an escape from tragedy, toward its higher overcoming.”¹⁵¹

Like Maeterlinck’s heroes, Al’mä does not struggle against outside forces compelling her to make a difficult choice, she rather struggles against her own inner fate, her instincts for love in its romantic, maternal, and societal spheres. In the preface to his translation of Aglavaïne and Selysette,¹⁵² Minskii explains how in the dramatist’s earlier artistic phase, his tragedies nearly

¹⁵² Falk examines this play in his study, Renunciation as a Tragic Focus, 73-81.
devolved into “poetic scenes, where, instead of the *dramatis personae*, mediums would crowd around, summoning the specter of death.” Many were convinced that this decadent, spiritualist strain in Maeterlinck’s art was always its main feature, but Minskii disagreed, arguing instead that, in *Aglavaine and Selysette*, one finds “the very essence of symbolism” (сам[ая] сущност[ь] символизма) in the form of a self-abnegating morality. This in turn recalls the language of *Pri svete sovesti*: “The illuminated soul, rejecting active will and passions, seeing in the external world only spiritual symbols, can be nothing other than endless goodness, humility, and love.”

Minskii argues that Aglavaine is not able to sacrifice herself because she relates to the lover’s dilemma too rationally. Selysette, on the other hand, is the first of Maeterlinck’s characters “with human passions, with human will, which leads her not to beautiful grievances, but to an active spiritual feat in the name of love.” In Minskii’s reading of the tragedy, “Selysette dies, carrying with her the mystery of her sacrifice, and the reader is left with the sad consolation that Meleander and Aglavaine, in their conversations from this day forward, will decline not the word ‘beauty,’ but rather ‘spiritual feat.’”

Similarities between *Al’ma* and Maeterlinck’s work might be seen to show not derivative imitation, but rather great attentiveness. Given that meonism predates Maeterlinck’s arrival in Russia, scholarly views of *Al’ma* as the “apotheosis of meonism” may close off the larger

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154 “Просветленная душа, отказавшаяся от активной воли и страстей, видящая во внешнем мире только духовные символы, не может быть ничем иным, как бесконечной добротой, кротостью и любовью” (Ibid., 76).

155 “[…] с человеческими страстями, с человечною волей, которая приводит ее не к прекрасным жалобам, а к деятельному подвигу во имя любви” (Ibid.).

156 “Селизета умирает, унося с собою тайну своей жертвы, и у читателя остается грустное утешение, что Мелеандр и Аглавэна отныне будут склонять в своих разговорах не слово «красота», а слово «подвиг»” (Ibid., 77).
philosophical role of Maeterlinck in the play. Translations of Maeterlinck’s philosophical
writings were already being published in Severnyi vestnik (The Northern Messenger). Minskii
published in the same journal prefaces to Maeterlinck’s play The Blind, in addition to Aglavaine
and Selysette. It is significant that Maeterlinck’s philosophical writings do in fact predate Al’ma,
thereby merging with the meonistic ideas in the play that began to form in the previous decade.
Al’ma is thus a “Maeterlinckian” tragedy in the sense that it borrows both its dramatic and
philosophical material from the dramatist. The result was a synthesis of meonism and “everyday
tragedy,” a model of tragic renunciation that sought to present a kind of spiritual heroism based
on internal strife, rather than the heroism of great deeds and struggle.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the form that spiritual sacrifice takes – either self-affirmation or self-
renunciation – has consequences for the characteristics of tragic art among the early Symbolists.
It is possible to locate in scholarship on this period a unified typology of the later Symbolist
“hero” based on an amalgam of various presentations of the lyric persona of Symbolist verse. In
her most recent discussion of Nietzsche’s influence on Russian Symbolism, Bernice Rosenthal
provides a typical treatment of this tendency. She writes:

Symbolist reinterpretations of Christianity included visions of a new man – an artist-hero,
a creator of a new culture and new values – the polar opposite of rationally calculating,
self-interested ‘economic man.’ In addition, he was depicted as young, daring, forever
striving, and a transgressor of established norms.\footnote{Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, New Myth, New World: From Nietzsche to Stalinism (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 40.}

Rosenthal also contextualizes the reaction of early Symbolist poets as one that confronted “the
ideological stagnation, the all-enveloping repression of the eighties, the Schopenhauerian
quietism which was its hallmark." The recurrent focus on Nietzsche as the source of Symbolist daring leaves out commentary on the dramatic and poetic function of this persona in the space of individual works, opening up the question of whether one can speak of a typology of the tragic hero in this period at all, especially this Dionysian model of heroism. The joyous defiance of Nietzsche’s superman neglects the double bind of the daring figure who preserves his individual identity to the point of welcoming his own destruction. It was this aspect of the heroic persona that this chapter has attempted to nuance with a focus on the ambivalent attitude toward sacrifice in Minskii’s meonism. In the case of the immediate reception of Minskii’s philosophy of meonism, poets and thinkers were wary of the pessimistic, life-denying consequences of self-renunciation, while also acknowledging the inevitability of personal “transformation,” to refer to sacrifice in a major key, in any ethical or creative act. Minskii’s meonistic heroine, Al'ma, is a singular attempt at a completely self-renouncing hero. Although she cannot be said to have any literary progeny, her heroism is neither Nietzschean affirmation, nor “Schopenhauerian quietism.”

Chapter One Bibliography

158 Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, *Dmitri Sergeevich Merezhkovsky and the Silver Age: The Development of a Revolutionary Mentality* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 11. It is an oversimplification to claim that “Nietzscheanism justified Merezhkovsky’s desire to be free of all restrictions and provided a cosmological world view based on art and sensuality. Through Nietzscheanism, Merezhkovsky hoped to overcome fear and suffering and to experience happiness which had been denied him. Self-abnegation was abandoned for a defiant individualism which was almost solipsistic in its desire to encompass all existence in his own person” (Ibid., 35). The following chapter presents evidence of how Merezhkovskii moved beyond Nietzschean affirmation toward a unique ascetic worldview.


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Chapter Two – Merezhkovskii, Greek Tragedy, and the Permutations of Symbolist Eros

[Rudin]: ‘I haven’t yet sufficiently clearly elucidated for myself the tragic significance of love.’

‘It seems to me,” Natalya remarked shyly, ‘that the tragic in love is an unhappy love.’

‘Not at all!’ Rudin retorted. ‘That’s rather the comic side of love... The question should be put an entirely different way... One should go much deeper.’\(^{159}\)

Veta. Our literature teacher was telling us that tragedies end in death, whereas comedies end in marriage.

Budaevskii. Your teacher is mistaken. Only tragedies end in marriage.\(^{160}\)

In his early work, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii considered tragedy the highest achievement of symbolic art. Like many of his contemporaries, he believed it to be the closest form to authentic religion. But according to the essay “Mech” (Sword, published in 1908) tragedy had already performed its function as a byway toward religion and not a path to truth in and of itself:

The final religious limit of art is the tragic perception of the world. The individuality of the hero in a tragedy, attaining the highest manifestation of his will, perishes in a struggle with the impersonal force of fate or passion. The actual unavoidability of evil in the world is only deepened in the imaginary, ideal outcome of the aesthetic perception. 'The greatest good – / Is to not be born at all, / And having been born, / To die right away.'

Merezhkovskii ends this thought by quoting from Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus*, a tragedy that he translated over a decade before. For him, the aesthetic representation of the tragic state of human existence was not therapeutic or cathartic; as long as an impersonal force decides the fate of every willful hero, hopelessness breeds either vain contempt or stoic acquiescence to death’s inevitability. One aspect of this passage is especially unclear and cries out for explanation. What does Merezhkovskii mean by the phrase “the impersonal force of fate or passion?” By “fate” he means what is variously referred to as “Necessity” or “Ananke” as an agent of the hero’s death in Greek tragedy or, more directly, the hero’s death itself. When commenting on *King Oedipus* much earlier, Merezhkovskii wrote that the hero is blinded either, “by passion or fate,” implying

the interrelationship of these forces.\textsuperscript{162} He suggests that both fate and passion play an
interchangeable role in the demise of the tragic hero, whoever he or she may be. I believe that
this slippage demonstrates the extent to which these concepts of “fate” and “passion” are linked
in Merezhkovskii’s thought.

For Merezhkovskii, tragedy was the manifestation of a religious problem at the heart of
his writing: the mysterious relationship between fate and love. Both topics were a favorite theme
in his earliest prose and poetic works. In his thought, the problem of love was as connected to
tragedy as the problem of fate. Over the course of translating a selection of plays from
Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides throughout the 1890s, Merezhkovskii began to advance not
one “impersonal force,” but two mythological entities, Artemis and Aphrodite, whose
battleground, he argued, was the human heart.\textsuperscript{163} But first, in “O prichinakh upadka…”
Merezhkovskii provided a preliminary definition of tragedy based on the idea of struggle
between two other active and opposing forces: materialism and idealism. Though this debate had
been around since virtually the 1860s, Merezhkovskii returned to it in order to underscore its
unresolved status in Russian literature:

Our time must be defined by two opposing features: this is a time of the most extreme
materialism and at the same time of passionate idealistic surges of the soul. We are
present at a great, highly significant struggle of two views about life, of two diametrically
opposed worldviews. The final requirements of religious feeling are colliding with the
final conclusions of empirical knowledge.\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{162}“Корин Оидипус, ослепленный страстью или роком” (Царь Эдип, ослепленный страстью или
\textsuperscript{163}Merezhkovskii translated Sophocles’s \textit{King Oedipus, Oedipus at Colonus}, and \textit{Antigone}, as
well as Euripides’s \textit{Medea} and \textit{Hippolytus} and Aeschylus’s \textit{Prometheus Bound}. He planned to
translate \textit{Electra} (Euripides’s and Sophocles’s versions), \textit{Alcestis}, and \textit{Iphigenia}, but these were
never realized.
\textsuperscript{164}“Наше время должно определить двумя противоположными чертами: это время самого
краиного материализма и вместе с тем страстных идеальных порывов духа. Мы
присутствуем при великой, многозначительной борьбе двух взглядов на жизнь, двух
dиаметрально противоположных мировоззрений. Последние требования религиозного
Merezhkovskii here is concerned not only with tragedy, but with the tragic state of existence.¹⁶⁵

A few years later, in “Tragediia tselomudriia i sladostrastiia” (The tragedy of chastity and sensuality, 1899), Merezhkovskii gave names to these belligerent forces as they appear in Euripides’s Hippolytus: Artemis and Aphrodite. He explained,

Their eternal struggle does not end and never will end in the tragedy of the world with the defeat of one and the victory of the other, and this struggle does not destroy their Olympian silence and clarity, being resolved only below, on earth, in the hearts of men.¹⁶⁶

It turns out that the problem of reconciling sexual love and a love that exists beyond physical consummation is, for Merezhkovskii, the driving force of tragedy. Like Euripides, he argued,

[…] we have understood that the universal tragedy of life lies in the great war of two great principles that surround and penetrate us; […] we have also seen that one can speak of it only in symbols, and […] with a consciousness too sharp and subtle we still do not know how to find the final harmony, the final resolution.¹⁶⁷

Thus what was once a concern for the ancients remains a contemporary problem. Merezhkovskii often made the fraught synthesis of the two forms of love the central focus of his writings.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ One finds an attraction to duality almost everywhere in Merezhkovskii’s early work: idealism and materialism, Apollo and Dionysus, Christ and Antichrist, spirit and flesh. Generally these may be categorized under the favorite dualistic rubric of the Symbolists: earthly and divine.¹⁶⁶ “Вечная борьба их не оканчивается и никогда не окончится в трагедии мира поражением одной, победой другой, и эта борьба не нарушает их олимпийской тишины и ясности, совершавшаяся только внизу, на земле, в сердцах человеческих.” D.S. Merezhkovskii, “Tragediia tselomudriia i sladostrastiia,” Mir iskusstva, nos. 7-8 (1899, t. 1): 64-66; 65.
¹⁶⁷ “[…] мы поняли, что трагедия мировой жизни заключается в окружающей, в проникающей нас великой борьбе двух великих начал; так же […] увидели, что говорить о ней можно только символами, и […] слишком острым и тонким сознанием еще не сумели найти последней гармонии, последнего соединения” (Ibid., 64).
¹⁶⁸ Vladimir Solov’ev argued that Plato was mistaken when he separated love into two categories: “The object of true love is twofold: 1) we love the ideal being – the being who belongs to a higher sphere; 2) we love the natural human being, who furnishes the living personal material for the realization of the former. In this way true love is both ascending and
Merezhkovskii, the tragedy of human existence is that the “reconciliation” of the goddesses is realized only in individual death; this metaphor is meant to offer an explanation for the tragedy of mortality. The spectator may experience some consolation when, though the lovers perish, their passion appears to have retained its intensity in death. For Merezhkovskii, the separation and death of the lovers is not to be lamented in the same way. Their deaths might be interpreted as necessary; through death the erotic love that brought them together in the first place may be purified. For Merezhkovskii, tragedy, or what is ordinarily feared or lamented, is desired and instrumental to one’s spiritual overcoming. Merezhkovskii’s focus on sex as ultimately bound up with tragedy is tied to the temporal realm, but it is ultimately a problem of moral and mystical import.

In this chapter, I examine Merezhkovskii’s reception of Greek tragedy and tragic myths of the early modern and early modernist period. My purpose is to show how these narratives that began appearing in his work in the 1890s and continuing into the early twentieth century explain the tragic thinking that underlies much of the Symbolist discourse on Eros. Merezhkovskii’s preference for tragic mythologies represents one prominent instantiation of this trend. As a secondary aim, this chapter extends scholarship on Eros in the Silver Age, which has disproportionately considered the poetry and biographical sexual practices of Aleksandr Blok and Zinaida Gippius. Comparatively little is known about Merezhkovskii’s personal views on love. Most of what is can be found in his writings intended for publication of a literary or philosophical nature and a small amount of material from his recently published “Zapisnaia knizhka” (archives may reveal still more). Moreover, given that his views on love are so often borrowed from canonical literary antecedents, even in his lyric poetry, the biographism that

informs a large portion of scholarship on Symbolism is not as essential to a study of Merezhkovskii. Therefore, with recourse to his little read works, better known critical essays, and his largely neglected translations of Greek tragedy, I contextualize his ideas on love in the anxiety about procreation shared by his wife and Blok. I will conclude with some general thoughts about Merezhkovskii’s readings of Greek tragedy as a particular kind of mythopoesis. “Love is Strong as Death:” Merezhkovskii on Love

In his “Zapisnaia knizhka,” Merezhkovskii’s view of love is based on the tragic loss of the beloved:

To love someone is the thirst to be with him. And the more insatiable the thirst, the stronger it is. That is why you only understand the entire power of love when you are sure that you will not see your loved one, when the thirst becomes forever insatiable. Only one who has died can be loved with a true, unselfish, and infinite love.169

A feeling of loss intensifies and possibly, it is not clear, purifies the experience of desire. Merezhkovskii’s impressions bear a resemblance to Gippius’s personal ideal of unrequited love, since the intensity of the love felt is only made that much more “insatiable.”170 These figurations of erotic love evoke its potential cruelty, as well as its relationship to a tragic conflict (in order to

169 “Любовь к человеку это жажда быть с ним. И чем неутолимее эта жажда, тем она сильнее. Вот почему только тогда понимаешь всю силу любви, когда уверен, что не увидишь любимого, когда жажда становится навеки неутолимой. Истинной и бескорыстной, и бесконечной любовью можно любить только умершего.” D.S. Merezhkovskii, “Zapisnaia knizhka 1891 goda,” in Puti i mirazhi russkoi kul'tury, pub. M.Iu. Korenevoi (Sankt-Peterburg: Severo-Zapad, 1994), 223-62; 344. This idea appears years later in “Mech:” “When a loved one dies, the lover does not stop loving. This is either a miracle or madness. How can I love the dead or even that which can die, must die?” (Когда умирает любимый, любящий не перестает любить. Это – чудо или безумие. Как я могу любить умершего или даже того, кто может умереть, должен умереть?) (Merezhkovskii, “Mech,” 5). Kumpan notices this trend, but considers it relevant only to his marital life. See K.A. Kumpan, “D.S. Merezhkovskii-poet (U istokov ‘novogo religioznogo soznaniia’),” in Stikhotvoreniia i poemy (Sankt-Peterburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000), 5-114; 76.

170 Olga Matich, Paradox in the Religious Poetry of Zinaida Gippius (Munchen: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1972), 76. “The fact of unrequited love does not bring unhappiness to the poet. Conversely, it brings her a strange pleasure: she loves more when she is not loved. In fact, it seems that Gippius is again saying that love can exist only when it is unfulfilled [my emphasis].”
love in a truly spiritual sense, one’s lover must have died or one’s love cannot be returned).

Elsewhere in the same collection of thoughts and impressions, the idea of death appears as a catalyst for true love:

Death does not kill, but resurrects true love. The person who never doubted total obliteration after death has never loved because you don’t love the dead, but only the living.

For a writer concerned with the corruptive influence of sexuality on his spiritual development, love for a dead woman was ideal. In such a situation, desire could be directed at the immortal memory of a forever absent individual. In an homage to this mournful love, Merezhkovskii concluded his collection *Simvoly* (*Symbols*, 1892) with a translation of Poe’s “Raven,” a tale of longing for one’s dead beloved.

This theme was treated in Merezhkovskii’s earliest prose work, “Prorok” (*The Prophet*, 1891). It is the story of Aleksandr Stroev, a promising student under the influence of Tolstoian philosophy (“The Kreutzer Sonata,” written in 1890), whose salon address on the immorality of Romantic poets in the first scene of the story provokes an audience member’s angry rebuttal.

Stroev defends himself:

If I love a woman, I cannot desire her downfall, her shame! But for every pure, loving girl there is no downfall and shame worse than what you call the happiness of love – possession. Gentlemen, how confused we have become; how we have floundered! To feel God in a person – that is what it means to love! How is it possible in the same moment to feel God in a person and do worse to him than a beast – a thousand times worse is the instrument of crude pleasure!.. That love about which you speak is the greatest cruelty and violence!.

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171 “Смерть не убивает, а воскрешает истинную любовь. Тот, кто никогда не сомневался в полном уничтожении после смерти, никогда не любил, потому что любишь не мертвого, а только живого” (Merezhkovskii, “Zapisnaia knizhka 1891 g.,” 344). Here he seems to see love as proof of immortality.

172 “Если я люблю женщину, я не могу желать ее падения, ее позора! А для всякой чистой, любящей девушки нет худшего падения и позора, чем то, что вы называете счастьем любви – обладанием. Господа, как мы все запутались и сбились! Чувствовать в человеке Бога – вот что значит любить! Как можно в одно и то же время чувствовать в человеке
But the hero’s intellectualism is tested right away with the introduction of his love interest, Ol’ga. Like the heroes of Merezhkovskii’s narrative poems from around the same period, “Vera” and “Smert” (Death) Stroev rejects Ol’ga’s love. Before going abroad, where she will eventually die, she tries one final time to convince him of love’s value:

You do not know love [...] You cannot say what it is like – good or bad – you only know that it is beautiful. You must submit to it: there is nothing higher than justice! Love is the same. Sasha, can you really understand it, can you really judge it? You told me that in the Bible it is said: “love is powerful as death.” Rationalizations of any kind will not help when death comes. What matters your meager mind when real love comes?173

Stroev’s earlier claim that love is violence (насилие) is echoed in Ol’ga’s implicit critique of his position (сила). This textual resonance has an ironic effect when Ol’ga refers to “The Song of Songs,” claiming to be quoting Stroev.174 Here love is as good as equal to the power of God.

Ol’ga’s argument that love is neither good nor evil is reaffirmed in the essay “O simvolizme ‘Dafnisa i Khloia’” (On the symbolism of Daphnis and Chloe, written in 1895), in which the god Eros is compared to a playful child “outside” good and evil: “he amuses himself

174 The full passage is: “Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame” (Song of Sol. 8:6, AV).
with bloody horrors, as well as innocent and pastoral games, coming from one to the other with
carefree ease: he is beyond good and evil.”

Later at the end of the story, persisting in his ideal of platonic love, Stroev is seduced by a
prostitute. She lures him to her room where there hangs a wall covering depicting a “fantastic
red tiger,” suggestive of her pernicious sexual power. She traps him in the room and refuses to
give him the key (in answer to his plea, “give it, give it!” [отдайте, отдайте!] she cries, “But I
certainly won’t! (А вот не отдам!).” The experience is obviously humiliating. In such a state
he returns home to find a letter from Ol’ga, who announces her drug addiction: “Nature is
beautiful, but morphine is even better” (Природа хороша, но морфий еще лучше).
Knowledge of her likely death (and probably the carnal knowledge he received hours before),
dejects Stroev, but this hopelessness results in an emotional outpouring and conversion:

He cried out of pity for himself and for others, out of consciousness of our collective,
irreparable weakness and insignificance before the unknown. But when he again looked
at the blue sky through tears, it seemed to him that it answered his love with an eternal
one…

Merezhkovskii has the obvious didactic aim of presenting Stroev’s faith in social ideals as
powerless to ease human suffering. His narrator expands Stroev’s story to speak of “our
collective […] weakness and insignificance.” The mystery of suffering has been revealed neither

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175 “[…] он забавляется то кровавыми ужасами, то невинными и пастушескими играми и
переходит от одних к другим с беспечною легкостью: он – вне добра и зла.” D.
Merezhkovskii (S.-Peterburg, 1904), 5-33; 28. A child Eros is significant when read alongside
Merezhkovskii’s staunch anti-procreative views. The infant Eros, not a real child, but a fantastic
one, suggests that love has no child-bearing goal outside of itself. An earlier and comparable
view of Cupid in this capacity appears in Merezhkovskii’s 1883 poem “Erot.” See D.
176 Merezhkovskii, “Prorok,” 105.
177 Ibid., 107.
178 “Он плакал от жалости к себе и к людям, от сознания нашей общей, непоправимой
слабости и ничтожества перед неведомым. Но, когда он опять сквозь слезы посмотрел на
gолубое небо, ему показалось, что оно отвечает на его любовь вечной любовью…” (Ibid.,
108).
in sex nor in the death of the loved object. The “unknowable,” which can only be God, fills the
void created by loss and despair with “eternal love.” This idealized form of love is dependent on
the tragic circumstances that bring it about.

“Prorok” illustrates only a specific case in Merezhkovskii’s frequent association of love
with death. But even elsewhere, in writings that directly address the nature and function of erotic
love, Merezhkovskii discussed the interrelationship of amor fati (“love of fate” or, as he
understood it, “love of death”) and the love of God epitomized in Christ’s filial devotion. In an
essay on the Spanish playwright Calderon, one of the cult writers of the Symbolist period,
Merezhkovskii gives a reading of the drama Devotion to the Cross, his most famous work.179 In
the play, the hero, Eusebio, mixed up with a gang of bandits after murdering his friend in a duel
over Julia, the daughter of a nobleman, discovers at the end of the play that she is in fact his twin
sister (they were separated at birth sometime after their mother’s murder at their father’s hands at
the foot of a cross, on top of a mountain).180 Eusebio, not yet recognizing Julia as his sister, has

179 Devotion to the Cross was performed at Viacheslav Ivanov’s “Tower” salon on April 19,
1910 (O.S.). For a contemporary account of the significance of this performance for the theater
of convention, see E.A. Znosko-Borovskii, “Bashennyi teatr,” Apollon, no. 8 (1910): 31-36. See
also Konstantin Bal’mont’s essay on the play, which provides a comparatively eclectic reading of
its religious symbolism. See K. Bal’mont, “Poklonenie krestu,” Mir iskusstva, nos. 11-12 (1901,
t. 6): 313-18.

180 The love theme and the crucifix imagery in Devotion to the Cross is repeated in
Merezhkovskii’s poem “Imogena (Srednevekovaia legenda)” (Imogena [A medieval legend],
1889). See D. Merezhkovskii, Simvoli (pesni i poemy) (S.-Peterburg, 1892), 252-55. In the
poem, a baron orders his daughter’s would-be suitor to carry Imogena up a treacherous cliff. If
he reaches the top, where a cross stands, he will agree to offer her in marriage. The trial is a
metaphor for the perils of love: “But such is our bitter lot: / Who is dear to us, who loves us, – /
Embracing, together to the abyss / She/He attracts us and murders us” (Но таков удел наш
gor’kyi: / Kto nam dorog, kto nas lyubit, – / Obnimay, vместе v bezdnu / Uvelekat nas i
gubit) (Ibid., 254). The rhyme (lyubit / gubit) makes clear the fatal consequences of love.
Having delivered the girl to the cross, the hero dies. The king demands that his guards separate
Imogena from her lover, but one responds, “There is no power or force, / Baron, that can
separate / What death has united…” (Никакая власть и сила / Разделить, барон, не может /
To, что смерть соединила…) (Ibid., 255). The suitor’s love for Imogena emboldens him, yet
already tried to rape her at a convent where she sought refuge. All of the characters’ sins and salvation intersect at the exact location of that mountain cross. Merezhkovskii claimed that the love plot, and not the individual’s relationship to fate often at the center of ancient tragedy, gave Calderon’s drama pathos:

Besides human will, a different, higher power directs the action of the drama. This power is “the love that moves the sun and the other stars.” The power of love summons Eusebio from the abyss of death so that he can repent. Only the thought of God saves the sinner Julia, whom her father wanted to kill with his own hands. Fate, the idea of revenge and justice that rules the world is the foundation of ancient Greek tragedy. God, the idea of love – that moves by the sun and the other heavenly bodies – is the foundation of the mystery of the Christian poet.  

Merezhkovskii positions God and “the idea of love” at the center of the Christian mystery play and the role of revenge and fatal justice in ancient tragedy, but he does not imply the separateness of these genres. For Merezhkovskii, mystery demonstrates not the evolution of tragedy into a higher form, but rather an extension of the same existential problems first explored in ancient Greece.

the resolution of their love – indicated by the marked word “соединить” – is in death (for more on the significance of this word, see the chapter section, “Hippolytus at the Theater”).


182 “Mystery” in Symbolist usage has two meanings. It can refer to a rite more closely linked to ancient tragedy – the Dionysian mysteries – or it might signify the medieval Christian mystery play, which is undoubtedly the meaning Merezhkovskii intends when he uses the term in the above passage. George Kalbouss considers the theatricality of the mystery play and leaves aside the question of the similarities between ancient tragedy and Christian mystery that clearly interest Merezhkovskii. See George Kalbouss, The Plays of the Russian Symbolists (East Lansing, MI: Russian Language Journal, 1982), 24-26; 31-56.
In his “Zapisnaia knizhka,” he again considered the generic relationship between Greek tragedy and the Christian mystery in the following entry dated August 1891:

What can be darker than the idea of fate? The Greeks were not spoiled by the abstract hopes of Christianity, they knew how to demand less from life and to make peace with it more easily. Christianity was the greatest attempt of the human spirit to free itself from the idea of Fate. Was it successful? Does not contemporary science return us to the same primordial idea of Fate, only in a still darker form?\(^{183}\)

In these observations, Merezhkovskii blames modern science for retrogression: humanity has returned to an ancient relationship to fate, which Christianity may be powerless to resolve.

Elsewhere, in the influential work *L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii* (*L. Tolstoi and Dostoevskii*, published 1900-01), Merezhkovskii addressed similar doubts about Christian love in an analysis of the Nietzschean concept of *amor fati*, a term that more generally refers to philosophical stoicism, but that for Nietzsche represented his personal ideal of life-affirmation. Although he was once strongly under the influence of Nietzsche, Merezhkovskii eventually came to criticize the German philosopher’s antagonism toward Christianity. In a discussion of the novel *Besy* (*Devils*) in *L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii*, Merezhkovskii considers Kirillov the most Nietzschean of Dostoevskii’s characters. Kirillov accepts the “love of fate” as a religion and thus rejects the transformative “holy love” that offers salvation, since, Merezhkovskii contends, “I cannot love what is external, dead, impersonal […] I can only love what is inner, living, kindred, vital – I can love only ‘the Father.’”\(^{184}\) For Merezhkovskii, *amor fati* cannot be “love,” since one may only

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\(^{183}\)“Что может быть мрачнее представления рока? Греки не были избалованы беспредметными надеждами христианства, умели меньшего требовать от жизни и легче с нею мириться. Христианство было величайшая попытка человеческого духа освободиться от представления Рока. Была ли она удачной? Не возвращает ли нас современная наука к тому же первобытному представлению Рока, только в еще более мрачной форме?” (Merezhkovskii, “Zapisnaia knizhka 1891 g.,” 343).

\(^{184}\)“Я не могу любить внешнее, мертвое, безличное […] я могу любить только внутреннее, живое, родное, кровное – я могу любить только «Отца.»” (Merezhkovskii, *L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii*, 435-36).
direct love at an “other” (the Son’s love for the Father). If modeled, one can think about the identification of *amor fati* and the love of God alongside their corresponding genres, or one might say, narratives:

\[
\text{love of death (amor fati)} = \text{love of God} \\
\text{Greek tragedy} = \text{Christian mystery}
\]

Merezhkovskii’s aim in critiquing Nietzsche is not to assert the truth of the love of God over *amor fati*, rather he wants to conflate the concepts. However, doing so presents problems for his conception of God as wholly good. He claims, still in *L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii*, “Is ‘Love of fate’ not the ‘most inner essence’ of the last Hero of the greatest tragedy – the love of the Son for the Father?”\(^{185}\) By Christianizing *amor fati*, Merezhkovskii makes the status of God more and not less ambivalent through the analogy: if “the love of fate” is “love of God,” Death and God become one and the same. The fear of death remains unresolved through this equalization.

Ksenia Kumpan has noted the interdependence of these abstract ideas in Merezhkovskii’s work, which she describes as “the establishment of the indissoluble and to some extent of the substitutive connection between Death, Love and God.”\(^{186}\) Resolving this “substitutive connection” between death, love, and God is central to Merezhkovskii’s efforts to conceive of a kind of love that could resist its constitutive ties to death. The merging of *amor fati* with Christ’s love for the Father results in the tangled identity of all relevant terms and leads Merezhkovskii to an idea of love as tragedy. This interpretation of tragedy as a fundamentally erotic problem, one resolvable only in the figure of Christ, extends to Merezhkovskii’s work as a fiction writer, but also to his work as a translator. It is to this role that the discussion will now turn.

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\(^{185}\) ““Любовь к року” не есть ли «самое внутреннее существо» Героя последней и величайшей трагедии – любовь Сына к Отцу?” (Ibid., 357).

\(^{186}\) “[…] установление нерасторжимой и в какой-то мере субституционной связи между Смертью, Любовью и Богом” (Kumpan, “D.S. Merezhkovskii-poet,” 47).
In “Prorok,” contact with the “unknowable” cleanses the sufferer of earthly desire and allows uncomplicated and un-antagonistic contact with a God who is implicated in human mortality. In “Prorok,” the female protagonist serves as a spiritual midwife who, like Sonia for Raskol'nikov, ushers the misguided male character to faith. Like Sonia, Ol'ga is only a potential sexual partner for her male tutor, but this unconsummated potentiality is instrumental in the male partner’s spiritual transformation. For Merezhkovskii, the male figure is responsible for transcending the physical side of erotic love in order to, as Olga Matich wrote about Gippius’s view of love, “in some vague and unclear way consecrate, i.e. disincarnate, the expression of his sexual desires.” With an ecstatic and religious love, Ol’ga does not express procreative or sexual desire, which for Merezhkovskii would suggest not only the negatively-marked earthbound, bourgeois mediocrity, but more importantly the false immortality that for him and many others progeny implied.

Procreation is empirical proof of sexual love at the expense of the spiritual development toward God’s love. Not only was spiritual love between two people destroyed by its sexual fulfillment, but its potential aftereffects of pregnancy and childbirth underscored the irresolvable issue of mortality. It is striking that the most idealized representation of love in Merezhkovskii’s work throughout the 1890s is one that is exclusively identified with fatal consequences. This pattern leads to the valorization of either the most chaste love or the most violent and requires an expanded definition of the femme fatale. In *Passionate Discontent: Creativity, Gender, and French Symbolist Art*, Patricia Matthews distinguishes between three types of female representatives that receive the most attention in turn-of-the-century French painting:

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The pure woman exemplified the ideal role model for bourgeois femininity, and her difference from the femme fatale situated the latter even more firmly among the aberrant, marginal, and disempowered. A spiritual hierarchy was thus established in this triad, with the androgyne superior to the pure woman and the femme fatale at the bottom as body in opposition to spirit.\textsuperscript{188}

This schematization of all three types is convincing when one considers the general tendencies of the Symbolist movement in a Russian context, but for Merezhkovskii, the function of all types are tied to the spiritual deliverance of the male representative and not just the decadent attraction to moral depravity. Moreover, the “pure woman” type lacks desire of any kind. At first consideration, she does not belong to the sexier exemplars of the femme fatale type, but she serves a similar function. For Ol'ga, desire is cultivated, exists, and is snuffed out all for the male hero’s spiritual maturation. Although Ol'ga represents the devotion of the believer, she is closer to death than the life that her faith in God might also affirm. She dies abroad, thereby releasing Stroev from erotic attachment and delivering him to the de-sexualized love of God.

Femme fatales like Salome or Cleopatra epitomized the anti-procreative fantasy whereby women, a symbol of fertility, were portrayed as increasingly death-dealing.\textsuperscript{189} Though Merezhkovskii deals with the conventional femme fatale who turns sex into a weapon, in “Prorok,” the implication of his female protagonist in the spiritual deliverance of her male partner accords her an analogous status in relation to the traditional sexualized femme fatale. Whether through chaste devotion or sexual deviancy, women in Merezhkovskii’s work are conduits that can bring the male protagonist closer to God (and, therefore, to death) and away from the procreative path.

\textsuperscript{188} Patricia Matthews, \textit{Passionate Discontent: Creativity, Gender, and French Symbolist Art} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 116.

These values are reflected in Merezhkovskii’s translations of Greek tragedy. So liberal are these translations that they might legitimately be considered evidence of the same ideas about sex and marriage that Merezhkovskii advanced in various essays in which he tackled the topic more directly. I read these translations as interpretive documents that indicate Merezhkovskii’s biases as a literary critic and a religious thinker. By way of comparison, I include other translations by Merezhkovskii’s contemporaries (I. Annenskii and F. Zelinskii). On the one hand, this comparison with a contemporary shows the particularity and modern quality of Merezhkovskii’s translation; on the other, I emphasize how, even without referring to the original Greek, it is possible to observe how much the translations of these passages diverge from one another. On occasion, I will refer to poetic and prose translations of the passages in English.

Merezhkovskii began an intense study of antiquity and started translating Greek tragedies in the early 1890s, making him the first Symbolist to do so. Between 1890 and 1895, the translations were published in Vestnik Evropy (Messenger of Europe) and Vestnik inostrannoi literatury (Messenger of foreign literature). This translation work coincided notably with his second and most important collection of poetry, Simvoli, in which his translation of Prometheus Bound appeared. Later, in 1902, Merezhkovskii delivered a controversial speech at the premiere of Oedipus Rex.

One scholar claims that Merezhkovskii chose to translate tragedies based on their treatment of “the individual toward fate” and that, as a translator, he foregrounded the problem of fate in the text above other concerns. See M.Iu. Koreneva, “D.S. Merezhkovskii i nemetskai kul'tura,” in Na rubezhe XIX i XX vekov. Iz istorii mezhduarodnykh sviazei russkoi literatury (Leningrad: Nauka, 1991), 44-76. However, given that Merezhkovskii shows a preference for Euripides over Sophocles, it is worth considering Behler’s summary of A.W. Schlegel’s opinion that “[…] Euripides abandoned the problem of fate,” treating it only in a “superficial, merely conventional manner.” See Ernst Behler, German Romantic Literary Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 119. Such a reading of Euripides conforms to Merezhkovskii’s Christian reception of his works.
of his translation of *Hippolytus*, “one of the first public pronouncements to awaken the minds of a wider Russian audience to the contemporary significance of the Greeks.”

Merezhkovskii’s discovery of the ancient world began in 1891 when he traveled to Italy and Greece for the first time (an experience recounted in the essay “Akropol’”). Speaking of the Greeks in *L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii*, Merezhkovskii wrote:

> The fear of death did not destroy for them the meaning of their joys – on the contrary the blackest darkness and the terror of the abyss even multiplied the charm of life, like the blackest velvet increases the sparkle of diamonds. They did not turn away from this darkness, but it was as if they were intentionally desiring it, searching for it in order to conquer it. Tragedy, the most daring and most profound perception of only the most dark and fateful in human fate, was for good reason created in the most radiant period of Greek life.

Though this excerpt was written in the late 1890s, Merezhkovskii’s high opinion of Greek tragedy and their tragic sensibility began at least a decade earlier: the excerpt “Smert' Klitemnesty” (The Death of Clytemnestra) to be discussed below, appeared in his first collection of poetry, *Stikhotvoreniiia* (Poems, 1888).

Merezhkovskii’s motivation for investigating Greek tragedy coincides with his persistent preoccupation with the fear of death. It has been suggested that this anxiety about death is also reflected in his study of canonical authors, many of them quintessentially pagan or Christian, which was the focus of his collected essays *Vechnye sputniki* (*Eternal Companions*, first

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193 “[…] страх смерти не уничтожал для них смысла этих радостей – напротив: самая черная тьма и ужас бездыни еще увеличивали прелесть жизни, подобно тому, как самый черный бархат увеличивает блеск алмазов. Они не отворачивались от этой тьмы, а как будто нарочно желали, искали ее, чтобы победить. Трагедия, дерзновеннейшее и глубочайшее созерцание всего, что только есть в человеческой судьбе наиболее темного и рокового, не случайно создана была в самую лучезарную пору эллинской жизни” (Merezhkovskii, *L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii*, 26).
Seeking a resolution of pagan and Christian worldviews during this period, Merezhkovskii regularly praised those whom he considered early precursors of Christianity in antiquity (Euripides, Marcus Aurelius, Longus, and others) and, vice versa, Christian artists who seemed drawn to paganism (figures of the Italian Renaissance, especially Da Vinci, or the pagan undertones of St. Francis’s joyful embrace of the earth in “Frantsisk Assizskii” [Francis of Assisi]). He held the Italian Renaissance historically significant as a positive retrogression from the ascetic teachings of Christianity to life-affirming Hellenism. The trilogy Khristos i Antikhrist (Christ and Antichrist), was composed during the peak of his study and translation of ancient tragedies.

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194 “Not only contemporary literature, but also ancient tragedy, the notes of Marcus Aurelius, the views of Montaigone, Christian teaching, and Buddhism became for him material in which he sees the posing and the resolution of the problem of death” (И современная литература, и античная трагедия, и записки Марка Аврелия, и взгляды Монтеня, и христианское учение, и буддизм – все становится для него материалом, в котором он видит постановку и решение проблемы смерти) (Kumpan, “D.S. Merezhkovskii-poet,” 48).

195 “It must be understood once and for all: paganism, at least in its final highest limits, for example in Hellenism [Sophocles, Socrates, Plato], is not something forever contrary to Christianity, but only pre-Christian, and in addition to this, inevitably leading to Christianity; a transfigured paganism is contained in Christianity, as transfigured flesh is contained in the spirit” (Надо же понять раз навсегда: язычество, по крайней мере, на своих последних высших пределах, например в эллинстве [Софокл, Сократ, Платон], не есть нечто навеки противоположное христианству, а лишь дохристианское, и вместе с тем неизбежно ведущее к христианству; преображенное язычество включается в христианство, как преображенная плоть включается в дух) (Merezhkovskii, L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii, 210).

196 Euripides’s texts appear in Voskresshie bogi (Resurrected Gods), in a scene in which a character copies out Bible verses beside text from one of the tragedian’s works. Also included in the novel is a brief digression referring to Pentheus’s fatal disavowal of Dionysus from The Bacchae. See D. Merezhkovskii, Voskresshie bogi (Leonardo da Vinchi), in Trilogiia. Khristos i antikhrist, t. 2, izd. 3 (S.-Peterburg, 1906), 751-52.


198 This idea appears in Merezhkovskii, “O simvolizme ‘Dafnis i Khloia,’” 16-17 and forms the entire backdrop of his novel Voskresshie bogi.

199 Iulian Otstupnik was finished in 1894 and Voskresshie bogi in 1898.
Given the attention paid in scholarship to Merezhkovskii’s love of antiquity, it is surprising that his translations of Greek tragedy have not been the subject of closer study. The process of translation for Merezhkovskii was reportedly quite fulfilling, whereas he often complained about his role as literary critic. Nevertheless he was more influential for his criticism than his translations, which poets tended to like but experts received poorly.

The tragedies that seem to have especially interested Merezhkovskii took as a subject some of the most dysfunctional families in Greek myth: Jason and Medea, Theseus and Phaedra, the House of Atreus (featuring the tragedies of Clytemnestra, Iphigenia, Electra), and the House of Thebes (notably the tragedies of Oedipus and Antigone). These lineages die out, and their tragedies explore themes of paternal and sexual love such as incest, matricide, filicide, and the preservation of virginity. When Merezhkovskii refers to the heroes of these tragedies in critical texts, his focus is on female virginity and female displays of passion or rage. Female acts such as these have in common a form of “contraception” in which the consummation of erotic love is violently avoided and in turn contributes to familial extinction.

It was commonly argued among religious thinkers of Merezhkovskii’s generation that procreation was by far the most flagrant (and banal) conflation of love and death. During the

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200 They have been examined in: Galina Shelogurova, “Strasti po ‘Ippolitu’: I. Annenskii vs skrytii polemike s D. Merezhkovskii,” Voprosy literatury, Mar-Apr. 2 (2009): 109-17; Uspenskaia has argued, against the general opinion, that Merezhkovskii’s translations of Euripides were often more comprehensible than Annenskii’s. See A.V. Uspenskaia, “Grecheskaia tragediia v perevodakh D.S. Merezhkovskogo,” in Antichnost’ i kul’tura Serebriannogo veka: K 85-letiiu A.A. Takho-Godi, ed. E.A. Takho-Godi (Moscow: Nauka, 2013), 231-38. See also Koreneva, “D.S. Merezhkovskii i nemetskaia kul’tura,” 57-59. Bedford claims that Merezhkovskii’s translations were good enough to be assigned in schools, see C. Harold Bedford, The Seeker: D.S. Merezhkovskiy (Lawrence, KS: The University of Kansas, 1975), 42. Alternatively, Merezhkovskii’s translations were much criticized. See I. Annenskii and I. Kholodniak, “Perevody D.S. Merezhkovskogo,” Zhurnal ministerstva narodnogo prosveshchenia, vol. 12 (1908): 237 (Quoted in Bedford, The Seeker, 182n5).

201 Koreneva, “Zapisnaia knizhka 1891 g.,” 337n12.
Silver Age it was believed by many that creative work could replace procreation, thus providing a temporary solution to Solov'ev’s scary mystical union, the “syzygy.” Arguing for the consideration of Eros as separate from procreation, Solov'ev claimed in *Smysl liubvi* (*The Meaning of Love*, 1892) that the intensity and truth of the love shared between two heterosexual individuals precludes the possibility of procreation: “It is impossible to recognize a direct correspondence between the power of individual love and the significance of its posterity, when the very existence of posterity as the result of such love is only a rare occurrence.” In this way Solov'ev stressed the tragic nature of great love. To take one of his examples, the fatally passionate love shared by Romeo and Juliet could never result in a Shakespeare, but Shakespeare could and did create the characters Romeo and Juliet. Solov'ev advanced a false dichotomy between a fatal passionate love, whose transcendental power offers a glimpse of immortality, and the endless sense of mortality signified in the procreative function of marriage:

The social-moral law and its basic objectification – the family – lead a human being’s animal nature within the limits necessary for generic progress; they regulate mortal life, but they do not reveal the path to immortality.

Scholars have recognized in this “regulation of mortal life” the fear of procreation shared most notably by the Merezhkovskiis and Blok, and before them, Nikolai Fedorov.
instincts resulted in temporary, incomplete and solely biological immortality, not the transcendent and final immortality sought in Christianity.

The pantheon of tragic characters signifies the artistic immortality that is attainable for human beings. If Solov'ev and a generation of poets following his teachings wished to put a stop to the cycle of life and death, at the same time, there is a tendency among members of this group to propagate recurring mythological character types that have populated world literature since Greek antiquity. Here the connection between Symbolist mythopoesis and their anti-procreative views appear to serve similar ends. These types of characters play a role in Merezhkovskii’s “O prichinakh upadka…” In it, Merezhkovskii claims,

Symbols can also be characters. Sancho Panza and Faust, Don Quixote and Hamlet, Don Juan and Falstaff, are according to Goethe’s expression “Schwankende Gestalten.”

The dreams that pursue humanity sometimes repeat themselves from century to century, accompanying it from generation to generation. It is not possible to convey the idea of such symbolic characters with words, for words only define and limit thought, whereas symbols express the limitless side of thought.\(^{206}\)

The recurrence of such characters can be compared to a kind of literary procreation (as in Plato’s “pregnancy of the mind”). Merezhkovskii’s word choice of “преследуют” is marked. According to this view, mortality traps the individual in cycles of birth and death, but a creative genius can reproduce any number of these literary types (symbols) with historically or aesthetically

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\(^{206}\) “Символами могут быть и характеры. Санчо-Панса и Фауст, Дон-Кихот и Гамлет, Дон-Жуан и Фальстаф, по выражению Гёте, – Schwankende Gestalten. // Сновидения, которые преследуют человечество, иногда повторяются из века в век, от поколения к поколению сопутствуют ему. Идею таких символических характеров никакими словами нельзя передать, ибо слова только определяют, ограничивают мысль, а символы выражают безграничную сторону мысли” (Merezhkovskii, “O prichinakh upadka…,” 217).
contingent variations without compromising the goal of ending the cycle of mortality. These character-symbols signify the continuity of Western literary heritage, not of the self.

In light of his negative reception of procreation, Merezhkovskii’s developing concept of love throughout the 1890s is reflected in his attraction to female displays of chastity or murderousness in tragedy. It is thus productive to consider the choices he made as a translator of Greek tragedy that reveal a particular reading of the text, as well as his comments about tragic heroes and heroines in critical essays.

The Symbolist mythopoetic impulse may have reflected a desire to birth literary children only, but for Merezhkovskii the supposed violence of erotic love remained an ever-present danger. In his 1894 essay on *Oedipus the King* he addressed the fear of procreation in terms of female violence:

> The tragic image of the victorious hero, Oedipus, the savior of his people, fighting against the Sphinx, the riddle of his own heritage, against Fate, the evil monster, like a beast, winged, like a spirit, seductive, like a woman; this image is eternal, similar to Prometheus, Faust, Hamlet, Don Juan, [King] Lear, similar to all tragic images, pursuing humanity from century to century, from generation to generation.\(^{207}\)

The figure of the Sphinx does not appear in the action of *Oedipus the King*, but it plays a key role in Merezhkovskii’s interpretation of the tragedy. When Oedipus deciphers her closely guarded secret, the incestuous production of heirs for Thebes becomes worse than death. However, it is not Oedipus’s hubris at stake in Merezhkovskii’s reading, but rather the cruelty of the Sphinx toward Oedipus that most reflects the hero’s tragedy. Solov'ev had linked the Sphinx

\[^{207}\]“Трагический образ победоносного героя, спасителя народа Эдипа, борющегося против Сфинкса, загадки собственного происхождения, против Судьбы, чудовища лютого, как зверь, окрыленного, как дух, обольстительного, как женщина; этот образ вечен, подобно Прометею, Фаусту, Гамлету, Дон-Жуану, Лиру, подобно всем трагическим образам, из века в век, от поколения к поколению преследующим человечество” (D.S. Merezhkovskii, “К tragedii Sofokla, Edip-Tsar’,” in *Estetika i kritika v dvukh tomakh*, t. 1, 226-31; 227-28).
not with the “hybrid morphology” popular at the time, but with woman more specifically. In Merezhkovskii’s essay the Sphinx is also perceived as predominantly female:

Here before us is revealed not tragic accident, but the very essence of life, the fatal inevitability of the death of every hero who relies not only on his will, on his strength, on his inexorable and ineradicable “I” at the confrontation of the mystery of the world, the clawed monster in the guise of a woman, offering her eternal riddles. Is this not how Faust, Manfred, Hamlet, and Don Juan perish, only because they stood against the law of necessity and death, because they thirsted for “the superhuman?”

For Merezhkovskii, the Sphinx comes to represent the hero’s inability to reject the feminine, resulting in the loss of his superhuman potential. Thus the rejection of sex for Merezhkovskii is directly related to an individual’s ability to transcend the human. This reading of the tragic hero is consistent with his preference for the plots of certain plays over others. In Merezhkovskii’s reading, for example, Medea’s tragedy is not that she is abandoned by Jason and consumed by rage, but that she bothered having children at all. Like the Sphinx, Medea represents an anti-procreative force: by murdering her children and Jason’s new wife, Medea destroys her husband’s desire to continue his line (the reason why he decided to remarry in the first place).

208 Matich, Erotic Utopia, 70; 306n28. For a visual depiction of the Sphinx as femme fatale, see Gustave Moreau’s Oedipus and the Sphinx.

209 “Здесь перед нами открывается не трагическая случайность, а самая сущность жизни, роковая неизбежность гибели всякого героя, который надеется только на свою волю, на свою силу, на свое непреклонное и неистребимое «я» при столкновении с тайною мира, с когтистым женоподобным чудовищем, предлагающим свои вечные загадки. Не так же ли гибнут и Фауст, и Манфред, и Гамлет, и Дон-Жуан только потому, что они восстали на закон необходимости и смерти, потому что они возжаждали «сверхчеловеческого?»” (Merezhkovskii, “К tragedii Sofokla, Edip-Tsar’,” 228).

210 Merezhkovskii may have also been inspired to translate Euripides’s Medea in response to the reworking of the myth in the co-authorship of the publishing giant Suvorin and Victor Burenin. See A. Suvorin and V. Burenin, Medeia. Drama v chetyrekh deistviakh v stikhakh i proze (S.-Peterburg, 1883). It includes an introductory essay on the Medea myth in which Grillparzer’s famous version is mentioned. Merezhkovskii gave his opinion of Burenin in “O prichinakh upadka…,” 205-06.

211 Some might consider the rage of Medea, daughter of the sun, as a mythical subtext of Belyi’s Argonaut poems in Zoloto v lazuri. The phrase “To the sun! to the sun!” seems a great deal less idealistic, after all, when viewed in light of the tragedy Medea!
As a translator Merezhkovskii showed a clear preference for Euripides’s versions of Greek myth. According to one scholar of tragedy, Euripides consistently returned to myths in which children are murdered: “fifteen of about nineteen extant plays – are quite explicitly involved with stories about the death, murder, or sacrifice of children.”

Euripides was also the subject of debate in nineteenth-century Romantic criticism over which tragedians expressed most successfully the values of harmony and solemnity desired in the aesthetic effect of tragedy. The Schlegel brothers and Nietzsche were critical of Euripides for deemphasizing the role of the chorus and for his use of *deus ex machina*.

In Medea, Merezhkovskii’s rendering of certain passages is revealing. In one scene, the chorus responds to the disastrous marital situation that arouses Medea’s thirst for revenge. They call to Aphrodite (here Cypris) to spare them passion for men other than their husbands and to keep them confined to marriage beds. Theirs is a plea for Aphrodite to grant them the submissiveness that Medea spurns. In Annenskii’s translation:

Скромной ласки хочу я:
Нет дара бессмертных сладче.
О, пусть никогда Киприды
Ужасной не слышу в сердце
С грозой ее ярых ударов,

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I long for a modest caress:
There is no sweeter gift of the immortals,
O that I would never hear
Terrifying Cypris in my heart,
With the thunder of her ardent blows,
With the hated storm of arguments,
With desire for another’s bed!
The bedroom, where there is no war,
The bed, where women do not argue,
Do I wish to glorify with a hymn!

Merezhkovskii renders this scene differently, deemphasizing the positive connotations of marriage put forth in the chorus. Instead of asking Aphrodite to grant women fidelity in marriage, Merezhkovskii places emphasis on the women’s virginal purity and sexual modesty, leaving out the issue of marriage:

Да пошлют нам скромность олимпийцы,
Робких жен пленительный венец!
Да не ввергнет страшная Киприда
В сети зла, в неутолимый спор,
Жен, объятых страстью беззаконной:
     Пусть она хранит
     Ложе верных жен
В чистоте и в неге целомудренной.215

May the Olympians send us humility,
The captivating crown of shy women!
And may terrifying Cypris not plunge us

214 In a recent English poetic translation: “May moderation please me – / that’s the gods’ best favor; / and may dread Cypris never / shake my heart with fervor; / nor bring on angry quarrels / and unending clashes, / by making me inflamed for / other men’s embraces. / May she employ her judgment / wisely to encourage / concord, by fairly settling / women’s beds in marriage.” See Euripides, Medea, trans. Oliver Taplin, in Euripides I, eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013), 98-99.
Into the nets of evil, into an endless quarrel,
We women embraced by unlawful passion:
Let her keep
The bed of faithful women
In purity and chaste delight.

The mention of “unlawful passion” is nowhere suggested in comparisons with other translations, pointing to a likely contamination of his Medea with his translation of Hippolytus. The chorus sings in Hippolytus of the innocent victim Phaedra: “The premonition is realized, / And the stormy flame / of unlawful love / Cypris has ignited.” Phaedra of course hangs herself over her bridal bed (“Phaedra over the marriage bed, appeasing Cypris; / Freeing her from torment and desire…”). Merezhkovskii’s translation here suggests the extent to which he saw Medea and Phaedra in similar terms. In fact, he tends to bring up the two characters as representatives of similar feminine tendencies. For example, Medea and Phaedra are invoked as a pair in Merezhkovskii’s introductory essay to Daphnis and Chloe:

When Phaedra or Medea howl about offended, jealous passion, in this howl a lion’s roar is heard that makes even the hearts of heroes tremble. It is terrifying when these Titan wives shriek about love or are silent, plotting some misdeed in their heart, but still more

216 “Предвестьє свершилось, / И бурное пламя / Любви беззаконной / Киприда зажгла.” Euripides [Evripid], Medeia, trans. D.S. Merezhkovskii, in Pss, t. 14, 329-89; 362. Compare with: “The presage of the omen was true; / Aphrodite has broken her spirit / with the terrible sickness of impious love.” See Euripides, Hippolytus, trans. David Grene, in Euripides I, 224. And with a prose translation: “True were the omens; she has been smitten to the heart by Aphrodite’s dread plague of incestuous love.” See Euripides, Hippolytus in The Plays of Euripides, trans. Moses Hadas and John Harvey McLean (New York: The Dial Press, 1936), 128.
217 “Федра над брачной постелью, Киприде покорствуя; / Освобождаясь от мук и желания…” (Merezhkovskii, Ippolit, 362). Merezhkovskii rearranges the lines in this scene to emphasize the cruelty of Aphrodite in Phaedra’s hanging. Compare with: “She felt shame at her cruel fate. / She has chosen good name rather than life: / she is easing her heart of its bitter load of love” (Euripides, Hippolytus, trans. Grene, 224) and with a prose translation: “[…] to the beams of her bridal chamber she will fix a hanging noose […] to rid her heart of the pains of love” (Euripides, Hippolytus, trans. Hadas and McLean, 128).
terrifying when, deceiving and pretending to be conquered, they weep: in Greek tragedies the tears of wives foreshadow the blood of husbands.218

The mention of a lion’s roar is a reference to Euripides’s text, where Jason refers to Medea as a “lioness,” a common epithet for vengeful females in Greek tragedy.219 Here Merezhkovskii continues the trend of animalizing vengeful heroines. To add to this tendency, women who are more masculine are not as positive as men with feminine features (like Hippolytus or Leonardo). Phaedra and Medea evoke his depiction of the Sphinx’s sharp claws, a sign of its feminine violence.

In generalizing about all Greek tragedies, Merezhkovskii points to the role of female characters in the downfall of the Greek heroes, a reading that calls attention to the role of Aphrodite as a destroyer of progeny and punisher of consummated erotic love (so that progeny is avoided). Merezhkovskii’s misogyny extends to his writings about Ibsen’s heroines in an essay on the Norwegian playwright. For example, Merezhkovskii compares Hedda Gabler to Medea, her ancient precursor. In the 1890s it was more common to compare not Ibsen’s Hedda, but the “New-Woman” heroine Nora from A Doll’s House to Medea.220 Hedda Gabler, burning Lövborg’s manuscript as though it were his child, is described as a modern Medea:

Illuminated by a blazing flame and a pale distorted face, with an expression of sensuality and cruelty in her eyes, she really bears a resemblance to a child-murderer, to Medea, or to one of the powerful, mysterious sorceresses of the North, about whom the

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219 “Not a woman, but a lioness you are, with a soul / More pitiless than the evil witch Scylla, / A monster of unknown seas!...” (Не женщина, а львица ты, с душой / Безжалостней, чем злая ведьма Сцилла, / Чудовище неведомых морей!...) (Merezhkovskii, Medeia, 323).

Scandinavian sagas tell. But, despite the horror of the crime – who knows, maybe precisely because of this horror – our hearts are drawn to her by an incomprehensible beauty. 221

His key insight into Hedda occurs in the italicized portion. There is something about Hedda’s cruel delight in destroying the manuscript that is also strangely beautiful. Ascribing positive qualities to a metaphorical child-killing, Merezhkovskii attends to the pathos of Medea’s and Hedda’s rage, but also seems relieved at the thought of female beauty leading not to creation but to extermination. The link between Hedda’s book burning and the Silver Age view that creative work could serve as a substitute for procreation is explicit in Merezhkovskii’s demonstrated interest in filicide.

Two “ideal” female representations have emerged so far: women whose overflow of passion (whether sexual or wrathful, Merezhkovskii does not distinguish) results in the murder of their offspring or in their own deaths; and women whose successful preservation of their chastity prevents future offspring. These women appear in different categories for Merezhkovskii: Medea and Phaedra are a pair, Antigone and Alcestis are another, but the actions of all arguably underscore an assertiveness on the part of female characters that Helene Foley contextualizes in the wariness of men about their own behaviors: “Women’s reputed incapacity for self-control, their vulnerability to desire, their naïve ethical misjudgments, their passionate responses to victimization […] are all characteristics men feared in themselves and preferred to explore in

221 “Озаренная разгоревшимся пламенем, с бледным искаженным лицом, с выражением сладострастья и жестокости в глазах, она в самом деле похожа на детоубийцу, на Медею, или на одну из могучих, таинственных волшебниц Севера, о которых повествуют скандинавские саги. Но, несмотря на ужас преступления, – кто знает, может быть, именно благодаря этому ужасу – наше сердце привлекается к ней непонятной красотой” (Merezhkovskii, “Ibsen,” in Vechnye sputniki, 285-337; 330).
Whether or not this reading applies to Merezhkovskii, the sexual or moral aggressiveness of Greek heroines (all of whom Foley singles out in her study: Antigone, Medea, Phaedra, or Clytemnestra\(^\text{223}\)) are valorized despite the fear that they arouse in the male author. Foley’s is an anthropological approach to the marriage plot in Greek tragedy. She argues that fifth-century tragedies in which marriage plays a pivotal role take up then contemporary conflicts of the marriage contract, such as:

> [...] the failure and abuse of the wife’s reproductive capacities [...], the potentially divisive power introduced into the household by a wealthy or higher-status wife or an heiress; and the wife’s possible division of loyalties between her natal and marital families [...].\(^\text{224}\)

Foley argues that this type of problem is explicit in tragedies like Euripides’s Medea: where “Medea’s assumption that she is entitled to a moral recognition as wife comparable with that normally offered by men to male friends leads inevitably to a tragic conflict.”\(^\text{225}\) In other words, these heroines might be feared because they act like men and forget their prescribed social roles.

For Merezhkovskii, these female characters are a cause for fear simply by virtue of their being women, and, more specifically, mothers. Thus Merezhkovskii finds Medea’s very maternity more tragic than her filicide, an interpretation that reverses the usual significance of her actions when understood in terms of the play’s social context. Murdering her children makes Medea terrifying, but, because this act also calls the suspicious values of marriage and procreation into question, it is, contrary to moral intuition, legitimate, at least in Merezhkovskii’s eccentric reading, and cannot be tragic. In Medea’s case, her supernatural exit at the play’s conclusion in a flying chariot is seemingly her reward for filicide and revenge well exacted: “She


\(^{223}\) Ibid., 115-16.

\(^{224}\) Ibid., 59.

\(^{225}\) Ibid., 81.
had become like a god, immortal [...] Medea is no longer human, her sons are dead and the house and the lineage are destroyed." In this interpretation the immortal transformation of Medea is predicated on the extermination of her children, the representatives of her mortality.

Opposed to the motivations of these vengeful mothers are the self-abnegating, faithful daughters that appear in Merezhkovskii’s criticism. In King Oedipus, the victory of fate results in two sister-daughters. These figures later renounce conventional marriage and child-bearing, a dispensation that endows them with “Christian tenderness:”

He [Oedipus] forgets himself, his sorrow and his pride, thinking only about his own poor, rejected and abandoned children. Is this tenderness – this new, still weakly flickering happiness of love – after all the terrors and sufferings, not a victory over fate itself, over the ancient monstrous Sphinx. Love gives true immortality to human will, love defeats the blind power of fate” [my emphasis]. And so in this reading, Antigone proves herself a loving companion to her father, who had long been suffering as a victim of the Sphinx.

The tragedy of Antigone has more recently been received as a work of personal choice over civic duty and has been especially important to recent critics who are drawn to the gender and political dimensions of the work. Needless to say Merezhkovskii’s view of her as a meek virgin is not at all in line with these recent critical trends. Faithful to burial customs, she inters her brother’s slain body in spite of Creon’s order that she leave it exposed to the elements. In Merezhkovskii’s reading, Antigone chooses the ideal love of her dead brother over sexual love

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226 Simon, Tragic Drama and the Family, 83.
for Haemon, her fiancé. This non-procreative choice places the religious above the sexual and temporal political law. Antigone represents love’s triumph over the inevitability of death as the cause of human misery, remaining a symbol of individual freedom and human dignity exercised against an unjust civic power.

Merezhkovskii gives special treatment to these female figures and others like Alcestis, Iphigenia, Electra, as well as Antigone’s sister, Ismene).\textsuperscript{229} Alcestis is an especially compelling example for Merezhkovskii’s ideal love for the dearly departed. In “O prichinakh upadka…,” he compared the elevated feeling conveyed by chaste heroines through a comparison with naked muscular youths leading horses on the Parthenon’s bas-relief. Like the youths, these women have tamed human nature with an otherworldly gentleness:

This is why there is such ineradicable greatness, such composure and fullness of life in a damaged shard of marble, over which millennia have flown by. Similar symbolism permeates all creations of Greek art. Is not Euripides’s Alcestis, dying in order to save her husband, not a symbol of maternal pity, which inspires the love of man and woman? Is Sophocles’s Antigone not a symbol of the religiously virginal beauty of female characters, which was subsequently reflected in medieval Madonnas.\textsuperscript{230}

\textsuperscript{229} In a letter to Mariia Ermolova, a tragic actress with whom he corresponded during a trip to Italy and Greece, Merezhkovskii confided his intention to present these heroines to the Russian public. “To resurrect the Greek theater (which to this day is a mystery) means to resurrect idealism, the purest and most immortal idealism amidst the kingdom of V. Krylov and operetta. If not Antigone, then Hippolytus, if not Hippolytus, Alcestis, or the real Medea, and not Suvorin’s or Burenin’s parody, or Elektra, or Iphigenia, but something must strike the hearts with unknown force. I am going to translate and, if I live until 30 or 35, I will translate all of the best tragedies of the Greek theater” (Воскресить Греческий Театр [который до сих пор – тайна] – значит воскресить идеализм, чистейший и бессмертный идеализм среди царства В. Крылова и оперетки. Не Антигона, так Ипполит, не Ипполит – Алькеста, или настоящая Медея, а не Суворина – Буренина пародия, или Электра, или Ифигения – но что-нибудь должно ударить по сердцам с неведомой силой. Я буду переводить и, если доживу до 30 или 35 лет, – переведу все эти лучшие трагедии греческого театра). Ed. R. Ostrovskaiia, “‘Kak by mne khotelo’s s Vami mnogo i mnogo pogovorit.’ Pis’ma D.S. Merezhkovskogo M.N. Ermolovoii,” Teatr, no. 7 (1993): 95-97; 96.

\textsuperscript{230} “Вот почему такое неистребимое величие, такое спокойствие и полнота жизни в искалеченном обломке мрамора, над которым пролетели тысячелетия. Подобный символизм проникает все создания греческого искусства. Разве Алькестис Эврипида, умирающая, чтобы спасти мужа, – не символ материнской жалости, которая одухотворяет
As one critic explains, “Through love of another, another who loves him so much that she would
die for him, Admetus learns to confront his own death.” Alcestis’s tragedy ends with her
“resurrection.” She is returned to her husband through the intervention of Heracles, who
descends into the underworld to retrieve her. Her resurrection “spiritualizes” their marriage, not
least, in Merezhkovskii’s eyes, because of her request that Admetus not marry after her death.
According to expectations, Admetus must remain alive in order to provide them with more heirs,
which Alcestis could not continue to do despite having already provided his line with children.
With her demand, Alcestis has revenge on his parents, who refused to give their lives, ensuring
the legitimacy of her own maternity and preventing the production of future children. In both
Alcestis and Antigone, Merezhkovskii sees self-abnegating love as a feminine ideal, but the
ideality of their love is still somehow dependent upon their deaths. This effective “suicide”
would seem to pose problems for his negative opinion of asceticism, but theirs is a death that
rejects life in order to affirm and purify love that might have easily resulted in marriage and
procreation.

In his translations, Merezhkovskii consistently deemphasized the value of marriage as a
procreative union. Virginal characters are not polluted by the cultural and instinctual desire to
marry or have children in his ideological reading. Translating Antigone, he side-steps her regret
that she will die as the last in her line. This regret would imply that she had intended and even
desired to marry Haemon in order to bear children. His ideological reading of the text is more

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любовь мужчины и женщины? Разве Антигона Софокла – не символ религиозно-
dевственной красоты женских характеров, которая впоследствии отразилась в
средневековых Мадоннах” (Merezhkovskii, “O prichinakh upadka…,” 216).
231 C. Fred Alford, The Psychoanalytic Theory of Greek Tragedy (New Haven: Yale University
explicit through comparisons with less biased translations. In F. Zelinskii’s translation, her
departing words to the chorus of old men are as follows:

O боги отцов!
Вы простите — прости ты, родная земля!
О, смотрите, фиванцы! Царевна идет —
Остальная наследница древних владык.
Вот судья мой — и вот преступление мое:
Благочестию честь воздала я!\footnote{232}

O gods of my fathers!
You must forgive me — forgive me native land!
O, look, Thebans! A queen is coming —
The last inheritress of ancient rulers.
Here is my judge — and here my crime:
Honor for piety I have rendered!

Antigone questions Creon’s judgment on her transgression, calling attention to the irony that he
himself is compromising his family line by punishing the woman he had promised to his son,
Haemon. Though Antigone rejects marriage and knowingly transgresses against the state, she
still regrets rejecting the traditional family life she might have led. Merezhkovskii’s rendering
obscures this regret:

О город родной,
О великие боги отчизны,
Без вины умираю! Старейшины Фив,
И вожди, и народ, посмотрите,
На какие страданья какой человек
Дочь владыки, меня, обрекает за то,
Что почтила я волю бессмертных!\footnote{233}

O native city,
O great gods of the fatherland,

I die, blameless! Elders of Thebes, 
Leaders and countrymen alike, look 
To what sufferings such a person, 
A ruler’s daughter, I, have been condemned, 
Because I honored the will of the immortals!

Antigone asserts her innocence in a lamenting farewell to the Theban chorus. In Zelinskii’s translation, Antigone refers to herself as the inheritor of her father’s reign and thereby underscores her regret that she cannot, as a mother, continue the family lineage. In Merezhkovskii’s translation, Antigone refers to herself as a “ruler’s daughter,” which implies her non-procreative familial obligations to her deceased father and brother, Polynices. In the case of Electra, Merezhkovskii similarly undermines the desire to be married and procreate.

The first translation that Merezhkovskii undertook is a portion from Euripides’s Electra. “Smert' Klitemnestry” takes the death of the mother as the central event in the action, by doing so positing the inevitably tragic consequences of motherhood. Contrary to what one might expect, Electra’s matricide in Merezhkovskii’s reading, as in his Medea, serves the purpose of rendering her unmarriageable and thus incapable of becoming a mother herself.

In Electra, the siblings plot to murder their mother, Clytemnestra, to avenge their father’s death (Agamemnon). Clytemnestra hatched a plot to kill Agamemnon after hearing that he willingly sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia (a tragedy that Merezhkovskii had vowed to translate). When the action begins, Electra’s mother has forced her to live in matrimony with a common farmer, an affront to her royal upbringing. Despite her marriage, Electra manages to preserve her virginity, thereby attenuating the shame of her position. Clytemnestra is considered an adulterer, by contrast, having remarried the man responsible for the dirty work in Agamemnon’s murder. Electra and Orestes discover one another as the latter is passing through his native country and they plot to kill their stepfather first and then Clytemnestra. Electra lures
her mother to her husband’s farm by spreading a rumor that she has given birth. Having murdered their mother, the siblings begin chanting a lament. Brother and sister show remorse at their act and fear the consequences of matricide (Orestes wonders what land will welcome him, Electra wonders who will marry her). Merezhkovskii interprets this scene as the end of a familial line brought about by the laws of revenge. Merezhkovskii rewrote entire portions of the lamenting dialogue spoken between Orestes and Electra. He also combines Electra’s and Orestes’s speech with the chorus’s alternating comments, giving both characters a self-consciousness of their deed as they recount their mother’s suffering. Electra has insisted that Clytemnestra be killed and now regrets her ruthlessness. She turns to her brother, who throughout the ordeal has shown more compassion than she. I quote from Annenskii’s translation of this scene:

О, тяжек грех, но он не твой, а мой:
Я на нее, родимую, напала,
Враждою палимая.234

O, the sin is heavy, but it is mine, not yours:
I fell on her, our kin,
Burning with enmity.

The chorus responds:

Увы! О мать, как лют удел
Носившей и убитой.
Ты в море слез погружена, –
Пускай права была их мсть, –
Детей родных руками, мать.235

Alas! O mother, how cruel your lot
As one who has been born and murdered.
You are plunged in a sea of tears –
Even if their revenge was just –
By the hands of your children, mother.

Merezhkovskii merges Electra’s words and the chorus’s commentary:

Плачь, брат мой, плачь! во всем моя вина:
С какою злобой надругалась я
    Над беззащитной матерью!
    Убитая, несчастная,
    Так вот чего дождалась ты
    От нас, от рук детей своих,
    Так вот, чего он требовал,
    Закон возмездья праведный!  

Weep, brother, weep! I am to blame for all:
With what evil violence did I mock
    Our defenseless mother!
    Murdered, unfortunate,
    So this is what you awaited
    from us, from the hands of your children,
    So here is what was ordered
    By the righteous law of retribution!

The conversational syntax of this passage betrays it as an interpolation of Euripides’s text.

Merezhkovskii’s other translations of Euripides correspond more consistently to high-register expression. Electra assumes responsibility for the crime, but her speech in Merezhkovskii’s interpretation suggests that Clytemnestra brought violence upon herself through the act of giving birth: “Так вот чего дождалась ты / От нас…” A similar phrasal pattern is developed just below this line, “Так вот, чего он требовал, / Закон возмездья праведный.” The following logic is implied: to have children is to be murdered by them. By killing their mother, Electra and Orestes are as if mechanically fulfilling the laws of retribution, implicating the law of revenge

and the familial line in the same inevitable destruction. Merezhkovskii in the above rendering suggests that the tragedy of Electra hinges on the notion of retribution (in the short space of this fragment he uses the word three times). Having enacted their revenge, the siblings are closer to bringing their dysfunctional family line to a close. Orestes cries to a “cruel God:” “With one breath / You wiped from the face of the earth / Our entire royal line.” Merezhkovskii brings out this idea of familial extinction in Electra’s speech:

Увы, мой брат, куда бежать,
Куда склонить нам голову?
Войдем ли мы на светлый пир,
– Толпа гостей бежит от нас,
Войдем ли мы под мирный кров,
– Внесем с собой проклятие!

Alas, my brother, where do we run,
Where can we rest our heads?
If we go to a joyous feast –
The crowd of guests will run from us,
If we go beneath a peaceful shelter –
We will carry a curse with us!

Whereas it appears in Annenskii’s version:

Увы! Увы! Куда пойду теперь?
Подруги, где и кто Электру примет

237 For Blok “retribution” was a theory of history that explicitly related to the extinction of the family line. In 1919, he wrote in the foreword to “Vozmezdie”: “[…] the family line, having put itself to the test of the retribution of history, begins, in its way, to create retribution; the last first-born is already able to snarl and emit a lion’s roar; with his little human hand he is prepared to seize the wheel that moves the history of humanity. And, maybe, he really will seize the wheel…[…]” ([…]) род, испытавший на себе возмездие истории, начинает, в свою очередь, творить возмездие; последний первенец уже способен огрызаться и издавать львиное рычание; он готов ухватиться своей человеческой ручонкой за колесо, которым движется история человечества. И, может быть, ухватится-таки за него…)” À.A. Blok, “Predislovie,” in Письма в двадцати томах, т. 5 (Москва: Нauка, 1999), 50. For more on the connection between Merezhkovskii and Blok’s “Vozmezdie,” see Carol Ueland, “Blok’s ‘Vozmezdie’: A Hidden Subtext in Chapter One,” Ulbandus Review, vol. 5 (Fall 1987): 55-73.


На ложе брачное?240

Alas! Alas! Where will I go now?
Friends, where and who will accept Electra
Into the marriage bed?

Where in Euripides’s original version Electra is anxious about her marital prospects following matricide (naturally), Merezhkovskii removes all reference to the girl’s conventional obligation. Instead of a young woman’s regret at being left out of a traditional rite of passage, in Merezhkovskii’s interpretation she is worried about being a pariah. Throughout the tragedy, Electra has preserved her virginity in order to marry her equal in royal blood. Merezhkovskii, however, has made her a willing virgin for life.

*Aphrodite and Artemis*

In “Tragedia tselomudriia i sladoastriia” Merezhkovskii had wanted to see his translations staged, especially of Euripides.241 He managed to do this for *Hippolytus* and two of his translations of Sophocles (*Antigone*, 1899 and *Oedipus at Colonus*, 1903). In October of 1902, Merezhkovskii delivered a speech at the premiere of his *Hippolytus* entitled “О новом значении древней трагедии” (On the new significance of ancient tragedy). The speech was meant to publicly declare the performance as the equal of a religious event and to provide a reading of the tragedy for the assembled audience.242 It is significant that Euripides’s *Hippolytus*, more than any other tragedy that Merezhkovskii worked on, explicitly foregrounded the problem of erotic

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241 In his letter to Ermolova, Merezhkovskii pointed out the scenic potential of *Hippolytus*. He writes, having just finished translating it: “If you had known what beauty is this! And how scenic. In general I am persuaded that the Greek theater is terra incognita, that is, an absolutely unknown world (Если бы Вы знали, что это за красота! И как сценично. Вообще я убеждаюсь, что греческий театр – terra incognita, – т.е. абсолютно неведомый мир) (Merezhkovskii to Ermolova, ““Как бы мне хотело’s...,”” 95).
love as a battle between Artemis and Aphrodite. It makes sense to say more about this pair in his work before moving to a discussion of the reception of *Hippolytus*.

As a pair, Artemis and Aphrodite are mapped onto the existing dialectic of tragedy (Dionysus and Apollo), but to unclear ends.

The triumph of diurnal, solar gods, Aphrodite and Apollo, blocked from us the holy mysteries of the nocturnal, chthonic gods kin to the ancient Titans, Artemis and Eleusinian Demeter and Bacchus-Dionysus. But now, when we remove from Greek antiquity the gleaming covering (cold as marble) of Roman classicism (and the still colder French imitations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the already completely frozen-over and soulless official Russian classicism), we discover once again its living and kindred heart. From behind the clear and radiant face of Apollo appears, like the starry night, the enigmatic and dark face of Dionysus, the resurrecting god of tragedy.  

243 If in “Tragediia tselomudriia i sladostrastiia” Merezhkovskii asserted the irreconcilability of the two goddesses, in “O novom znachenii drevnei tragedii,” he thought about how to resolve them.

This movement is toward the post-tragic world of Apocalypse that characterizes his thought into the twentieth century. It appears in the above quote that Merezhkovskii would like to rediscover the underground world of Artemis, but in actuality his project is directed at apprehending Aphrodite’s Apollonian luminousness. She might represent Apollo in one passage, but in *L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii*, the birth of Venus (Anadyomene, “rising from the sea”) serves as a metaphor for the birth of tragedy:

The element of sensuality, of music […] beckons from the shore, like the quiet sea. But when it rises up, rebelling, and strikes the human world, the fortresses of moral laws break into smithereens what seems to be the most solid historical boundaries, because it

243 “Торжество дневных солнечных богов Афродиты, Аполлона заслонило от нас священные таинства ночных подземных, родственных древним титанам, Артемиды, Деметры Елевзинской и Вакха-Диониса. Но теперь, когда блестящая и холодная, как мрамор, оболочка классицизма римского, еще более холодных французских подражаний XVII и XVIII века и уже окончательно обледенелого и обездушенного казенного русского классицизма спадает с эллинской древности, нам открывается снова ей живое и родное сердце. Из-за явного и лукавого лица Аполлона выступает загадочное и темное, как звездная ночь, лицо Диониса, воскресающего бога трагедии” (Ibid.).
wants still the new and still newer, the limitless, the supernatural, the supra-historical, –
then people take fright and this element seems to them evil, cursed, demonic. Only then
from its depths, like Anadyomene from the sea’s abyss, is Tragedy born, a joyous and
fearful spectacle, the sensual and bloody game of Dionysus.²⁴⁴

Like many others of his generation, Merezhkovskii subscribed to Nietzsche’s narrative of the
birth of tragedy as one possible only through the madness-inducing Dionysian frenzy that is then
converted into a pristine, dream-like Apollonian form. This basic understanding of the way
tragedy organizes chaos into representable statements of human contradiction and suffering
informs his understanding of Aphrodite and in turn his notion of erotic love. However, his
purpose, he claims, is to strike a balance between Aphrodite’s ethereal beauty (bringing her
closer to the purity represented in Artemis) and her violent, sexual power.²⁴⁵ Merezhkovskii
believed that such a resolution was almost achieved in the characters of Daphnis and Chloe.

In his essay on this work, he upheld the naïve sexuality of the lovers, linking their
ignorance of sex to a burgeoning Christian love and their languid desire to death throes:

Mind, heart, and will – their entire being is exhausted and melts from love, like soft wax.
And the sting of passion, which they, poor and innocent, do not even know how to name,
permeates their souls and poisons them with a piercing pain and pleasure that is similar to
death. They do not resist, they only pray and weep, surrendering to this savage power,

²⁴⁴ “Стихия сладострастного, музыкального […] манит с берега, как тихое море. Но когда
встает она, бунтующая, и, ударяя в мир человеческий, в твердь нравственных законов,
разбивает вдребезги, по-видимому, самые незыблемые, исторические грани, потому что
хочет все нового и нового, безграничного, сверхъестественного, сверхисторического, –
тогда люди пугаются, и стихия эта кажется им злую, проклятою, бесовскою. Тогда-то из
недр ее, как Анадиомена из пучины морской, рождается Трагедия, радостное и страшное
зрелище, сладострастная и кровавая игра Диониса” (Merezhkovskii, L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii,
447). The phrase “bloody game” (кровавая игра) appears in the context of Cupid rather than of
Dionysus (as in “О simvolizme ‘Dafnisa i Khloi’”).

²⁴⁵ Nowhere is this stated more clearly than in the later essay “Turgenev” (1909): “To love is
cruelty. To love is bloody violence. To love is to give birth. To love is to kill. ‘Love is strong as
death.’ Death is connected to love” (Любовь – жестокость. Любовь – кровавое насилие.
Любить – рождать. Любить – убивать. ‘Любовь крепка, как смерть.’ Смерть связана с
любовью). He quotes from the same passage in the “Song of Songs” as the heroine of his earlier
story “Prorok” (See Merezhkovskii, “Turgenev” in Estetika i kritika v dvukh tomakh, t. 1, 430-
39; 432).
and it swallows them, carries them away like a vernal stream would flower petals. Real Greeks did not love and suffer thus. There the blessed breath of Fate, fresh and terrible, wafts over everything. There even on the most tender love – Antigone’s and Alcestis’s – is the stamp of heroism, severity, and greatness.²⁴⁶

Philetares, their mentor in love, teaches them about the god Eros and instructs them to end their suffering by kissing and lying together naked. Daphnis and Chloe never in fact consummate their love, but Daphnis finds a willing tutor in Lycaenion, a local woman. With her Daphnis loses his virginity, but is reluctant to take Chloe’s after Lycaenion’s warning that she “will lie there, bleeding heavily” and will struggle as though in pain.²⁴⁷ After this “tutoring,” Daphnis continues to avoid having sexual intercourse with Chloe because he “shrank from pestering Chloe for more than kisses and embraces.”²⁴⁸ In Gill’s standard English translation, Daphnis simply wishes to avoid harming Chloe, “having only just learned about the blood” [i.e. about the fact that she would bleed when they first have sex].²⁴⁹ Merezhkovskii translates this sentiment differently, perhaps in an effort to preserve Daphnis’s innocence with Chloe after casual sex with Lycaenion, “All of this scared him, inexperienced in love.”²⁵⁰ In his translation of Lycaenion’s admonition, possibly due to censorship, Merezhkovskii sanitizes the scene and leaves out mention of blood;

²⁴⁶ “Ум, сердце, воля – все существо их изнемогает, тает от любви, как мягкий воск. И жало страсти, которую они, бедные и невинные, даже не умеют назвать, проникает в их душу и увлажняет с пронзительной болью и наслаждением, подобным смерти. Они не сопротивляются, только молятся и плачут, отдаваясь этой дикой силе, и она поглощает их, уносит, как весенний поток уносит лепестки цветов. Настоящие эллины так не любили, так не страдали. Там надо всем ветать благодатное дыхание Рока, свежее и грозное. Там и на самой нежной любви – у Антигонды, у Алькестис – печать героизма, суровости и величия” (Merezhkovskii, “О символизме ‘Дафнис и Хлоя,’” 15).
²⁴⁸ Ibid.
²⁴⁹ Ibid.
²⁵⁰ “Все это пугало его, неискушенного в любви” (Longus, Dafnis i Khloia, trans. Merezhkovskii, 118).
“[Chloe] will scream, cry and resist…” (будет кричать, плакать и сопротивляться…).251 As a translator of Longus, Merezhkovskii maintains his view of the characters as “two innocent children” (дв[а] невинных детей), and the plot, in which “the innocent game of love and the greatest chastity borders on a dangerous and exquisite temptation.”252

If the essay on Daphnis and Chloe foregrounds the influence of the child god Eros, even over the will of Zeus, then Aphrodite is a more sinister and powerful variable. The goddess emerges frequently in Merezhkovskii’s writings as the divine embodiment of the terrifying and destructive qualities of erotic love, identified with both cruelty and mercilessness.253 One recognizes this view of her from Greek choruses, who frequently chant to appease the goddess of love. Yet in the essay “Tragediia tselomudriia i sladostrastiia,” Aphrodite is only as powerful as Artemis: “[…] And then perhaps many will dimly or clearly feel, how two cups of a scale, various and equal, waver and how, in between them, high above, the dial trembles, not able to find a final equilibrium.”254

251 Ibid., 117. Gill’s translation reads, “[…] he was frightened of it [the blood] and thought it was only from a wound that blood came” (Longus, Daphnis and Chloe, 325-26). Thanks to Professor Robert Sobak at Bowdoin College for helping me check selections of Merezhkovskii’s translations of this text with the Greek original.
252 “[…] невинная игра любви и величайшее целомудрие граничат с опасным и утонченным соблазном” (Merezhkovskii, “O simvolizme ‘Dafnisa i Khloi,’” 12).
253 Rozanov did not agree with Merezhkovskii’s portrayal of Aphrodite as cruel. For him she belonged to the positive valence of fertility: “The fact is that antiquity itself – not only Greece, but also the East – considered Artemis and not Aphrodite ‘cruel.’ This is very accurate and even already foretold the most recent European asceticism, which brought severe, doleful, in the Middle Ages even bloody, notes into Christianity” (Дело в том, что сама древность – и не только Греция, но и Восток, – считали именно Артемиду, а не Афродиту «жестокою», что очень правильно и уже предсказал новейший европейский аскезис, который внес суровые, страдальческие, в средние века даже кровавые, ноты в христианство). V. Rozanov, “Ippolit Evripida na Aleksandrinskoi stsene,” Mir iskusstva, nos. 9-10 (1902, t. 8): 240-48; 244.
254 “[и тогда может быть, многие смутно или ясно вдруг почувствуют, как две чаши весов мира, разные и равные, колеблются и как дрожит между ними, вверху, единая стрелка, не
The equal strength of the goddesses, on which Merezhkovskii insists, reaches equilibrium after instability is resolved in the human heart. In this way Artemis can be described as “unconquered and unconquerable, pure, just, and serene” even though Aphrodite’s scheme to destroy Hippolytus has succeeded. After Hippolytus’s death, Artemis addresses the slain youth, as if speaking to the crucified Jesus, “O my dear, for torments you were born / And you cannot live with people because too / Pure for them was your soul” (О милый мой, для мук ты был рожден / И жить с людьми не мог, затем что слишком / Была для них душа твоя чиста). A.W. Schlegel said of this scene, “I know of nothing at all, either in ancient or in modern tragedy, that is more touching.” Though Merezhkovskii insists on the equal strength of both goddesses, his more frequent reference to Aphrodite’s tyranny over all things reveals a point of tension.

One such example can be found in Merezhkovskii’s translation of a choral address to the goddess, which he quotes in “Tragedia tselomudriia i sladostrastiia:”

Диркейский колодезь,
Священные Фивы,
Вы помните ярость

умея найти последнюю неподвижность” (Merezhkovskii, “Tragedia tselomudriia i sladostrastiia,” 66).


That Aphrodite is queen and ruler of the universe – even more than Zeus – is an idea expressed in *Daphnis and Chloe*, *Hippolytus*, and in his own poetry. Her identification with the bee highlights her physical beauty and omnipotence. Here the image of the bee and the lightning flash (the traditional attribute of Zeus) are merged. But Aphrodite, “terrifying as death,” is still an elusive and ambivalent divinity, whereas Artemis, on the other hand, in Merezhkovskii’s treatment, usually represents sexual purity.

Another example of Aphrodite as an omnipotent force occurs in the poem, “Venera Milosskaia” (*Venus de Milo*), in the larger cycle “Konets veka” (The end of the century):

Но вера в идеал – единственная вера,
От общей гибели оставшаяся нам,
Она – последний Бог, она – последний храм!

[…]

Неумолимая! как ты царишь над нами –

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Царить во все века ты будешь над людьми.
О, преклони свой взор на гибнущих, пойми,
Как мы страдаем!.. Нет, не видит и не слышит
И только вечною красив улыбка дышит.259

But faith in the ideal is the only faith,
That is left to us from total destruction,
She is the last God, she is the last temple!

[…]

Implacable one! How you rule over us –
In all ages you will rule over people.
O, incline your gaze on the dying, grasp
How we suffer!.. No, she does not hear or see
And only her smile breathes with loveliness eternal.

Though the tenor of accusations against the goddesses meddling in the affairs of mortal love
reflect many instances of the choral portions of Greek tragedy, Merezhkovskii does not
consistently portray Aphrodite as destructive. Rather, he finds the spiritual in Aphrodite’s erotic
nature without necessarily rejecting Artemis. Artemis, as the primordial symbol of sexual purity,
can never be made profane, but Aphrodite can be spiritualized without disavowing her arousal of
sexual desire.

Temptation and the Spiritualization of Aphrodite

Advancing a view of Aphrodite as potentially beneficial to the triumph of chastity,
Merezhkovskii is getting at a post-tragic understanding of erotic love that Matich calls “cerebral
sexuality.”260 After all, Merezhkovskii regularly prizes virginity for its inexhaustible potential for
the desire directed toward it. In the essay on Devotion to the Cross, Merezhkovskii concentrated
on Eusebio’s near rape of Julia, who has entered a convent. Eusebio finds Julia more attractive
for her pure nature: “[…] ‘O, how beautiful she is in this humble garment!.. perhaps because the

260 Matich, Erotic Utopia, 87.
whole of woman’s beauty is in chastity?..’” («О, как она прекрасна в этой смиренной одежде!.. быть может, потому, что у женщины вся красота в целомудрии?..»).261 Aphrodite does turn love into this sort of game, but not normally is the game an “innocent” one. Her role in temptation brings her closer to the Devil, tempting Christ in the wilderness, than the all-powerful place she enjoys above (or at least on the same footing as) God in Merezhkovskii’s writing.

The mental contemplation of sin informs the very basis of temptation for Merezhkovskii. He explained his basic understanding of desire in one of the gatherings of the Religious-Philosophical Meetings, asking a member of the clergy, “Desire is a fact and I am speaking of desire as I would about a fact. Two points are needed: a point of departure and a point of attainment. I want to find out what is desire for you. The point of departure, or the point of attainment?”262 Temptation might be understood as desire as a point of departure and not its point of fulfillment. This idea takes further Matthew’s “[...] lead us not into temptation / But deliver us from evil,” and pursues the advantages of the opportunity to be only led to temptation and to somehow remain chaste after the ordeal. Dubious about this ambiguity of chaste temptation, Georges Florovsky noted, “Spirit and flesh ‘are not fused, but interwoven.’ The result is a deceptive mixture, a seductive flame, a temptation. [...] Merezhkovskii hardly succeeded in avoiding this ‘mingling,’ this tempting ambiguity.”263 In Voskresshie bogi, Leonardo Da Vinci feels such temptation when painting the portrait of the Mona Lisa. Their attraction verges on sexual love, but remains at the ideal liminal stage: “They both were walking

along the edge of an abyss, where no one has yet walked, defeating temptation and the attraction of the abyss” (Оба они шли по краю бездны, там, где еще никто никогда не ходил, – побеждая соблазн и притяжение бездны).  

The resulting portrait is described as if it were their child:

But if he had loved her, could he have desired a more perfect union with his beloved, than in these deep and mysterious caresses – in the creation of an immortal image, a new creation, which began, was born from them, like a child is born from a father and a mother, – was he and she together?

Here erotic love is transformed into a mystical communion of souls. Mona Lisa dies not long after she sits for the portrait and Leonardo’s sexual attraction for her image becomes Merezhkovskii’s idealized form of erotic desire. An art patron threatens to buy the work from an indigent Leonardo, and his apprentices bicker, mirroring the thoughts in Merezhkovskii’s own private “Zapisnaia knizhka.” The apprentices argue:

– How can you not see? He still loves her… – But she has died! – What does that matter? Can the living really not love the dead? You yourself said that she is alive in the portrait. Please, good brother, leave him a final memory of the past, do not bring sorrow to the old man.

In this scene, the power of art and the death of the beloved diverts still existent erotic energy that might otherwise be expressed physically. The feeling of being tempted exists on the borderline

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264 Merezhkovskii, Voskreshie bogi, 634.
265 “Но если бы он и любил ее, мог ли бы желать более совершенного соединения с возлюбленной, чем в этих глубоких и таинственных ласках – в созидании бессмертного образа, нового существа, которое зачиналось, рождалось от них, как дитя рождается от отца и матери, – было он и она вместе?” (Ibid.). Jenifer Presto quotes this section of the novel as the epigraph for her book Beyond the Flesh, but her discussion of Merezhkovskii in that study is very brief.
between refusing to give in to temptation and accepting the consequences of acting on one’s desire.

In an early poem entitled “Iskushenie (otryvok.)” (Temptation [a fragment.], 1884), Aphrodite appears to a monk in the guise of temptress. This poem bears some similarities to Pushkin’s “Zhil na svete rytser’ bednyi…” (often referred to simply as “The Poor Knight”), a work that was for Merezhkovskii a later figuration of Euripides’s Hippolytus. Like many other poets (including Pushkin), Merezhkovskii often complicates the traditional guises of Aphrodite and the Virgin Mary. At the moment of temptation, the poem proceeds thus:

Сверкало тело молодое,
Как пена в сумрачных волнах,
Всё ослепительно нагое
В темно-каштановых кудрях.
Струились волны аромата…
Лежал недвижим я, как труп.
Улыбкой дерзких, влажных губ
Она звала меня куда-то,
Она звала меня с собой
Под полог ночи голубой:
«Одашь ли мне ночное бденье,
Труды, молитвы, дни поста
И кровь распятого Христа,
Одашь ли вечность и спасенье –
За поцелуй?..» И в тишине
Звучало вновь: «Одашь ли мне?..»
Она смеялась надо мною,
Но брошен вдруг к ее ногам
Какой-то силой роковою,
Я простонал: «Одашь, отдашь!..»

A young body sparkled,
Like foam in murky waves,
All blindingly naked
In dark, chestnut curls.
The waves of a fragrance streamed…
I was lying immobile, like a corpse.
With a smile from daring, moist lips,

She called me somewhere,
She called me to her
Under the canopy of the light blue night:
“To me will you give up the evening vigil,
Toil, prayers, days of fasting
And the blood of the crucified Christ,
Will you give up eternity and salvation –
For a kiss?..” And in the silence
Resounded again: “Will you give up for me?..”
She mocked me,
But thrown suddenly to her legs
By some kind of fateful power,
I moaned: “I will, I will!..”

In a Russian context, Aphrodite’s watery appearance calls native *rusalki* to mind, but her physical attributes are clearly those of the Greek goddess.²⁶⁸ The monk’s exchange with the goddess of love is transposed to “Prorok” almost a decade later, when the prostitute begs, “Отдашь!” and Stroev keeps insisting “Не отдам!” One line references Pushkin’s “Prorok” – “Like a corpse in the desert I lay” (Как труп в пустыне я лежал) – making an extra-textual connection to a poem about spiritual purity leading to prophetic gift. The nod to Pushkin is not

²⁶⁸ The reader may recognize the female figure as Aphrodite because she rises from foamy sea waves, “[…] in the young cypress, / Entwined with a fresh vine…” ([…] в кипарисе молодом, / Обвитом свежею лозою…). Aphrodite’s body is of special interest to Merezhkovskii. The leitmotifs associated with her physical appearance migrate around his writings, as in the poem “Parfenon” (Parthenon), where she appears “Transparent, warm and alive” (Прозрачный, теплый и живой). D.S. Merezhkovskii, “Parfenon,” *Novye Stikhotvoreniia, 1891-1895*, in *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy* (Sankt-Peterburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2000, 503. A similar description can be found in the essay, “Turgenev:” “Turgenev’s women and girls have the same body as Tolstoi’s Kitty, Natasha or even Anna Karenina. It seems that their bodies are nebulous, spectral, and transparent, like the bodies of Gogol’s *rusalki*, through which the moon shines” ([…] у женщин и девушек Тургенева такие же тела, как у толстовской Китти, Наташи или даже Анны Карениной. Кажется, что тела их облачные, призрачные и прозрачные, как тела гоголевских русалок, сквозь которые светит луна) (Merezhkovskii, “Turgenev,” in *Estetika i kritika v dvukh tomakh*, 433). Suggestions of the statuesque quality of these women are given in Aphrodite’s frequent association with sculpture in Merezhkovskii’s work. Marble appears life-like and transparent when it shines in the sun. This physical property is expressed in its Greek meaning, which is derived from the word “to shine.”
surprising given that Merezhkovskii’s early poetic period is devoted to motifs from the earlier poet’s work.269

The monk’s devotion to the unnamed Aphrodite is what brings this poem in line with Pushkin’s poor knight, but “Iskushenie” represents a negative portrayal of temptation that does not hold over in the 1890s. In that decade, Merezhkovskii had been working to eliminate the binary between asceticism and life-affirming sensuality. From the start, the monk in “Iskushenie” is under some spell until finally “by some kind of fateful power” he delivers himself over to her. Still, looking at Merezhkovskii’s novel, Voskresshie bogi, I would argue that Aphrodite has migrated from a cruel and sadistic temptress into a precursor of the Virgin Mary. In several artworks in the novel the reader comes across a visual synthesis of the two figures, and the notion of chaste temptation is further developed. In this way, Aphrodite is made more chaste through gradual identification with the Mother of God, but Artemis remains an inflexible, but still compelling model of uncompromised virginity. Aphrodite in Merezhkovskii’s work moves from her role as a vengeful goddess proclaiming her right to Hippolytus’s virginity in that tragedy (or in “Iskushenie”), to a voiceless and purely visually represented prefiguration of Mary (she appears in the form of ekphrasis in Merezhkovskii’s novel trilogy and in various other poems from the 1890s, but never as the Mother of God and always as her virginal self). The loss of one’s purity through erotic love is converted to the spiritually advantageous suppression of sexual desire. In contrast to the purification of Aphrodite, its counterweight – the “sensualization” of Artemis in Merezhkovskii’s speech on Hippolytus – appears irresolvable for the author.

Hippolytus at the Theater

Merezhkovskii’s prefatory lecture, “O novom znachenii drevnei tragedii,” was intended to provide background and context for an amateur audience, but his presentation of Euripides as a Russian prophet was beyond the expectations of that forum. In his memoirs, Aleksandr Benois distanced himself from the strong pronouncements in Merezhkovskii’s lecture: “with the exception of Bakst, Merezhkovskii’s enthusiasm did not find support at Mir iskusstva” (за исключением Бакста [responsible for scenery and costumes] энтузиазм Мережковского не находил среди «Мира искусства» поддержки). They drew caricatures of Merezhkovskii and composed comic verse and scenarios, one of which was an interview with a puzzled Euripides, who was asked to respond to Merezhkovskii’s interpretation of his play.

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270 Aleksandr Benoia, Moi vospominaniia v piati knigakh, kn. 4, 5 (Moskva: Nauka, 1990), 369. Hippolytus had failed to speak to the ranks and skeptics alike; Merezhkovskii’s younger peers were similarly unimpressed. Briusov saw the performance in November 1902 and remarked in his diary, “Liudmila waited on me and brought me to the theater for Hippolytus (a poor show)” (Людмила за мной ухаживала и проводила меня в театр на «Ипполита» [плохое зрелище]). See Valerii Iakovlevich Briusov, Dnevnikii, 1891-1910 (Moskva, 1927), 125. Gippius wrote to Blok just before the premiere, inviting him to attend the performance. Writing to his father, Blok remarked, “All of this is a ‘religious matter,’ or close to it” (Все это – “религиозное дело», или – близко от него). See Aleksandr Blok, Pis’ma Aleksandra Bloka k rodnym, t. 1, ed. M.A. Beketova (Leningrad: Academia, 1927), 80, quoted in Literaturnoe nasledstvo. Aleksandr Blok. Novye materialy i issledovaniia, t. 92, kn. 1, ed. V.R. Shcherbina (Moskva: Nauka, 1980), 435.

271 Odissi, “Malen'kii fel'eton. Evripidiada (Malen'kie aksesuary k postanovke ‘Ippolita’),” Peterburgskaia gazeta, no. 283, 15 Oct. 1902: 2. This newspaper published another exchange between mythological figures (this time Apollo and Melpomene, the muse of tragedy), see Nekrylov, “Shutki dna. ‘Ippolit’ ili Mel'pomena v khlopotakh,” Peterburgskaia gazeta, no. 288, 20 Oct. 1902: 4. The gods critique the direction and actors of the production. These imagined dialogues must have been popular, since “Odissi” wrote another conversation that brought Dmitrii Samozvanets into the mix with Merezhkovskii, Hippolytus, and a variety of other characters. See Oddisei. “Malen'kii fel'eton. Zakusochka (Les petits hors-d’oeuvre),” Peterburgskaia gazeta, no. 292, 24 Oct. 1902: 4. Hippolytus introduces himself to Dmitrii as “a mythical Greek, not included in textbooks and therefore incomprehensible for Mr. Merezhkovskii” (мифический грек, не вошедший в учебники, а потому и непонятный г. Мережковскому).
After this lack of support, Merezhkovskii might well have conceded, as he did following MAT’s *Antigone*, that a problematic production of an ancient tragedy is still better than none at all:

But in any case, the staging of a Greek tragedy in our country, and the fact that the crowd was curious and went to the theater is already an event. It speaks toward the dim desire, just being born, to understand something that was before totally unnecessary, to direct gazes in that direction where no one had looked before.272

In addition to the difficulties of introducing Greek culture to a contemporary audience, Merezhkovskii had still more problems with Hippolytus’s characterization and its realization on the stage. In Merezhkovskii’s eyes, Hippolytus was meant to display proto-Christian qualities, though he acknowledges the hero’s failure to sacrifice to Aphrodite as justifiably punishable:

A saint, a hermit, a *postnik*, a virgin, a bridegroom of the heavenly Maiden, and finally a martyr of chastity, forgiving and loving his enemy, his murderer – is this not an almost perfect image of Christianity before Christianity?273

Retreating to nature and leaving behind the world’s vanity (“Hippolytus renounces worldly vanity and power; he lives far from the hubbub and the crowd…” [Ипполит отрекается от мирских сует, от власти; живет вдали от шума и толпы…]), he cannot in doing so escape the laws of nature enforced by Aphrodite.274 Hippolytus bears a resemblance to the hero of the early drama *Sil’vio* (1887, previously titled *Vozvrashchenie k prirode*) and the portrayal of Leonardo da Vinci in *Voskresshie bogi*, whom Merezhkovskii repeatedly describes as having no interest in...

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272 “Но, во всяком случае, постановка греческой трагедии у нас, и то, что толпа любопытствовала и шла в театр, есть уже событие. Оно говорит о едва нарождающемся, смутном желании что-то понять, прежде совсем ненужное, обратить взоры в ту сторону, куда прежде вовсе не смотрели” (Merezhkovskii, “*Tragediia tselomudriia i sladostrastiia*,” 64).

273 “Святой, отшельник, постник, девственник, женен небесной Девы, и наконец мученик целомудрия, прощающий и любящий врага своего, убийцу – разве это не почти совершенный образ христианина до христианства?” (Merezhkovskii, “*O novom znachenii drevnei tragedii*,” 2).

274 Ibid.
women and feminine features, as well. For instance, in Sil’vio, adapted from Calderon’s *La vida es sueño*, the hero first appears, as does Hippolytus, regaling his protector with his latest hunting exploit.

Another inter-text that makes Merezhkovskii’s interpretation of the hero especially odd and contradictory is Pushkin’s poor knight. Merezhkovskii claims that Hippolytus dies because he failed to acquiesce to Aphrodite’s all-powerful nature as “the source of all being.” However, Hippolytus does reconcile the warring goddesses through merging in death with Artemis, who is like the poor knight’s *Mater Dei*. The contradictory epithets of “Bogoroditsa” and “Nevesta” (Hippolytus’s mother and bride), however, suggest a kind of “holy incest” alternative to the earthly crime of Hippolytus’s potential union with Phaedra. Death really is a kind of spiritually erotic consummation in his retelling of Hippolytus’s final moments:

Scorning the caresses of women and maidens, he loved an unearthly maiden, Artemis. He is her mysterious lover and priest, the eternal bridegroom of this “unwedded bride.” His love is his prayer: “O if I could be at your feet, loving, / I could end my life” – he says in the very beginning of the tragedy, and at its end, in the bloody conclusion, – his desire is fulfilled: Hippolytus truly dies at the feet of Artemis and she, bending over him, accepts his final sigh, a final glance, with infinite tenderness. “You – here!.. I sensed you in my torment. / O the wafting of fragrant lips!.. / I feel better… Here, with me is my goddess!” // They unite, the virginal lover with the virginal beloved, in unwedded matrimony – in death.

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275 D. Merezhkovskii, *Sil’vio. Fantasticheskaia drama, Severnyi vestnik*, no. 2; no. 3; no. 4; no. 5 (1890): 69-90; 63-81; 45-58; 57-75.

276 “Презирая ласки жен и дев земных, он любил неземную деву, Артемиду. Она ее таинственный любовник и жрец, вечный жених этой «невесты неневестной». Его любовь – его молитва: «О если бы у ног твоих, любя, / Окончить мог я жизнь мою», – говорит он в самом начале трагедии, и в конце ее, в кровавой развязке, – его желание исполняется: Ипполит действительно умирает у ног Артемиды, и она, склонясь над ним, принимает его последний вздох, последний взор, с бесконечною нежностью. «Ты – здесь!.. Тебя почувствовал я в муках. / О веянье благоуханных уст!.. / Мне легче… Здесь, со мной – моя богиня!» Они соединяются, девственный любовник с девственной возлюбленной, в браке безбрачном, в смерти” (Merezhkovskii, “О новом знachenii drevnei tragedii,” 2).
Referring to the Virgin Mary’s epithet, “unwedded bride,” Merezhkovskii makes Artemis a prototype for the Mother of God. Artemis and Hippolytus spiritually “consummate” their love in another paradoxical phrase – “unwedded matrimony” – or, in death. The sacrifice of the virginal hero for his Lady looks to the future passionate love of Pushkin’s poor knight. Though Merezhkovskii manages to slightly eroticize Artemis – her fragrant lips bring solace to Hippolytus’s pain – the culminating marriage in death is still a problematic rejection of life and thus a rejection of Aphrodite:

Hippolytus does not unite them, but only destroys one principle by another; he does not conquer truly and actively, but only rejects dreamily and thoughtlessly what is impossible to reject – the procreative power of Aphrodite, the source of all being.277

In the earlier section on representations of Aphrodite in Merezhkovskii’s work, I noted that Aphrodite is purified in some way that is developed to its furthest point in Voskresshie bogi. In his reading of Hippolytus, however, the reverse happens. Somehow it is now Artemis who represents the Virgin and not a cleaned-up Aphrodite. This inconsistency is striking, given that Merezhkovskii asserted the need to merge the sensual and the chaste forms of love through the sensual (and more broadly, that the spiritual plane must be reached through the earthly). This notion was in fact central to his definition of Symbolism.278

Iurii Iur'ev’s portrayal of Hippolytus did not buttress Merezhkovskii’s Christian reading of the hero. In his review, the critic Beliaev found Iur'ev’s makeup and costume erotic enough to

277“Ипполит не соединяет их, а только уничтожает одно начало другим; не побеждает реально и действительно, а только мечтательно и легкомысленно отрицает то, чего нельзя отрицать — рождающую силу Афродиты, источник всякого бытия” (Ibid.).

278 Quoting Goethe toward a definition of Symbolism, Merezhkovskii wrote “[…] we must unite the meaning of the temporal with the eternal, we must, not belittling the ephemeral and the mortal, perceive in it and through it what is immortal and non-transient” (мы должны соединять смысл невечного с вечным, мы должны, не унижая преходящего, смертного, созерцать в нем и сквозь него бессмертное, непреходящее […] ) (Merezhkovskii, L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii, 25). This movement from earth to heaven is implied in Viacheslav Ivanov’s well-known formula “a realibus ad realiora” (from the real to the more real).
creatively misquote Briusov’s infamous monostikh: “And involuntarily looking at these balletic legs, one wants to say, ‘O cover your pale legs!’” (И невольно глядя на эти балетные ноги, хотелось сказать: «О закрой свои бледные ноги!»).

279 Reviewing the Aleksandrinskii production of Merezhkovskii’s translation, Dmitrii Filosofov criticized the presentation of Hippolytus as an effeminate Don Juan:

Hippolytus should have been depicted either by something in the way of a servant of the Grail – it is not for nothing that Mr. Merezhkovskii compared Hippolytus with Pushkin’s “Poor Knight” (in a word, to give his outward appearance the mystical character of an ancient knight), or to make him a simple hunter youth – just like his friends. Iur’ev, however, appeared in a cute little white shirt with blond curls. His face was thickly smeared with pink blush, and his legs were covered with tricot as white as snow. In a word, neither more nor less Paris from Belle-Hélène.

The picture that Filosofov paints of a blonde, lily-white cherub with rosy cheeks is hardly in line with Merezhkovskii’s view of Hippolytus as a prototype of Christ. These characteristics are notably similar to those ascetic features that Merezhkovskii ascribed to the hero in his speech. Given Hippolytus’s failure to accept Aphrodite while continuing to honor Artemis, there are indications in Merezhkovskii’s essay on Cervantes that the knight errant’s failure simply

280 “Ипполита надо было изобразить или чем-то в роде служителя Грааля – недаром г-н Мережковский сравнивал Ипполита с Пушкинским «Бедным Рыцарем», – словом, придать его внешности мистический характер античного рыцаря или сделать из него простого юношу-охотника – такового-же, как его товарищи. Юрьев-же являлся в беленькой рубашечке, с белокурыми кудряшками. Лицо было густо намазано лилово-розовыми румянами, а ноги были обтянуты белоснежными трико. Словом, ни дать, ни взять Парис из Belle-Hélène.” D. Filosofov, “Teatral'nye zametki. I. Pervoe predstavlenie ‘Ippolita’ (14 oktiabria 1902 g.),” Mir iskusstva, nos. 9-10 (1902, t. 8): 5-13; 7. Filosofov said of Ippolit before its staging, “Hippolytus is not only a play, but also a mystery” («Ипполит» есть не только пьеса, но и мистерия [...]. See D. Filosofov, “Sofoki i Evripid na Aleksandrinskoi stsene,” Mir iskusstva, no. 3 (1902, t. 7): 45-47; 47. Jacques Offenbach’s operetta La Belle-Hélène (1864), was criticized throughout Europe for its popular success and its apparently coarse depiction of the ancient world. Speaking about La Belle-Hélène and other of Offenbach’s works, David Baguley writes “These works direct their humorous effects far more at other musical, artistic, and literary works in a spirit of travesty and parody of grand opera, grand art, and grand literature than at contemporary realities.” See David Baguley, Napoleon III and His Regime: An Extravaganza (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 326.
prophesies a future victory over the flesh. He writes in “Servantes” (Cervantes): “But the future belongs not to the Don Quixotes, but to those true heroes who know how to unite feeling with reason, faith with science, the surge of love with the calm calculation of force.”

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there was the suggestion in Aleksandr Kugel’s review that Hippolytus was not just a misogynist, but possibly a homosexual. For this reason Kugel balked at Merezhkovskii’s reading of Hippolytus as a proto-Christian:

Hippolytus is a hunter and because all of his thoughts are occupied by sport, he is the truest servant of Artemis, and Artemis, naturally, passes to him all of the features associated with her. Hippolytus’s monologue in the scene with Phaedra is the usual philippic of the misogynist. Echoes can be found in Socrates and in Schopenhauer. But Socrates, for example, said (Xenophon’s Memorabilia): “when we love beautiful youths and so on” and analyzed the essence of that love. Does it follow that Socrates was also a representative of Christian love, being a “servant of Artemis”?

Kugel does not explicitly connect Hippolytus’s “misogynist philippic” with homosexuality, but his near immediate mention of Xenophon’s apologia for Socrates and the philosopher’s love of beautiful youths is enough to see his indirect provocation. The question of homoeroticism in the “poor knight” interpretation of Hippolytus was brought up elsewhere, as Olga Matich has shown

282 Kugel relies on Friedrich Schlegel’s observation that “Euripides is a woman-hater […] and takes occasion, whenever he can, to declaim in the harshest manner against the female sex.” A.W. Schlegel, Kritische Ausgabe der Vorlesungen, vol. 1, eds. Ernst Behler and Frank Jolles (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1989), 63-64. Quoted in and trans. Behler, German Romantic Literary Theory, 113.
in *Erotic Utopia*. Matich analyzed the censored debates on marriage at the Religious-Philosophical Meetings at which Merezhkovskii participated in 1903. In these meetings, Archimandrite Mikhail accused Pushkin’s poor knight of sodomy. Matich summarizes: “Platonic homoerotic love, premised on sublimated desire, was attributed to the monastic ideal of celibacy.”284 Merezhkovskii exclaimed in the censored meeting notes as translated by Matich, “What? ‘He traced A.M.D. on his shield with his own blood’ – this is sodomy? You call this sodomy?”285 Kugel’s suggestion that spurning women might be a sign of Hippolytus’s homoerotic sublimation presages the Archimandrite’s reading of the poor knight, considered Hippolytus’s literary kin. Merezhkovskii’s vision of Hippolytus – whether for theater critics or Church authorities – was simply unconvincing.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have attempted to account for the tragic thinking that informs Merezhkovskii’s views on Eros. His concentrated literary efforts to present erotic love as tragically contingent on death are revealed not only in his translations of Greek tragedy, but also in his comments about early modern and modernist tragic heroes and heroines. In the way that myths always resurface to explain the nature and meaning of events, Merezhkovskii searched for old models to explain what for him had not been resolved by nineteenth-century materialist thought. However, like other Symbolists, he did not merely recycle myths to explain his world, he rewrote and reinterpreted them to fit his worldview while taking advantage of their cross-cultural legitimacy. In doing so, tragic myths themselves were not offering ready-made solutions to his current problems; in some ways they were affirming the status quo that he sought to reject. His interpretative work was reorganizing myth as raw material to prove certain ideas true or

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285 Ibid.
false, such as contemporary anxieties about decline, procreation, mediocrity, etc. In this way he systematically relied on myth as “evidence” for solving problems that his century would have attempted, to make an assumption, to answer with recourse to sociological or medical theories. Merezhkovskii’s re-appropriation of myth (and more specifically that of Greek antiquity and the Italian Renaissance) for his own purposes is performed only through the re-writing of those myths. What Bernard Williams said about understanding the Greeks as an exercise of self-understanding seems relevant to Merezhkovskii’s generation:

They are among our cultural ancestors, and our view of them is intimately connected with our view of ourselves […] It will continue to be so even though the modern world stretches round the earth and draws into itself other traditions as well. Those other traditions will give it new and different configurations, but they will not cancel the fact that the Greek past is specially the past of modernity.  

To take Williams’s points further, in the next chapter we turn to one of those “other traditions” – nineteenth-century spiritualism and theosophy – in Briusov’s tragedy Zemlia (Earth), a synthesis of the ancient and modern tragic paradigms.

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286 Bernard Williams, Shame and Necessity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 3.
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Chapter Three – Valerii Briusov, Esoteric Tragedy, and Parody at Earth’s End

This dissertation has investigated the centrality of tragedy to the religious thinking of three quite diverse poet-philosophers. Among the early Symbolists, Valerii Briusov is not ordinarily considered a religious thinker or one particularly interested in the tragedy of the human condition. It might seem strange to turn to him at this point in this study if it were not for his tragedy Zemlia (Earth, 1905), a work that parodies the tragic thinking discussed in the previous chapters. Zemlia, in addition to being largely unknown, is a strange play because of its first appearance in the Symbolist almanac Severnye tsvety (Northern Flowers), just before Viacheslav Ivanov’s “Greek” tragedy Tantal (Tantalus). Briusov claimed that Zemlia was “published from a draft” and thus, completed hastily. See Valerii Briusov, Iz moei zhizni (Moskva, 1927), 136. It has never been viewed as a significant part of the poet’s works, nor is it considered a canonical work of Russian Symbolist drama. There are only brief references to Zemlia in critical biographies of Briusov. See G. Lelevich, V.Ia. Briusov (Moskva-Leningrad: Gosudarstvenoe izdatel'stvo, 1926) and Vasilii Molodiakov, Valerii Briusov: Biografia (Sankt-Peterburg: Vita Nova, 2010), representing the oldest and the most recent biographies of Briusov. Scholars may also have neglected Zemlia over the years because they found its publication year more compelling from a biographical standpoint. “For me it was the year of a storm, a whirlpool,” Briusov wrote. “Never had I experienced such passions, such torments, such joys” (Для меня это был год бури, водоворота. Никогда не переживал я таких страстей, таких мучительств, таких радостей). Valerii Briusov, Dnevnik, 1891-1910 (Moskva, 1927), 136. Briusov also wrote in a diary entry from those years: “A great part of my anxieties are realized in the verses of my book Stephanos. Something also went into The Fiery Angel. At times I quite sincerely was ready to abandon all former paths of my life and move to new ones, to start my whole life over again. [paragraph break] In a literary sense, I almost didn’t exist this year, if one understands literature in Verlaine’s sense. I hardly worked at all: Earth was published from a draft” (Большая часть переживаний воплощена в стихах моей книги «Stephanos». Кое-что вошло и в роман «Огненный Ангел». Временами я вполне искренно готов был бросить все прежние пути моей жизни и перейти на новые, начать всю жизнь с нуля. [paragraph break] Литературно я почти не существовал за этот год, если разуметь литературу в Верлаэновском смысле. Почти не работал: «Земля» напечатана с черновика) (Ibid.). He was

\[287\] Zemlia first appeared in the Symbolist almanac Severnye tsvety (Northern Flowers), just before Viacheslav Ivanov’s “Greek” tragedy Tantal (Tantalus). Briusov claimed that Zemlia was “published from a draft” and thus, completed hastily. See Valerii Briusov, Iz moei zhizni (Moskva, 1927), 136. It has never been viewed as a significant part of the poet’s works, nor is it considered a canonical work of Russian Symbolist drama. There are only brief references to Zemlia in critical biographies of Briusov. See G. Lelevich, V.Ia. Briusov (Moskva-Leningrad: Gosudarstvenoe izdatel'stvo, 1926) and Vasilii Molodiakov, Valerii Briusov: Biografia (Sankt-Peterburg: Vita Nova, 2010), representing the oldest and the most recent biographies of Briusov. Scholars may also have neglected Zemlia over the years because they found its publication year more compelling from a biographical standpoint. “For me it was the year of a storm, a whirlpool,” Briusov wrote. “Never had I experienced such passions, such torments, such joys” (Для меня это был год бури, водоворота. Никогда не переживал я таких страстей, таких мучительств, таких радостей). Valerii Briusov, Dnevnik, 1891-1910 (Moskva, 1927), 136. Briusov also wrote in a diary entry from those years: “A great part of my anxieties are realized in the verses of my book Stephanos. Something also went into The Fiery Angel. At times I quite sincerely was ready to abandon all former paths of my life and move to new ones, to start my whole life over again. [paragraph break] In a literary sense, I almost didn’t exist this year, if one understands literature in Verlaine’s sense. I hardly worked at all: Earth was published from a draft” (Большая часть переживаний воплощена в стихах моей книги «Stephanos». Кое-что вошло и в роман «Огненный Ангел». Временами я вполне искренно готов был бросить все прежние пути моей жизни и перейти на новые, начать всю жизнь с нуля. [paragraph break] Литературно я почти не существовал за этот год, если разуметь литературу в Верлаэновском смысле. Почти не работал: «Земля» напечатана с черновика) (Ibid.). He was
its subtextual mysteriousness, which this chapter will attempt to decode. *Zemlia* has two parallel stories – that of the earth-loving Nevatl' and the death-loving Teotl' – which allow for two different interpretations of the play. On the surface, *Zemlia* is the tragedy of Nevatl', an intrepid hero who travels to the borders of his futuristic city and returns to his people with a plan to rescue it from decline. In this future Earth, a megacity houses the populace, enclosed by a massive roof that blocks out natural sunlight and air.

Nevatl’’s plan to save his community rests on his devotion to the sun, recalling pagan rituals that preserved a vital link to the sun deity. Other characters, convinced by Nevatl’’s enthusiasm, join in a collective effort to open the roof over the city, but the result is disastrous. When the roof is lifted, the townspeople suffocate.

At the time of *Zemlia*’s action, humanity has become the engine of its own extinction. Nevatl’’s embrace of the sun as a means out of this doomsday scenario is symbolic of a renewal of religious faith. Teotl’’s narrative presents a different strategy for meeting the end of the world. He welcomes the Earth’s end as deliverance from the material limitations of human existence, meanwhile finding solace in occult worship. In a key scene with a sorceress spirit to be discussed undoubtedly referring to the Petrovskaia affair. For Briusov’s correspondence with Petrovskaia, see V.Ia. Briusov, *Perepiska, 1904-1913*. Valerii Briusov, *Nina Petrovskaia*, ed. N.A. Bogomolov (Moskva: NLO, 2004).

This plot is similar to that of Briusov’s short story “Respublika iuzhnogo kresta,” in which there is also a mechanized roof protecting the city from a harsh climate. See Valerii Briusov, “Respublika iuzhnogo kresta,” *Vesy*, no. 12 (1905): 25-46; 26. The failure of the machines that control the roof resembles the conclusion of Camille Flammarion, *Fin du monde* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1894). I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of a past *SEEJ* submission for calling my attention to still another story with common themes, E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1909), in which a machine that regulates all aspects of a future city ceases to function. Much later in his career, Briusov returned to the theme of dystopian sci-fi in his tragedy *Diktator, tragediiia v piati deistviakh i semi stsenakh iz budushchikh vremen* (1921). It was published for the first time in Valerii Briusov, *Zaria vremen: stikhotvorenia, poemy, p'esy, stat'i* (Moskva: Panorama, 2000), 387-433.

later, it becomes clear that Teotl’s occultism is not only a parody, for it relies on theosophist philosophies of history and cultural transmission that Briusov seems to have earnestly studied. A member of an occult society, the character Teotl both satirizes and affirms Symbolist mystics, like Minskii, who urged spiritual transcendence at all costs. Convinced that existence will continue elsewhere than on Earth, Teotl’s is no tragedy at all, but a way out of the planet’s “blue prison.” What many Symbolists hailed as a tragedy for all humankind was in fact cryptic, theosophist propaganda and a literary depiction of the last heirs to the Atlantean heritage of all human culture.

The first part of this chapter is devoted to new theosophical sources and contexts for *Zemlia*. With evidence from Briusov’s lectures on Atlantis, “Uchiteli uchitelei” (The teachers of teachers, 1917) and from the text of *Zemlia* itself, I show that, despite its apparent futurity, the play harks back to the destruction of the lost continent of Atlantis and to its alleged last line of descendants, the Aztecs. The play is thus neither Eleusinian nor Christian mystery, but a tragedy of cultural loss and an artwork of theosophical ideas. Briusov gave his *dramatis personae* Nahuatl names, that, I will show through analysis of theosophist histories, provide the Atlantean and Mesoamerican subtext of the play. A discussion of this material would be incomplete without providing the biographical and scholarly sources that point to Briusov’s early interest in the theme of Atlantis, his subsequent study of Mayan history and culture (and the role of Bal'mont in these endeavors), and evidence of his philological interest in the Aztec language. The Mesoamerican cultural borrowings in *Zemlia* are further demonstrated in Briusov’s focus on the transmission of architectural technology in two important structures: the pyramid and the labyrinth. Having presented how Briusov’s philological and archeological investigations into Atlantis relate to *Zemlia*, I will provide a new reading of the play in light of those findings.
Briusov not only traced Atlantean culture via historical evidence from the past, but also projected this cultural transmission into the play’s dramatized, future context. The role of the esoteric or occult imagination is, in this respect, inseparable from Briusov’s (sometimes tentative) reliance on historical evidence.

Why is Zemlia a Tragic Drama?

A reconsideration of Zemlia as a theosophical text affects its dramatic form. If there is a performance in Zemlia, it is similar to the dramatization of ideas that one sees in the genre of the philosophical drama. Taken with the example of Aleksandr Blok’s Balaganchik (The Fairground Booth, 1906), another famous parody of Symbolist culture, one might consider the self-referential tendencies of the dramatic genre in Symbolism as a means of sorting out issues in the movement itself. This point would help explain how drama for Symbolists was of great theoretical and polemical interest: dramas were written as philosophical arguments or statements of artistic credos. Being that the stakes of much Symbolist drama were often metaphysical or philosophical, it is natural to ask whether they believed that the “big ideas” of tragedy could even stand up on the modern stage.

Despite his important work as a theater critic in the early years of Russian modernist theater, Briusov did not view Zemlia as theatrical and later expressed doubts about the limitations of theatrical performance in general. In a letter to Remizov, thanking him for suggesting to Meyerhold that his studio stage Zemlia, Briusov wrote: “About Earth, of course, I would agree, although I consider its performance on the stage unrealizable. When I wrote it, I had the reader in mind.”

Aleksei Tolstoi later insisted that Zemlia was indeed quite suitable for

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290 “О «Земле», конечно, был бы согласен, хотя считаю постановку ее на сцене недостижимой. Я, когда писал, имел в виду читателя.” Recommending Earth to the theater-studio, Remizov was, on the contrary, extremely positive about the play from a visual
performance. He wrote to Briusov in 1910, “I don’t agree that the scenes in *Zemlia* are not made to be staged. *Zemlia* would open new areas in theater. In my opinion, fantasy is a fundamental and little used area of theater.” ²⁹¹ For Tolstoi, the strength of Briusov’s tragedy was in its “pantomime of the mind,” not what Meyerhold may have exploited in its opportunities for plastic movement that, by 1910, had become central to his theater experiments. ²⁹²

Indeed, when *Zemlia* was first published, Vsevolod Meyerhold hailed it as not only theatrical, but imminently performable. For him, *Zemlia* was a triumph of dramatic art, ideal for the “theater of convention.” Entertaining plans to stage *Zemlia* in 1905 for his theater-studio, Meyerhold also invited Briusov to become the head of its literary bureau. ²⁹³ In the essay “Teatr. (K istorii i tekhnike)” (Theater. [Toward history and technique], 1907), Meyerhold made use of Briusov’s ideas on theater as presented in “Nenuzhnaia pravda” (An Unnecessary Truth, 1902), praising the poet’s tragedy and mentioning it among the most well-regarded plays and playwrights:


²⁹² “Now Meyerhold seeks fantasy of movements and he’s staging pantomime; he’s attracted by the absurdity of exaggerated action and by unexpected lunges, both tragic and amusing. As I see it, this is the principle of the new theater, which will reach its apex with exaggeration and richness not of positions but of reason; your play seems to me such a pantomime of the mind in the future” (Теперь Мейерхольд ищет фантастики движений и ставит пантомиму; его увлекает нелепость преувеличенного действия и неожиданные выпады, как его кажется. Мне кажется, что это начало нового театра, который завершится преувеличением и богатством уже не положений, а ума; такой пантомимой ума и представляется мне Ваша пьеса в грядущем) (Ibid.).

Van Lerberghe and Maeterlinck are earlier than their theater. Ibsen, Verhaeren’s *Les Aubes*, Briusov’s *Earth*, Viacheslav Ivanov’s *Tantalus* – and where are the theaters that could stage them? Literature creates the theater. Not only dramaturges, who give models of new forms requiring new techniques, but also critics, who reject old forms, are upset.\(^{294}\)

Meyerhold’s focus on the play is with regard to its ideal conditions for the new stylized theater; he does not mention the spiritual undercurrent of Briusov (or Ivanov’s play), which seems to have affected its subsequent reception.

Briusov’s writing on theater reveals possible clues as to why he wrote a drama that he did not believe could be staged. In his essay “Realizm i uslovnost' na stene” (Realism and conventionality on the stage), Briusov wrote about the future of the theater of convention. He argued that, eventually, the conventionalization of theater would be so complete, “Step by step, taking away the actor’s possibility of play, the possibility of artistic creation, theatrical convention will ultimately destroy the stage as art.”\(^{295}\) It is going too far to read this essay as a prediction for the eventual extinction of the theater. Briusov argues only that the extremes of both realism and convention in the theater lead to their own “unresolved contradictions” (неразрешимы[e] противоречи[я]).\(^{296}\) About the theater of convention specifically, he expressed doubt that its successful realization could even reach all members of the audience.

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296 Ibid.
Those with active imaginations will continue to respond to the artwork primarily through reading, not spectating:

Reading works of drama, we, with the power of our imagination, of course, imagine the action being performed. The theater of “convention” will be able to help this imagination only a little: in its performance, just like when one simply reads a book, the action itself will only be implied. If the theater of convention should take over, only people of weak imagination will have occasion to visit the theater, those for whom books are insufficient: for people who are in possession of an imagination the theater will be superfluous.\textsuperscript{297}

Viacheslav Ivanov speculated that Briusov’s tragedy might be classified as a “philosophical drama,” which might explain Briusov’s insistence that it was written not for an audience in a theater, but for a reader. It is a common criticism of Symbolist drama that its plays often fail as performance, since they are preoccupied with ideas rather than action. It is crucial to note that the occult mysteries at the center of \textit{Zemlia} and other Symbolist writings on tragedy as a religious theme were hardly ever significant in the realm of performance.

Furthermore, Briusov’s theory of drama seems directly tied to the individuality of the dramaturge and his own particular perception. In “Nenuzhnaia pravda,” Briusov distinguished between the content of art – fundamentally autobiographical in nature – and plot and setting, which in his view should be as simple as those from ancient drama. Using the example of Goethe’s \textit{Faust}, Briusov presents the “content” of the work as “Goethe’s soul” and the plot or “form” as the story of Faust. Art’s power, then, comes not from mythical subjects and the artist’s semi-conscious conceptualization of the symbol, but rather through taking seriously the Delphic inscription “Know thyself.” Indeed, in his 1899 pamphlet “O iskusstve,” intended as a response

\textsuperscript{297}“Читая драматические произведения, мы силой воображения, конечно, представляем действие совершающимся. «Условный» театр будет только немного помогать этому воображению: в его исполнении как и при простом чтении книги, самое действие будет только подразумеваться. Если утвердится условный театр, посещать его придется лишь людям со слабым воображением, которым книги недостаточно: для людей, обладающих фантазией, театр окажется излишним” (Ibid.).
to L.N. Tolstoi’s “Что такое искусство?” (What is art?) Briusov proclaimed, “Whoever dares to be an artist must find himself, become his very self.” Yet he explains that the proclamation “this is me” is obscured by the many masks that people wear out of fear and the temptation to betray their individuality: “It is necessary for the artist to dare to remove the mask from himself.” In this statement the author appears as an actor, removing his mask and imparting the “content” of art for his audience. In “Истины” (Truths), an essay written for a volume of Severnye tsvety, Briusov again articulated the purpose of the artist as he saw it. He wrote, “I came to the view that the goal of creation is not communication, but only self-gratification and self-understanding. And the word was originally created not for communication between people, but for the elucidation of one’s own thought to oneself.” Briusov arrives at the ideal of self-comprehension as the only truth in art. It is this “data” that he sees as “artistic content” in “Ненужная правда.” The theater of convention, in this sense, is a way of exposing not only the formal conventions of theater, but also the author’s way of thinking, or to put it another way, his particular fantasy, to the audience.

In “Учители учителей,” fantasy in the form of “scholarly” speculation testifies to Briusov’s hopes that ancient knowledge could be somehow retrieved through imaginative means. In concluding his lectures, storytelling takes the place of the rigorous discussion of pseudo-scientific evidence. What seems to have interested Briusov about Atlantis was its

299 “Художнику необходимо осмелиться и снять с себя такую личину” (Ibid., 12).
300 “Я пришел к взгляду, что цель творчества не общение, а только самоудовлетворение и самопостижение. И слово первоначально создалось не для общения между людьми, а для уяснения себе своей мысли.” Валерий Брюсов, “Истины,” в Severnye tsvety (Москва: Skorpion, 1901), 189-96; 195. Briusov here reverses a claim made a few years earlier in “О искусстве” in which he wrote, “Both Tolstoy and I consider art a means of communication” (И Толстой, и я, мы считаем искусство средством общения) (Briusov, “О искусстве,” 8).
mysteriousness, another theme in his writing about art (as in his essay “Kliuchi tain” [The Keys to the Mysteries] and the opening of “Nenuzhnaia pravda”).

To summarize, Briusov’s composition of Zemlia as a dramatic text may be explained by his view that theater happens in the imagination of the spectator. If it had been written as a novel, Zemlia would lack the illusion of immediacy conveyed by the dialogue and the innumerable ways that the future city might be visually represented. Drama – the five-part structure of the tragedy – may have also imposed limits on the story, creating gaps with which the audience could productively engage. There would have been perhaps too much to explain in a novel: for example, why do all of the characters have Mesoamerican names so far into the future? What has happened between our time and the era of this future society? The following sections will attempt to answer at least the first question.

Zemlia in Scholarship

Atlantis fascinated Briusov throughout his life. His wife recalled conversations in 1897 between Briusov and fellow poet Konstantin Bal'mont. These meetings ended when Bal'mont left to go abroad, after which, she remembers, “Valerii Iakovlevich ordered from France, Germany,

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301 Briusov opens “Nenuzhnaia pravda” with the idea of art as inherent mysteriousness: “Art begins at the moment when the artist tries to clarify his own mysterious, vague feelings to himself. Where this clarification is lacking, there is no creation; where there is none of this mysteriousness in feeling, there is no art” (Искусство начинается в тот миг, когда художник пытается уяснить себе свои тайные, смутные чувствования. Где нет этого уяснения, нет творчества; где нет этой тайности в чувстве – нет искусства). Valerii Briusov, “Nenuzhnaia pravda (po povodu Moskovskogo khudozhestvennogo teatra),” Mir iskusstva, no. 4 (1902, t. 7): 67-74; 67.

302 M.V. Vasil'ev and R.L. Shcherbakov, Commentary to “Uchiteli uchitelei,” in SS v semi tomakh, t. 7 (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1975), 482.
and England a great number of scientific-historical books, all concerning Atlantis, the Etruscans, the Aegeans, and *even the Maya*” [my emphasis].

Briusova’s phrase “even the Maya” suggests their insignificance, yet this culture held a special place in Briusov’s imagination. In fact, the characters in *Zemlia* bear names from Nahuatl, the language spoken by the sun-worshipping Aztecs. Theosophists believed the Aztecs to be the descendants of the Maya, whose ancestors were the Toltecs, an ancient people with Atlantean heritage.

Throughout the play, traces of Atlantean culture appear in the city’s architectural landscape and in the names of its characters. These archeological and linguistic traces of Atlantean culture illustrate Briusov’s concern with cultural origins, its transmission to future generations, and the means of recovering lost knowledge of the past. In Briusov’s Atlantis lectures, archeological evidence played a key role in demonstrating material channels through which cultural knowledge was transmitted from one culture to its descendants. However, the appearance of occult forms of knowledge in *Zemlia* indicate that these archeological testaments, for Briusov, would never resolutely reconnect the contemporary world with its cultural source. As Briusov suggests in *Zemlia*, such a feat could be accomplished by transcending terrestrial and temporal limitations and above all, as he argues in the Atlantis lectures, by the historian not letting fact and evidence guide him too strictly.

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303 Ibid., 483.
304 Before being published in Maxim Gor’kii’s journal, *Letopis’,* in 1917, Briusov first delivered lectures from material in “Uchiteli uchitelei” in Baku on January 24, 1917.
305 Briusov believed that with the advancement and combined efforts of science, untold treasures of Atlantis would be revealed to humanity at some future time: “[…] on the bottom of the Atlantic today must rest the ruins of the magnificent cities of the kingdom of the Atlanteans, full of marvelous treasures, great creations of art, and piles of decaying books… In the depths of the earth, the pick hammers of the researcher will find waiting the most diverse works of Atlantean masters and craftsmen, of course, dispersed all over the world; gifts sent by Atlantean leaders to friendly kings, things exported by merchants and curious travellers, some kinds of inscriptions, with which Atlanteans commemorated their naval campaigns, even, maybe, Atlantean
is not merely ornamental, but rather a demonstration of the unbroken chain of cultural heritage that might reunite future humanity with its ancient mysteries.

For the few scholars who have written on this play, the Mesoamerican and Atlantis themes are peripheral to the broader social or political interpretations of the play. On the contrary, I view these themes as interconnected and central: Briusov chose his subject matter carefully in order to foreground an esoteric view about the cultural transference of knowledge beyond the physical constraints of human civilization. This new reading of Zemlia does not avoid its esoteric or theosophist elements. Popular theosophical “histories” dedicated to the lost continent of Atlantis are in fact the chief sources for the imagined future in Zemlia.

Previous scholarship of Zemlia can be presented as two main interpretive frameworks. The first contextualizes the play in literary sources from the Western proto-science fiction tradition. The second is ideological in nature and tends toward inaccuracy. Comparisons of Zemlia to apocalyptic science fiction rely on similarities with English and French works, providing strictly a literary-historical understanding of the play. Interpretations of Zemlia as


308 Dolgopolov, Na rubezhe vekov, 75.

309 Dolgopolov cites Flammarion’s Fin du monde as a possible source for Zemlia (Ibid.), while Langer sees Wells’s Time Machine. See Gudrun Langer, Kunst, Wissenschaft, Utopie: die
part of the nascent science fiction genre include ideological readings from the Soviet period in which *Zemlia* is read as a dramatization of a proletarian struggle against bourgeois technocracy.\(^{310}\) Regarding *Zemlia* as neither Symbolist nor “decadent individualism,”\(^{311}\) Vinnik claimed that the play rightly belongs to the new genre of the “drama-warning” (драма-предупреждение)\(^ {312}\) detailing the threats posed to the beauty of human labor by bourgeois progressivism.\(^ {313}\) Similarly, Strashkova finds in *Zemlia* an encapsulation of “Briusov’s conception of Life, Death and Fate” and places it in the context of the 1905 Revolution, which it predates.\(^ {314}\) She does mention *Zemlia* in the same category as Briusov’s unfinished “Gibel' Atlantidy” (The destruction of Atlantis, 1910), but only goes so far as to claim that these works share a concern for the renewal of natural cycles and the eventual defeat of barbarianism.\(^ {315}\) Even the title of this unfinished work makes clear Briusov’s interest in the destruction of Atlantis.

Given that the themes of *Zemlia* occurred to Briusov long before the events of the 1905 Revolution, the play cannot be read as a direct political response. By Briusov’s own admission, he began thinking about *Zemlia* quite early in his literary career. On the title page of the play itself, he claimed to have conceived the work in “the clear autumn of 1890” (ясн[ая] осен[ь] 1890 года).\(^ {316}\) But perhaps this statement reveals less about what Briusov actually did than how he wanted his composition to be perceived. Much later, in the posthumously published *Iz moei zhizni* (1927), Briusov recalled working on a *poema* entitled “Zemlia,” for which he planned to

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\(^ {310}\) See Vinnik, “Zhanr dramy-preduprezhdeniia.”
\(^ {311}\) Ibid., 59.
\(^ {312}\) Ibid., 56.
\(^ {313}\) Ibid., 60.
\(^ {315}\) Ibid., 138.
adopt the meter of Lermontov’s “Mtsyri:” “The story was written in the first person, from the
point of view of a spirit that was in love with the planet Earth, even loved it when it was still a
molten mass.” This later comment hints at the spiritualist character of the play that seems to
have been preserved in its final version. Strashkova’s political reading cannot account for the
theosophical and occultist elements of the play, nor does it explain its Aztec and Atlantean
cultural backdrop.

Two scholars, P.N. Berkov and Gudrun Langer, have noticed links between Briusov’s
study of Atlantis and Zemlia. In his essay, Berkov interpreted an explicit textual reference to
Atlantean knowledge in the play as the beginnings of Briusov’s future research-based conception
of the lost continent:

[…] afterwards he complicates [this conception] and from a mystical-symbolist system
tries to change it into a strictly documented one that rests on the sober conclusions of
incontrovertible archeological science at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of
the twentieth century.

But the prominence of the Mesoamerican theme in Zemlia suggests that these clandestine
references to Atlantis were not merely a laboratory for Briusov’s future legitimate research on
the lost continent. Atlantis plays a role in Langer’s focused reading of Zemlia, but she neglects

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317 “[…] рассказ написан от первого лица, от лица духа, который был влюблен и Землю,
как в планету, любил ее еще в те времена, когда она была расплавленной массой.” Valerii
Briusov, Iz moei zhizni. Moia iunost’. Pamiati (Moskva, 1927), 75. In his juvenile diary, Briusov
mentioned a “poema” called Zemlia, which took an epic rather than dramatic form (Ibid., 42).
318 “[…] впоследствии он осложняет ее и из мистически-символистской пытается
превратить в строго документированную систему, опирающуюся на трезвые итоги
неопровержимой археологической науки конца XIX – начала XX в.” P.N. Berkov,
“Problemy istorii mirovoi kul'tury v literaturno-khudozhestvennom i nauchnom tvorchestve
Valerii Briusova,” in Briusovskie chteniia 1962 goda, ed. K.V. Aivazian (Erevan: Armianskoe
Gos. Izd., 1963), 32.
Briusov’s likely theosophical sources. She also recognizes the character names as “Indian,” but not Nahuatl, or even Mesoamerican.  

Sources for the Atlantean (and Aztec) Imaginary of Zemlia

Briusov’s first contact with Mesoamerican culture can be traced to his friendship with fellow poet Konstantin Bal'mont. 

A catalyst for Briusov’s life-long interest in Atlantis, Bal'mont was the dedicatee of Briusov’s unfinished poem “Atlantida,” which first appeared in one of his notebooks from 1895. Indeed, in “Uchiteli uchitelei,” Briusov quotes Bal'mont alongside scholarly authorities as an expert on both Egyptian and Mesoamerican art.

Russia’s “solar” poet and author of Budem kak solntse (We will be like the sun, 1903), Bal'mont’s investigations into Mesoamerican art and myth were on prominent display in Symbolist periodicals in 1905, the publication year of Zemlia. Earlier that year, a single issue of

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319 Langer, Kunst, Wissenschaft, Utopie, 64.
321 Vasil'ev and Shcherbakov, Notes to “Uchiteli uchitelei,” 482. The role of Atlantis in other of Briusov’s early works bearing similarities with Zemlia is apparent, such as “Gora zvezdy” (1885-99), a novella about an isolated desert civilization with common features of both Egyptian and Atlantean culture. See Valerii Briusov, “Gora zvezdy,” Fantastika, no. 73-74 (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1975): 191-236.
322 Briusov obviously saw Bal'mont’s use of sun imagery as a quintessential feature of his poetry. In his collection of essays, Dalekie i blizkie, he wrote: “That was a time when the sun of Bal'mont’s poetry rose over Russian poetry. In the bright rays of this ascent all the other heavenly bodies were almost lost. Bal'mont captivated the souls of everyone who really loved poetry and he made everyone fall in love with his ringing, melodious verse” (To было время, когда над русской поэзией восходило солнце поэзии Бальмонта. В ярких лучах этого восхода затерялись едва ли не все другие светила. Душами всех, кто действительно любил поэзию, овладел Бальмонт и всех влюбил в свой звонко-певучий стих). See Valerii Briusov, Dalekie i blizkie, quoted in Literaturnoe nasledstvo: Valerii Briusov i ego korrespondenty, kn. 1, v. 98, ed. N.A. Trifonov (Moskva: Nauka, 1991), 30. In Briusov’s lengthy review of Budem kak solntse, Bal'mont the poet appears as a literary double of the sun-worshipping Nevatl!: “[...] proud of his bright eye, he, this visionary blind man, believes too much in the power of his vision. He braves the most forbidden roads, sometimes passing where, it seemed, there was no path, but sometimes pitifully slipping and falling where many go freely, guided by a walking stick.” See Valerii Briusov, “K.D. Bal'mont, ‘Budem kak solntse. Kniga simvolov.’ M. 1903,” Mir iskusstva, nos. 7-8 (1903, t. 10): 29-36; 34.
the journal *Iskusstvo (Art)* was devoted to Bal'mont’s Mexican writings, which were supplemented with photographs of Mayan ruins. In *Vesy (Libra)*, Briusov published two of Bal'mont’s pieces in 1905 – the three-part travel diary "*V stranakh solntsa*" (In the countries of the sun) and "Poeziia stikhii" (The poetry of the elements) – both treating the Mayan theme. Bal'mont would later devote an entire volume to his Mexican travels with *Zmeinye tsvety* (*Serpent Flowers*, 1910), which included portions from an important Mayan text, the *Popol Vuh*.

The cultural heritage of Mexico was a subject of great importance for Bal'mont. Once in Mexico, he wrote to Briusov expressing anger at the destruction of the pagan treasures of a land laid waste by Christendom:

> O shadow of Cortés, the Christian Muslim who destroyed the sculpted dreams of the Aztecs and Toltecs! Cursed be the conquerors who did not spare the stone. I don’t pity the mutilated bodies, I don’t pity the murdered. But to see a loathsome Christian church on the site of an ancient temple where the Sun was worshipped, but to know that it stands on monuments of a mysterious art that have been buried in the earth. O these Europeans are scoundrels thrice, seventy-seven times over!

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325 “О, тень Кортеса, христианского мусульманина, уничтожившего изваянные сны ацтеков и тольтеков! Да будут прокляты завоеватели, не щадящие камня. Мне не жаль изуродованных тел, мне не жаль убитых. Но видеть мерзкий христианский собор на месте древнего храма, где молились Солнцу, но знать, что он стоит на зарыхтых в землю памятниках таинственного искусства. О трижды, семью семьдесят раз мерзавцы европейцы!” (Bal'mont to Briusov, 31 March 1905, *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, t. 98, kn. 1, 159).
In the first installment of “V stranakh solntsa,” Bal'mont reaffirmed his intentions, seeking “to know Mexico, and, with all [my] soul, […] to go away into extinguished centuries, full of mysteries.” For him, travel to Mexico was going back in time to a place of great cultural significance. Despite the pagan force behind his poems to the sun, Bal'mont, in the final pages of “V stranakh solntsa,” wishes to enter Christian churches with “a desire to be meek and humble” (желание быть кротким и смиренным), which, as though ashamed he writes, “I cannot defeat” (я не могу победить). 327

William Richardson notes that “For Balmont, speculating on the mysteries of the past became an obsession, one stimulated by […] his infatuation with Theosophy, sun worship, paganism, and in the case of the Maya of Yucatán, with the vague belief that their civilization was all that remained of submerged Atlantis.” 328 By “vague,” Richardson likely means “imagined.” Yet the imagined nature of the Mayan link should not keep us from recognizing it as an integral aspect of several of Bal'mont’s works. 329 In “V stranakh solntsa,” Bal'mont located the mythical Thule (Tule or Fula in Russian, which he conflates with Atlantis) in Mesoamerica,

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327 K. Bal'mont, “V stranakh solntsa,” Vesy, no. 8 (1905): 17-30; 29. Bal'mont experienced the “majestic peals of the organ” (величественный восторг органа) in Catholic churches with “mysterious ecstasy” (таинственный восторг), but nevertheless would prefer the temple to be open to the air, lit “by the rays of the sun and appearing multi-colored with flowers [or colors]” (лучами Солнца и весь пестрел цветами) (Ibid., 30). In Ognennyi angel, Briusov’s character Ruprecht, a former conquistador, associates Catholic organ music with the sounds of Mexican forests: “[…] I listened to the measured song of the organ and imagined at times that it was the Mexican forests making noise all around” ([…] я слушал мерное пение органа и воображал порой, что то шумят кругом мексиканские леса). V.1a. Briusov, Ognennyi angel, in SS v 7 tomakh, t.4 (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1974), 71, and again on 178. Briusov mentions pyramids “in the virginal forests of Central America” (в девственных лесах Центральной Америки) (Briusov, “Учителя учителей,” 366).
328 William Harrison Richardson, Mexico through Russian Eyes, 1806-1940 (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), 78.
using as evidence the massive statues of Toltec warriors (for him, examples of Atlantean figures) at the archeological site of Tula. Like Briusov, Bal'mont compared the peoples of Mesoamerica with the lost civilization of Atlantis. However, Bal'mont wrote even more directly about the significance of the lost continent for world culture. In “V stranakh solntsa,” Bal'mont expressed his feeling that “without Atlantis it is impossible to understand and explain the enormous stock of phenomena from the sphere of cosmogonic ideas and creations of sculpture, painting, and the art of construction.”

For Bal'mont, as later for Briusov, to discover traces of Atlantis was to recover the mysterious origins of culture itself.

Though it is more difficult to determine precisely the influence of Bal'mont on Briusov’s prolonged study of Atlantis, there is concrete evidence of the research that Briusov conducted on the Maya prior to writing Zemlia. In “Uchiteli uchitelei,” Briusov argued for the Atlantean origins of the ancient Aegean, Egyptian, and Mayan civilizations. In his section on the Maya, he claimed (in a footnote) that he “took a course on the history of the Maya in Paris at the Collège de France in 1902 and made use of his own notes for the present work.”

It is worth emphasizing that in this entire work, the section containing his research on the Maya is the only one in which Briusov includes this kind of personal remark. In claiming to have attended a university course on Mayan history, Briusov conveys to his reader a certain assiduousness and familiarity with his subject.

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331 “Автор этой статьи слушал курс истории майев в Париже в College de France, в 1902 г., использовался для настоящей работы своими записками” (Briusov, “Uchiteli uchitelei,” 368).
But Briusov’s published correspondence during 1902 makes clear that he was not in Paris that year. He had, however, been there in the spring of 1903 – during the 1902/1903 academic year – where he first met Viacheslav Ivanov. Over the course of a brief, sixteen-day visit, as his diary confirms, he took part in numerous cultural and intellectual activities. Records in the Annuaire du Collège de France for the year 1903 indicate that a course entitled “Antiquités Américaines” was then being offered, and it is likely that these are the lectures that Briusov mentions. Taught by Mesoamericanist Léon Lejeal, this course dealt with Mayan art, history, and religion, all of which could have influenced Zemlia. Perhaps faulty memory explains Briusov’s imprecise dating of these lectures to 1902 as opposed to 1903. But whether Briusov attended Lejeal’s lectures or not, the available documentation suggests that it was possible for him to have gone to at least a few of them. He certainly could have read the introductory lecture, which was published already in 1903.

Whether it was in Paris or much later in private study, Briusov had more than a rudimentary knowledge of the Maya and Aztecs before writing Zemlia. Indeed, as it turns out, he had studied their language. His friend and colleague Maksimilian Voloshin seems to have

332 “Paris. April. We spent sixteen days in Paris. Saw everything, i.e., museums, the university, theatres, streets, bistros. We refrained only from climbing the Eiffel Tower, and did not visit the Salon or attend the Opera.” See Valerii Briusov, The Diary of Valery Bryusov (1893-1905), trans. Joan Delaney Grossman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 138.

333 Among the topics covered were “Archéologie mexicaine (Le Calendrier et la vie religieuse des Aztèques)” and “Découvertes archéologiques récentes dans la Zapotèque et le Yucatan.” Léon Lejeal, L’Archéologie américaine et les études américanistes en France: leçon d'ouverture du cours d'antiquités américaines au Collège de France (Paris, 1903), 23.

334 Proof that Briusov was familiar with the Nahua (in Russian nagua) can be found in “Uchiteli uchitelei.” “We know that the Aztecs and later the Zapotecs – more precisely, the Nahua tribes, to which also belonged the tribe that founded the subsequent Aztec kingdom – invaded Mexico from the North approximately in the middle of 900 A.D., that is, in the epoch of medieval Europe” (Мы знаем, что ацтеки и сапотеки, – точнее, племена нагуа, к которым принадлежало и племя, основавшее позднее царство ацтеков, – вторглись в Мексику с Севера, приблизительно, в середине IX в. нашей эры, т.е. в эпоху европейского средневековья) (Briusov, “Uchiteli uchitelei,” 367).
been somewhat aware of the Mayan associations of the play’s *dramatis personae*, but perhaps, out of respect for their mysterious quality, referred more to their sonorous effect than to their semantics.\footnote{\textsuperscript{335} Voloshin wrote, “Finding possible names for the last people on earth was a very difficult task and he settled it cleverly and logically, taking the most ancient names that have come down to us: the names of the Mayan tribe. These names sound beautiful, with gravitas, and naturally in *Zemlia*, imparting to everything the particular archaism of the future” (Найти возможные имена для последних людей на земле было очень трудной задачей, и он разрешил ее остроумно и логично, взяв древнейшие имена, дошедшие до нас, – имена племени майев. Эти имена звучат в «Земле» красиво, громко и естественно, придавая всему особый архаизм грядущего). Maksimilian Voloshin, “Gorod v poezii Valerii Briusova,” in *Biblioteka russkoi kritiki: kritika russkogo simvolizma*, t. 2, ed. N.A. Bogomolov (Moskva: Olimp, 2002), 373-87; 386.} Briusov himself claimed, writing to his German translator, that he took the names from “one ancient American dialect”\footnote{\textsuperscript{336} V.A. Lazarev, “Iz istorii literaturnykh otnoshenii pervoi chetverti dvadtsatogo stoletiia,” in *Uchenye zapiski Moskovskogo oblastnogo pedagogicheskogo instituta im. N. Krupskoi*, t. CXVI (Moskva, 1962), 99. Quoted in Molodiakov, *Valerii Briusov*, 344.} without indicating a source.\footnote{\textsuperscript{337} Johannes von Guenther, *Zemlia*’s German translator, gave the tragedy the title *Erduntergang*, which ironically evokes the German for “sunset” (*Sonnenuntergang*). See Valerius Brjussoff, *Erduntergang. Tragödie künftiger Zeiten in 5 Handlungen und 9 Szenen*, trans. Hans Guenther (München: Verlag von Hans von Weber, 1909).} He insisted that “All things have *their meaning in this language*” ([…] все имеют в этом языке свой смысл).\footnote{\textsuperscript{338} Lazarev, “Iz istorii literaturnykh otnoshenii,” 99. Quoted in Molodiakov, *Valerii Briusov*, 344.} Despite these suggestive references, scholars since have not considered the possible meaning of the characters’ names. Gudrun Langer has discovered the anagrammatic nature of the names of three characters – Atla, Intla, and Tlan – all of which are letters in the word “Atlantis.”\footnote{\textsuperscript{339} Langer, *Kunst, Wissenschaft, Utopie*, 64.} She also notes an accepted belief in the nineteenth century that descendants of the people of Atlantis were from a “red race” (*rote Rasse*), presumably whose origins were in the Americas. I would add to Langer’s observation that this theory of “root races” seems to have had particular currency among theosophists. For example, “root races” are a topic of considerable discussion in Madame Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* (1888), as the following statement from this work shows: “Occult
philosophy teaches that even now, under our very eyes, the new Race and Races are preparing to be formed, and that it is in America that the transformation will take place, and has already silently commenced."

However, it has heretofore escaped notice that Briusov’s main characters correspond to Nahuatl words with precise definitions: Tlakatl: “person/man,” Teopikski: “priest,” Nevatl’ (standard transliteration “ne’huatl’”): “I,” Teotl: “god,” Tlatsotli: “esteemed” or “loved,” Oknoma: possibly “still, even now,” Matsevatli (standard transliteration “Macehualli”): “vassal, subject,” Kualli: “good,” and Atla: “water.” The name Teotl' is translated as “god,” carrying an echo of the Greek “θεός” (possibly why the Spanish chose this translation). Briusov’s likely source is John Thomas Short’s *North Americans of Antiquity* (1880), cited in William Scott-Elliot’s *Story of Atlantis* (1896), which Briusov appears to have consulted for his earlier research on Atlantis, as well as for his later lectures. It is not difficult to see how Briusov created Cyrillic variants in *Zemlia* from the transliterations of Nahuatl words that he found in Short’s text. The mystery of these names until now might be read as Briusov’s attempt to make his intentions legible only to an initiated few, obviously including Bal'mont, whose knowledge of ancient cultures would have allowed them to decipher the names. Given the presentation of

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342 John Pohl, M.D. and Claire L. Lyons, *The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of Empire* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2010), 34. Another scholar explains, “The word teo may be used to qualify almost anything mysterious, powerful, or beyond ordinary experience […] Nor was its application restricted to good or ethical things, for malign phenomena might also be designated by teo.” Richard F. Townsend, *The Aztecs*, 3rd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2009), 120.
343 Vasil’ev and Shcherbakov, Notes to “Uchiteli uchitelei,” 483. Briusov gives the English theosophist a relatively fair treatment in “Uchiteli uchitelei” considering the lack of evidence supporting his claims (Ibid., 421-22).
Nevatl' in Zemlia as a Bal'montian hero, his closest friend and colleague was likely the play’s ideal reader.344

Briusov had a rationale for selecting Nahuatl for the names of his characters and it was closely tied to theosophical texts. In “Uchiteli uchitelei,” Briusov argued that “The culture of the Aztecs was only a shade of Mayan culture, which, for its part, must have been insignificant compared to the culture of the Atlanteans, the ‘teachers’ of the Maya.”345 A diluted outgrowth of the Mayan civilization, the Aztecs were, in Briusov’s presentation, a culture that combined elements of their forebears’ technical skill and cultural production with “national cruelty” (национальная жестокость), a reference to their practice of human sacrifice.346 By making the future inhabitants of Zemlia culturally similar to the Aztecs, Briusov sought to underscore the decadence of their civilization.

The second reason for Briusov’s choice of Nahuatl can be found in Scott-Elliot’s Story of Atlantis. This text might be called an imaginative reconstruction of the Atlantean origins of the

344 Briusov quotes Bal’mont’s poem “Kak ispanets” (1899) in Zemlia. Dolgopolov has also noted this citation (Dolgopolov, Na rubezhe vekov, 76). Approaching the implementation of Nevatl’’s plan, a character speculates about the sun’s nature, claiming: “One ancient poet has a verse – ‘The sun, red like blood’” (У одного древнего поэта есть стих – «Солнце, красное как кровь»). Briusov, Zemlia, in Severnye tsveti: assirianskie, al'manakh IV (Moskva: Skorpion, 1905), 193. The image of the “красное солнце” is repeated in Bal'mont’s poem “Solntse – krasnoe:” “The sun is red, my native people said to me / And my heart sings to me about the free, red Sun” (Солнце – красное, сказал мне мой родной народ, / И о вольном красном Солнце сердце мне поет). K. Bal'mont, Liturgiia krasoty. Stikhinye gimny (Moskva: Grif, 1905), 27.

345 “Культура же ацтеков была только тенью культуры майев, которая, в свою очередь, должна была быть ничтожна в сравнении с культурой атлантов, «учителей» майев” (Briusov, “Uchiteli uchitelei,” 408).

346 Ibid., 368. Blavatsky refers to the Aztecs similarly when she compares their downfall to the imminent decline of her own contemporary age, as theosophists understood it: “It is the present men who will then begin to be regarded as exceptional mongrels […] surviving only in small groups on islands – the mountain peaks of to-day – where they will vegetate, degenerate, and finally die out, perhaps millions of years hence, as the Aztecs have […]” (Blavatsky, Secret Doctrine, 445).
Toltecs, distant ancestors of the Maya. Scott-Elliot characterized Toltec as the closest approximation of the now lost Atlantean language: “[…] All through the ages, however, the Toltec language fairly maintained its purity, and the same tongue that was spoken in Atlantis in the days of its splendor was used, with but slight alterations, thousands of years later in Mexico and Peru.”

Briusov probably had this view of Nahuatl in mind. The surviving traces of ancient Atlantis in the future names of humanity reflect Briusov’s interest in the transmission not only of language, but of cultural knowledge and know-how. In addition to the philological traces of the past, architectural elements of Atlantean wisdom make their way into the imaginary future of Zemlia.

In “Uchiteli uchitelei,” architectural structures of complex design present one possible conduit for the transmission of knowledge from one civilization to its descendants. Convinced by the analogies between the Aegean labyrinth and the Egyptian pyramids, Briusov extended these connections to the ruins of Uxmal and Palenque in today’s Central America. For Briusov, these buildings were a means for their architects to preserve ancient knowledge: “The nation-teacher erected or forced others to erect pyramids as its testament to the nation-student. ‘When we will no longer be with you […] future generations will be able to recover the foundations of our wisdom by these stone letters’ […]”

Mesoamerican ruins were, to his mind, surviving relics of Atlantean knowledge. Moreover, Mayan technical prowess suggested to Briusov a sophisticated grasp of math and science. The elaborate nature of their structures “would have been impossible without a previously calculated plan of the entire construction, without the

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proper skill in building and without some machines and devices."  
Such apparatuses evoke the machines located underneath the city of Zemlia. However, despite the demonstration of technical brilliance in the labyrinth, Briusov intimated that it could be an ill-omened place. He wrote about the Aegean labyrinth:

Thus the labyrinth contained within itself and surrounded itself with everything a person needed in life and after the end of life. It is as though the labyrinth did not require the outside world and, in any case, could have gotten on for a long time without assistance from the outside. It was a separate, complete, and self-enclosed world…

Sealed off from the natural landscape and containing innumerable serpentine passageways and darkened corners, the “megapolis” that Briusov depicted in Zemlia is just such a “separate, complete, and self-enclosed world.”

Pathways to Original Knowledge: Architecture and the Occult in Zemlia

Since Briusov’s Zemlia is not widely read, I will provide a summary of the action in addition to tracing some key patterns in its themes and imagery. The drama is set in a dystopian future in a time of drought. The action takes place in just one small section of a megacity composed of millions of rooms which now provide shelter for earth’s inhabitants. Zemlia is the story of Nevatl', a visionary hero who over the course of the play amasses support for a plan to bring the sun’s rays and “free air” (свободный воздух) to his society, which has replaced these necessities with machines built below the ground that supply water and oxygen. In the first act, the machines controlling the roof are failing for unknown reasons. Some characters believe that this technological breakdown is a sign that the Earth has run its course. Nevatl', just returned

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349 “было бы невозможно без заранее обдуманного плана всей постройки, без должного навыка в строительстве и без некоторых машин и приспособлений” (Ibid., 371).
350 “Таким образом, лабиринт включал в себя и окружил себя всем, что только нужно человеку в жизни и по окончании жизни. Лабиринт как бы не нуждался во внешнем мире и, во всяком случае, мог бы долгое время обходиться без содействия извне. Это был отдельный, законченный и замкнутый в себе мир…” (Ibid., 294).
351 Briusov, Zemlia, 171.
from a journey to the roof of the city’s enclosure, plans to wrench it open so that natural cycles of birth and death can return to human life. He urges the citizens to destroy the machines controlling the roof and believes that this act will end the drought and deliver them to a “new life.” The desperate citizens rally enthusiastically around the optimistic slogan “To the sun, to the sun!” (К солнцу, к солнцу!). However, Nevatl’’s Promethean attempt is thwarted by the very progressivism and rhetoric of self-sacrifice that fuels it: when the roof is opened, the play ends with the suffocation of those on stage before a “blinding sun.”

Despite the consequences, Nevatl' believes that his plan will lead to renewal. Two characters, however, believe in seeing out the extinction. These are Teopikski, who was Nevatl’’s teacher, and Teotl'. The first of these figures is the city’s wise man. His teachings about heroism and pride in humanity were the foundation of Nevatl’’s education. However, since the decline of civilization has set in, he has grown more pessimistic. Teopikski fears that the Earth’s end will threaten the beauty of the human. So that the fall of society does not amount to the “fall of humanity,” Teopikski in the first act reminds the citizenry that “We serve not the cause of Death, but the cause of Beauty.” For him, the end of the world should occasion acts of great heroism and voluntary self-sacrifice, not savage desperation.

This conviction leads to his support of the plan to wreck the machines. Just before his death, Teopikski’s student Katontli reveals the disastrous outcome of Nevatl’’s naïve plan and explains to Teotl' what his teacher wanted from humanity’s last days: “Teacher wanted humanity to know a proud death instead of a

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352 Ibid., 158.
353 They do not speak to one another in Zemlia, but their names are etymologically related to the Aztec word teotl.
354 “Мы служим не делу Смерти, а делу Красоты” (Ibid., 153).
355 “May the last day of humanity be the proud end of a powerful hero, who has accomplished his feat, and not the furious death of an animal at bay, who has lost conscience and will” (Да будет последний день человечества гордой кончиной могучего героя, свершившего свой подвиг, а не яростной смертью затравленного зверя, потерявшего сознание и волю) (Ibid.).
shameful decrepitude. He wanted our end to be beautiful. He wanted not for degeneration to
realize its punishment over people, but for they themselves to be their own voluntary
executioners." The tragedy of Earth is the failure of the optimistic Nevatl', whose evasion of
fate is duly punished. But the larger tragedy is “Earth’s” itself. Rather than cultivating its
spiritual connection to the other world, humanity has strove beyond itself in the here and now
and faces its extinction. Teotl' is the only character who believes that this dark turn in the history
of humankind will end with deliverance.

In Zemlia, traces of Atlantean culture resurface in the identities of the inhabitants and in
the city’s architecture. Briusov uses the landscape of the future city as a metaphor for
humanity’s growing distance from an implied lost knowledge. A general plan of the city given in
the first stage direction recalls Briusov’s later discussion of labyrinths in the Atlantis lectures:

A giant round room. Walls in strict lines ascend to the sky. Around the entire room there
are galleries arranged in tiers. Geometrically correct arcs open out to infinite perspectives
of other rooms and passageways. In the middle of the room is a Blue Pool. There are no
decorations anywhere. A soft, even light spills out from unseen sources.

It is already possible to imagine maze-like hallways terminating in total darkness; the faint light
source illuminating the gathering place of the first scene does not extend to the city’s outer
reaches. Briusov’s discussion of the labyrinth in the Atlantis lectures permits us to read the
massive city of Zemlia as a testament to the technological advancement of Atlantean culture.

356 “Учитель хотел, чтобы человечество вместо позорной дряхлости узнало гордую смерть.
Он хотел, чтобы не вырождение совершило свою казнь над людьми, а чтобы они сами
были своими добровольными палачами” (Ibid., 191).
357 Briusov’s representation of humanity’s epistemological progress in terms of architectural
space can also be found in Valerii Briusov, “Strast’,” Vesy, no. 8 (1904): 21-28.
358 “Гигантская круговая зала. Стены строгими линиями уходят в высь. Вокруг всех зал
ярусами расположены галереи. Геометрически правильные арки открывают бесконечные
перспективы других покое и проходов. Посреди залы Синий Бассейн. Нигде никаких
украшений. Разлит мягкий ровный свет из невидимых источников” (Briusov, Zemlia, 151).
Subtle details scattered throughout Zemlia connect the darkness and horizontal expanses of the halls with humanity’s dim relationship to ancient knowledge. Nevatl', his teacher Teopikski (“priest”), and Teotl' relate differently to their responsibility to preserve and even renew their lost heritage. In the first scene, Teopikski claims that,

To us, the keepers of the holy fire bequeathed by happier generations, a single duty is entrusted: to prevent humanity from collapse. We late ones preserve its decline as others, who came first, praised its radiant ascent.359

Referencing the rising and setting of the sun, Teopikski claims that it is too late to return to sun worship in the end days of the Earth. Nevatl', on the other hand, has faith that these ties to ancient knowledge can be perpetuated if only the birth rate were increased and the connection between the Earth and the Sun were reestablished. He complains, “We don’t even have the strength to retain what little our fathers and grandfathers have given us; their armor crushes our chest.”360 Moreover, only traces of their forefathers’ genius remains “preserved in still un-dimmed rooms” of the metropolis, relating the extinguishing of human knowledge in his present time in terms of the city’s expansive architecture.361

In order to rescue humanity and its cultural heritage from extinction, Nevatl' does not uncover a solution in the darkened halls of the city, but beyond its borders. He is drawn to the sun, to an external light source, and thus to ancient sun worship. But first, Nevatl' turns to the dark passageways for answers:

I plunged into dark rooms, hoping to find free earth behind them or, maybe, another sliver of humanity that, more fully than us, preserved the wisdom of antiquity. I passed through hundreds of rooms so many times […] But suddenly a thought became clear to

359 “Нам, хранителям священного огня, завещанного более счастливыми поколениями, вверен единый долг: не допустить человечество до падения. Мы, поздние, охраняем его закат, как другие, пришедшие первыми, славили его лучезарный восход” (Ibid., 153).
360 “Мы не в силах даже удержать то малое, что передали нам отцы и деды, их доспехи раздавливают нашу грудь” (Ibid., 170).
361 “хранятся в еще непогасших залах” (Ibid.).
me: is it not possible to find an exit not on the side, but above? I decided to perform an experiment. I decided to undertake a new journey, – not to the dark rooms, but to the upper floors of the City. We live in two or three floors; for a depopulated humanity that’s sufficient. A desert begins after the third floor. People do not ascend higher.  

And so, instead of searching in the darkened rooms, Nevatl' ascends beyond the upper floors and it is there where he sees the sun’s light. He explains to the townspeople, “[…] suddenly it was as though a knife was plunged into my eyes. I prostrated myself. When I dared to look again – the sun! the sun! like a bloody-fiery sphere, was rolling onto the round vault of heaven.”  

When Nevatl' reports his sighting to Teopikski, he refers to the sun as a deity: “[…] I still see it, the blinding, dawning flame in the fiery crown of a god!” This seemingly terrifying witnessing of the sun, for Nevatl', presages an optimistic return to the human: “I understood that we must only look upon it [the sun], only obey it, and it will give us life. And I understood that the Sun will save us!” Nevatl' cries out to his countrymen, “I will lead you to the Sun, to the ancient and eternal Sun!”

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362 “Я углублялся в темные залы, надеясь за ними найти свободную землю или, может быть, другой осколок человечества, который полнее нас сохранил мудрость древности. Я проходил сотни зал, сколько раз […] Но вдруг меня озарила мысль: нельзя ли найти выход не в сторону, а в высь? Нельзя ли пробиться к свободе из нашего Города не через стены, а через крышу? Я решил сделать опыт. Я решил предпринять новое путешествие, – не в темные залы, а в верхние этажи Города. Мы живем в двух-трех этажах. Для обезлюдевшего человечества этого довольно. С третьего этажа начинается пустыня. Люди не поднимаются выше” (Ibid., 156).

363 “[…] вдруг словно нож вонзился мне в глаза. Я пал ниц. Когда я осмелился взглянуть вновь, – солнце! солнце! как кроваво-огненный шар, вкатывалось на круговой небесный свод!” (Ibid., 157). The high-register phrase “я пал ниц” is reminiscent of Biblical language.

364 “Я еще вижу его, ослепительное, пламенарное, в огненном венце бога!” (Ibid., 155).

365 “Я понял, что мы должны только смотреть на него, только повиноваться ему – и оно дарует нам жизнь. И я понял, что Солнце спасет нас!” (Ibid., 157). The sun’s “youth” is a reference to Bal'mont’s poem, “Budem kak Solntse – ono molodoe…” In Bal'mont’s poetry the word “sun” is often capitalized. See K. Bal'mont, Budem kak solntse (Moskva: Skorpion, 1903), 2.

366 “Я поведу вас к Солнцу, к древнему и вечному Солнцу!” (Ibid., 158). Dolgopolov sees in these lines a reference to the epigraph from Budem kak solntse, “I came to this world to see the sun” (Я в этот мир пришел, чтоб видеть солнце) (Dolgopolov, Na rubezh vekov, 76).
Nevatl’’s vertical search for a solution to the crisis finds its opposite in the horizontal probing of the shadowy cult, the Order of Liberators (Орден освободителей). This organization carries out the routine murder of civilians as a kind of harvesting of souls. Their lair is located in a dimly lit, underground chamber in some unknown location of the city. Longing for humanity’s extinction, as well as untold knowledge in the afterlife, the Order seeks, as their chairman Teotl' proclaims, to “[…] become the destroyers. Our Order is merely the will of Nature, merely the hand of Fate!” The Order’s philosophy of death rejects erotic and familial love. In this dystopian future, nature can no longer regulate what comes into the world and what leaves it (women have, in fact, stopped having children). Hoping for the extinction of the human race, members of the Society murder innocent people so as to “free” them from life. The citizens of the city are aware of these periodic murders, but they do not know when or why the Order will strike (they are effectively a futuristic terrorist organization). The Order’s enemies are the forces of progress and positivism that are promoting the project to open the city to the sun, as ever a symbol of enlightenment and new life. The chairman of the Order, Teotl', understands the history of the earth as humanity’s gradual destruction of the natural world and natural cycles. Having destroyed these cycles, humans came to occupy the highest possible level of ability and intelligence. However, now that the human race is dying out, the apposite response of Teotl' and the Order is to bring death, what nature can no longer do, so that humans can fulfill their role as the servant of their “mother,” nature.

Briusov’s depiction of the Order suggests that, whereas Nevatl' aims at the purely earthly concern of regenerating natural cycles and reestablishing biological processes, the members of the Order opt for extinction through destruction. This dichotomy is a reflection of the tension between vertical and horizontal axes of change, a conflict that is played out in the city’s struggle for survival and its eventual annihilation.

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367 “[…] стать разрушителями. Наш Орден – лишь воля Природа, лишь рука Рока!” (Ibid., 164).
the Order focus beyond the confines of the Earth. The only verse in the entire play appears in this scene with the Order, who sing a hymn to consecrate their meeting:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Russian Text</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Смерть, внемли славословью!</td>
<td>Death, heed our eulogy!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ты – неглечно чиста!</td>
<td>You are imperishably pure!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Сожигают любовью</td>
<td>Your lips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Твои уста!</td>
<td>Burn with love!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Всем однажды предстанешь</td>
<td>One day you will present to all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Обнаженною ты,</td>
<td>Yourself exposed,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Не сожжешь, не обманешь</td>
<td>You will not lie, you won’t deceive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ничьей мечты.</td>
<td>Anyone’s dream.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ты на каждое ложе</td>
<td>On every bed will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Припадаешь вся в огне.</td>
<td>You fall down, all aflame.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Лик свой пламенно-Божий</td>
<td>Show your fiery, God-like face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Яви и мне!</td>
<td>To me, also!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>С лаской строгой и нежной</td>
<td>With a stern and tender caress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Наложи поцелуй,</td>
<td>Place a kiss,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Уязви безнадежно</td>
<td>Wound hopelessly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>И уврачуй!</td>
<td>And heal!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Счастлив тот, кто изведал</td>
<td>Happy is he who has come to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Лезвие твоих губ,</td>
<td>The blade of your lips,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Кто свободен, кто предал</td>
<td>Who is free, who commits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Огню свой труп!368</td>
<td>His corpse to the fire!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though the Order rejects erotic love, its members welcome death with the language of romantic love. The hymn foreshadows Teotl’s conversation with an emissary of Death, whom the order names “Mistress” (Владычица). He later expresses this sentiment in his own words, which were clearly informed by the Order’s hymn:

Love for Death subdues the entire soul, you yield to this love to the end! Death! Death! Mistress! I have looked into your eyes and from that moment all other eyes are too pale for me, – your glance has penetrated my heart like steel. Accept me on your all-embracing breast!369

368 Ibid.
369 “Любовь к Смерти покоряет всю душу, этой любви отдаешься до конца! Смерть! Смерть! Владычица! Я посмотрел в твои очи, и все другие глаза слишком бледны с тех
In the fifth act, Teotl learns of Nevatl’s plan to open the roof of the city and rejoices in the likelihood of mass suffocation. In order to open the ceiling, the characters must turn a great wheel in the machine that has powered the city for hundreds of years. The turning of the wheel, now literally in the hands of human beings, evokes the wheel of Fortune; just as Teotl had hoped, man now controls the cycle of Nature. When the roof of the city is finally wrenched open, Teotl joyfully prepares himself for certain asphyxiation, leading the terrified masses in a prayer:

I see your gigantic countenance, O Death. It looks intently at me. O what bliss that I am seeing your triumph. Here you are exalting your omnipotent hand over us. Strike us! The sin of separation has been atoned for. The soul rejoices, anticipating the last moment. Sun, sun! Your rays will not burn through this darkness that I am rushing into!370

Nevatl’s teacher dies earlier in the action, but also with a prayer on his lips. In his case, it is the “Nunc dimittis” (Ныне отпущаеши).371 The prayer appears in the Gospel of Luke and refers to the story of a Jew who refused to die until he saw the Messiah. When he set eyes on the baby Jesus, he said “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: / For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, / Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; / A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.”372 Briusov’s invocation of this well-known prayer is of course ironic. In Zemlia, the light of Christ (as the sun) that was to “lighten the Gentiles” brings death instead. A pernicious sun is revealed in the play’s final stage direction. As the roof opens one of the citizens cries “It’s a fiery angel, trumpeting a golden
Amidst a throng of suffocating people on the stage, the sun rises from behind the just opened cupola of the city and the final stage direction reads: “And slowly, slowly all of the quieted room is transformed into a cemetery of motionless, disfigured bodies, over which the depths of the heavens shine from the gaping cupola and, like an angel with a golden trumpet, is the blinding sun.”  This nemaia shtena is reminiscent of two other final scenes in Russian theater: Pushkin’s Boris Godunov and Gogol’s Revizor (The Inspector General).

Nevatl’ (“I”), dedicated to saving the earth, and Teotl’ (“god”), looking beyond earthly existence, are further distinguished through Briusov’s use of light as a metaphor for spiritual insight. Various light motifs invoked in Teotl’’s speech reveal that Briusov is drawing a comparison between Nevatl’’s reliance on external light and Teotl’’s, which is inwardly generated. Teotl’ ridicules Nevatl’’s faith in the sun: “You want the cobwebs of a life, grey and sticky, that would again sheathe the earth and again weave shut the inner light of freedom, which you don’t see, in place of which you prefer the coarse rays of the sun!”  For him the sun destroys “that light which to me is visible, the rays of which are black […].”  By comparison, Nevatl' claims earlier, “when my gaze drank in the sun’s light […] I was entirely reborn.”

Whereas Nevatl’ represents the forces of progress, his eyes pierced by the sun’s optimistic illumination, Teotl' cries out to Death, “Your glance has penetrated my heart like steel,” an image recalled in his later vision of a ghostly sorceress, appearing moments later as “the image

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373 “Это огненный ангел трубящий в золотую трубу” (Briusov, Zemlia, 196).
374 “И медленно, медленно вся стихнувшая зала обращается в кладбище неподвижных, скорченных тел, над которыми из разверстого купола сияет глубина небес и, словно ангел с золотой трубой, ослепительное солнце” (Ibid.).
375 “Вам хочется паутины жизни, серой и липкой, которая вновь оплела бы землю и вновь заткала бы внутренний свет освобождения, которого вы не видите, которому предпочитаете грубые лучи солнца!” (Ibid., 166).
376 “Тот свет, который зришь мне, свет, лучи которого черные” (Ibid.).
377 “когда взоры мои испили солнечного света […] я весь переродился” (Ibid., 171).
378 “твой взор проник мое сердце как сталь” (Ibid., 175).
of a beautiful girl with a sword in her hand.”

It becomes clear later that Teotl’’s worship of Death is based on a search for occult knowledge, a quest that must take him out of his earthly guise and into the spirit realm.

The simple opposition that Briusov sets up between the powers of light and those of darkness becomes more complex when darkness comes to be associated with lost knowledge. As the action progresses, Briusov increasingly connects the dark areas of the future city with shades of Atlantean culture, and eventually, to its most valuable patrimony, occult knowledge. In the second act, Oknoma, one of the Order’s assassins, regales his brethren with the story of a recent kill. He finally managed to track one of his victims to the more isolated outer rooms, as Oknoma describes, “along the faraway Atlantean room” (по отдаленной Атлантовой зале) and into the “Winding Passageway” (Изогнутый Проход). When his victim’s body is eventually discovered, “no one could understand why he went into those rooms,” which only the Order knows how to navigate. When Teotl' retreats to the “Dim room” (Погасшая зала), Intlanel', the Order’s new initiate, finds him in the city’s labyrinth. Intlanel' remarks, “I was afraid that you went far, away from the bright rooms.” In the darkness, Teotl' receives a vision of the sorceress who claims to have been taught “only fragments of the revelations” of “prophetic books, written in the language of the Atlanteans.” This scene is one of the play’s most mysterious; it is a conversation between Teotl' and the “spirit of the last sorceress” (дух последней колдуньи) the last initiate of Atlantean occult wisdom.

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379 “образ красивой девушки с мечом в руке” (Ibid., 176).
380 Ibid., 162.
381 “никто не может понять, зачем он зашел в те покой” (Ibid.).
382 “Я боялся, что ты ушел далеко, прочь от светлых зал” (Ibid., 173).
383 “только обрывки откровений;” “вещих книг, написанных на языке атлантов” (Ibid., 177).
Referring to concepts important to theosophists – the astral plane and the celestial spheres – the sorceress explains why she is all that remains of a once powerful connection between humanity and the spirit world: “The souls of deceased people, purified in the crucible of ordeals, have ascended to the higher spheres and ever fewer spirits have remained near this planet.”

She instructs Teotl' that his “dark thirst for Death” (темная жажда Смерти) is only the first stage of his soul’s long journey: “[w]hat is not completed here will be finished by other beings in other worlds.” Her prophecy suggests that the only viable connection to the ancient Atlanteans is in the other realm.

Before ascending to the higher spheres, the sorceress shares a final insight with Teotl': “seven times the scepter of spiritual power has passed from the hands of one tribe into the hands of another.” Each of these spiritual dynasties was responsible for “revealing a new face of truth, accessible to the human mind” (явить нового лика истины, доступной уму человека).

The precision of the sorceress’s vision of history cannot but recall Scott-Elliot’s *Story of Atlantis*, whose text indicates how many generations are required for each “root race:”

[…] For of the seven sub-races required to complete the history of a great Root Race, five only have so far come into existence. Our own Teutonic or 5th sub-race has already developed many nations, but has not yet run its course, while the 6th and 7th sub-races, who will be developed on the continents of North and South America, will have thousands of years of history to give to the world.

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384 “Души умерших людей, очищенные в горниле испытаний, возносились в высшие сферы, и все меньше духов оставалось близ этой планеты” (Ibid., 176).
385 “Что несовершено здесь, будет докончено иными существами в других мирах” (Ibid., 177).
386 “Семь раз скипетр духовного державства переходил из рук одного племени в руки другого” (Ibid.).
387 Ibid.
This passage, referenced in Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine*, is likely the original source of the sorceress’s speech. With its clear linguistic ties to “North and South America,” Briusov presents the civilization in *Zemlia* as the seventh sub-race following the most recent “Fifth Age.”

Scott-Elliot’s model of human history is closely related to an Aztec cosmological myth that may have influenced Briusov: the myth of the Five Suns.389 In his “history,” Scott-Elliot mentions the “*Popul Vuh,*” where this legend is found.390 Bal’mont recorded this myth while visiting the ruins at Xochicalco at the Temple of the Feathered Serpent (i.e. Quetzalcoatl):

The legend […] tells about the four great epochs of the world, connected to the four universal destructions, which preceded our earthly life and the founding of the famous Thule […] Four universal scourges and creators: the heavenly Fire (Sun and Lightning), the earthly Fire (Volcano), Air (Hurricane), Water (Flood).391

The myth tells of four sibling gods who were born of the first sun and defeated each other in turn to become kings of the universe, whose throne is in the Sun. Each of these four defeats coincided with a scourge that resulted in humanity’s extermination. After the fourth catastrophe (a flood) reduced the earth to ruin (an event sometimes linked to the oceanic submergence of Atlantis), the god Quetzalcoatl is said to have created, with his own blood, the age of the fifth sun, the one in which the Aztecs and Briusov’s characters live. When the sorceress warns Teotl, “You will see

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389 For an overview of this myth, see Charles Phillips, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Aztec & Maya* (London: Lorenz, 2006), 158-163. I would like to thank Ilya Vinitsky for identifying this myth as a possible source for the play.
391 “Легенда […] рассказывает о четырех великих эпохах мира, связанных с четырьмя мировыми гибелями, которые предшествовали нашей земной жизни и основанию знаменитой Тулы […] Четыре мировые бича, и созидатели: Огонь небесный (Солнце и Молния), Огонь земной (Вулкан), Воздух (Ураган), Вода (Потоп).” Bal’mont, “*V stranakh solntsa,*” *Vesy,* no. 6 (1905), 21. A photograph of the Xochicalco pyramid is included in Bal’mont, “*Kosmogonii Maiev: Otryvki iz Sviashchennoi Knigi ‘Popol Vuh,’*” 11.
the last moments of the human race. You will see the convulsion of the dying earth,” she
possibly refers to earthquakes that the Aztecs believed would conclude the fifth age.392

The sorceress’s prophesy also suggests the geometrical figure of the pyramid as a visual
metaphor for the stages of human history. The pyramid was a central symbol discussed in the
Atlantis lectures. The sorceress, it should be recalled, said that “truth” has four faces. This notion
of truth as a unit with four sides evokes the geometric figure of the pyramid, a structure integral
to Mesoamerican cultures.393 The sorceress explains that “all levels have been passed; all faces
have been revealed.”394 Therefore, when Teotl' looks into the “face of Death” – “I see your
gigantic countenance” (Вижу твой исполинский лик) – the next face of truth (лик истины; my
emphasis) is revealed.395 Briusov employs the same word (лик) as the sorceress. Bearing in mind
the significance of the “four faces” permits the interpretation of the play’s final scene as the
culmination of human knowledge on Earth in the completion of the pyramid’s fifth point, the
apex of the geometric shape. Briusov’s insistence on the number symbolism of the pyramid in
“Uchiteli uchitelei” makes the deliberateness of the “fives” in Zemlia a distinct possibility.396

392 “Ты увидишь последние миги человеческого рода. Ту увидишь предсмертную судорогу земли” (Briusov, Zemlia, 177).
393 In Flammarion’s Fin du monde, the ghost of Cheops confronts the characters and refers to a
very similar spiritual existence in the planetary spheres (Flammarion, Fin du monde, 356). In
Zemlia, a room so-called “Triangle Room” is referred to twice, once as the repository of a
“remarkable collection of paintings” (Briusov, Zemlia, 193).
394 Ibid., 177. Teopikski echoes the sorceress’s language (Ibid., 169).
395 Ibid., 196.
396 “In Egypt, Etruria, as well as in Mexico, on the quadrangular base rise four triangles with
their points turned to the sky (this is a symbol of the soul’s eternal striving upward from the
earthly). Both here and there is the stone incarnation of primary numbers: 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 12…
These numbers are the external expression of an entire worldview and are likely closely
connected to astrological religious ideas, the conclusion of many centuries of observations on the
starry sky” (И в Египте, и в Этрурии, и в Мексике, на четырёугольном основании
возводятся четыре треугольника, обращенные вершинами к небу: символ вечного
устремления души от земного в высь. И там, и здесь воплощение в камне первичных
чисел: 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 12… Эти числа являются внешним выражением целого
The strangest and yet most central question that Briusov raises in *Zemlia* is whether culture continues after death in some other incorporeal realm. Usually set aside in readings of *Zemlia*, the theosophist elements of the play make an argument for the second life of culture on another plane, though the ultimate significance of a cultural afterlife remains as much a mystery as the origins of culture itself. As Briusov wrote in “Uchiteli uchitelei,”

> The mysterious moment of the birth of culture escapes the eye of the historian, just as in the biological sciences the moment of the living organism’s birth recedes from view. We are condemned in history, as in biology, to study only development, but not emergence.

Thus Briusov hints that the murky origins of human civilization are as speculative and as open to fantastical conjectures as its future development.

**Conclusion: The Symbolist Response to Zemlia**

When it was first published, *Zemlia* reached the attention of a diverse set of critics, ranging from the religious thinker Sergei Bulgakov to the mystical anarchist Georgii Chulkov. For Bulgakov, Ellis (the pseudonym of Lev Kobylinskii, Symbolist fellow traveller and literary ally of Andrei Belyi), Ivanov, and Chulkov, its status as drama was unremarkable compared to its religious significance. Ivanov seemed particularly interested in it from the perspective of the tragic genre. In a letter to Briusov, Ivanov expressed his desire to see *Tantal* printed alongside мirosозерцания и, вероятно, тесно связаны с астрологическими религиозными представлениями, составляя вывод из многовековых наблюдений над звездным небом) (Briusov, “Uchiteli uchitelei,” 364).

397 “От глаз историка опять ускользает таинственный момент зарождения культуры, как в биологических науках ускользает момент зарождения живого организма. Мы осуждены в истории, как в биологии, изучать только развитие, а не возникновение” (Ibid., 356).
Zemlia, possibly as a gesture of literary allegiance. In a letter to Briusov from 1904, Ivanov wrote:

I will wait for your drama impatiently. When the opportunity presents itself, write more definitively what Earth’s genre is. A mystery in verse? A philosophical drama? – Tantalus is getting written; it is far from completion, but the perspectives are transparent. Therefore, my hope to have it ready for Northern Flowers has become firm. I would treasure seeing it printed together with your drama…”

Ivanov might have been on to something when he speculated about Zemlia’s genre, but his guesses – “a mystery in verse? A philosophical drama?” – may also be read as personal hopes for the ultimate significance of Briusov’s play to his own literary and religious preoccupations.

Chulkov’s comments on the play were more specifically directed at Zemnaia os’, a collection where Briusov published a revised version of Zemlia in 1907 (the original 1905 publication of the play had several glaring mistakes). His review of Zemnaia os’ focused not on Zemlia’s aesthetic contributions, but rather on its religious significance, or lack thereof. For him the play had no claim to religious art, which, as a close ally of Viacheslav Ivanov, he believed to be synonymous with Symbolist art. In Zemnaia os’, Briusov had delivered something “mechanical.” Comparing the collection to the Eiffel Tower and punning on Briusov/brus’ev (Briusov/brus’ev), Chulkov wrote about the structure of Zemnaia os’ as a “nightmare of iron beams” (кошма[р] железных брусьев). Referring to the symbol of industrialization, Chulkov portrayed Briusov in a familiar guise: as the cold and calculating master of verse structure.

399 As an example, in a heated scene, the speech of the play’s protagonist is represented as the antagonist’s.
400 Georgii Chulkov, “Valerii Briusov. ‘Zemnaia os’,” Pereval, no. 4 (1907): 64-65; 64.
Chulkov singled out the “irreligious Zemlia” as the lifeless portrayal of human suffering and accused Briusov of transforming the muse-like Neznakomka into a “fake corpse” (бутафорский мёртвец).

Whereas Chulkov criticized Briusov’s tragedy for erecting a wall between art and religion, Bulgakov and Ellis found its presentation of a civilization’s extinction a kind of religious allegory for the tragic fate of humanity. While I will not provide an exhaustive discussion of the immediate critical reception of the play, these critics either evaluated Zemlia from an aesthetic or dramatic point of view, or others, like Bulgakov and Ellis, classified it as a work of philosophical import, joining the ranks of works that treat the history of humanity (a longing for prelapsarian being) as an ongoing tragedy. Ellis wrote in 1907 that Zemlia was considered “a tragedy of all humankind,” comparing it to Dante’s Inferno and Charles Baudelaire’s meditations on infinity.

Bulgakov mentions Briusov’s play in an article published in Voprosy zhizni (Questions of Life), noting that the play shows the author’s “dark fantasy of the fate of future humanity” in which the forces of rebellion against life clash with the poshlost’ of “the collective suicide of

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401 Ibid. The allusion to “Neznakomka” is likely explained by Chulkov’s review of Balaganchik in the same issue of Pereval containing his review of Zemnaia os’.
402 “Before our eyes appeared a drama that contains the tragedy of all humanity; I am speaking about V. Briusov’s Earth, about that incomparable and amazing work, for which it is not difficult to foretell a universal significance that blows with the terror and power of Dante’s Inferno and is full of that “vertige de l’infini” [the vertigo of infinity] that Baudelaire considered the very essence of the contemporary soul” (На наших глазах возникла драма, охватившая трагедию всего человечества; я говорю о «Земле» В. Брюсова, о том несравненном и изумительном произведении, которому не трудно предсказать мировое значение, которое веет ужасом и мощью Дантовского «Ада» и полно тем “vertige de l’infini”, которое Бодлёр считал самой сущностью современной души!). Ellis, “Korabli. Sbornik stikhov i prozy,” Ves, no. 5 (1907): 73-76; 76.
humanity, freed from its illusions.” While it seems too strong to suggest that he praised Briusov’s play, he nevertheless affirms its significance as a valuable depiction of the ends of historical “progress.” For a deeper understanding of Bulgakov’s reading of Zemlia, one can consult his essay “‘Tragediia chelovechestva’ Emerikha Madacha” (1905), which appeared some four months before his mention of Zemlia in “Bez plana.”

The Hungarian author Imre Madách’s Tragedy of Man (1861) is often compared to Faust and, judging by its cast of characters – Adam, Eve and Lucifer – might also recall Milton’s Paradise Lost. The play begins in Heaven and ends in an ice age several thousand years after the Creation. Interestingly, like the plot of Zemlia and Flammarion’s Fin du monde (echoes of which appear in Briusov’s play), the conclusion of The Tragedy of Man is marked by the suggestion of a slowly dying sun. What is worth noting about Bulgakov’s review of the Russian translation of this work is that he uses Madách’s text to focus on a subject that interested him a great deal: the tragedy of humanity. If in “Bez plana” Bulgakov focused his attention on the inseparability of the terms “ascetic” and “tragic,” in reviewing the translation of Madách he strove to isolate the general, fundamental features of this human tragedy in terms that strongly implied its contemporary relevance. Bulgakov wrote:

What is the basic idea, or, more exactly, the basic theme of Madách’s dramatic poem? This theme is quite clearly indicated by its title: it is the tragedy of man and of humanity, the foundational and ineradicable tragic nature [трагизм] of the human soul […]

403 “[…] колективное самоубийство человечества, освободившегося от своих иллюзий.” S. Bulgakov, “Bez plana,” Voprosy zhizni, no. 6 (1905): 293-317; 305.
404 In an English translation, this landscape is described in the following stage direction: “A mountainous, treeless region, covered with snow and ice. The sun, a red, dull globe, glimmers behind layers of mist. A dim, dubious light. In the foreground, amid a few stunted birches, junipers, and blackthorn bushes, stands an Eskimo hut. Adam, a completely broken old man, leaning on a staff, descends from a hillside with Lucifer.” Living in the Eskimo’s hut is a dishevled Eve, long separated from her eternal beloved. Imre Madách, The Tragedy of Man, trans. Thomas R. Mark (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 126.
What is in this tragic nature [трагизм] and why is it ineradicable and unresolvable neither in personal life, nor in history? This tragic nature [трагизм] is defined by a basic contradiction that lives in every thinking soul, by a contradiction between absolute demands of the questioning spirit, between its insatiable spiritual thirst and by those relative means of its satisfaction, which in fact are only even accessible to the human.405

Bulgakov often tackled the problem of universal tragedy in the articles that he wrote for Voprosy zhizni throughout 1905. By returning to the apocalyptic thinking signaled in the phrase “the tragedy of humanity,” he joined his fellow contributors to the journal, Nikolai Berdiaev and Dmitrii Merezhkovskii. There was at this time many attempts to articulate the history of humanity in terms of its fall, and often this attempt went back to key cultural mythologies like the ones informing Madách’s play. As I showed in the previous chapter, these mythologies were often borrowed from Greek tragedy. Whereas Merezhkovskii and Ivanov focused on the most archetypal of archetypes – the heroes Oedipus and Prometheus – it was for Briusov to project these anxieties into the future with a hero taken directly from Aztec mythology.

It is easy to read Zemlia, as Bulgakov does, in the context of this “apocalypticizing.” Though he did subtitle Zemlia a “tragedy,” his choice to re-label the play with the more neutral “drama” for Zemnaia os’ suggests that Briusov perhaps wished to disassociate himself from the ideologically and religiously loaded connotations that this term had acquired by 1905. Not intending to show his cultural milieu a mirror image of its anxieties, ever the mistifikator-provocateur, Briusov based his tragedy not on Christian paradigms of loss, but on a view of

theosophist history that, in his reading, put art and cultural achievements at the forefront of human experience. In doing so, he parodied the nostalgic narrative of human history as beginning with prelapsarian utopia and culminating in postlapsarian chaos. Chulkov was correct to notice Briusov’s cultural orientation as “irreligious,” but *Zemlia* is a work of a particular spirituality. Accounting for the theosophist sources of *Zemlia* makes it possible to speak of the play as “spiritual” in the theosophist sense.\(^4\) In the same way, Briusov’s dramatization of the loss and subsequent attempt to regain ancient knowledge does not reference the Garden of Eden as much as it does occult beliefs that claim to establish contact with the past through non-rational and supra-physical (but perhaps not exactly metaphysical) means.

\(^4\) Briusov is generally thought of as an aesthete, but he did believe, perhaps at times even seriously, in something beyond art and life itself. Nikolai Bogomolov has brought Briusov’s identity as a spiritualist to the attention of many, especially the early and previously unknown connections the poet made between Symbolism and spiritualism. In an early prose fragment of 1893, published by Bogomolov, Briusov remarked on the binary of “fantasy/real” as opposed to the more typical “ideal/real” juxtaposition of Symbolist art: “The world of fantasy became for me the real world, and the reality that surrounded me was a dream of prose and lies” (Мир фантазии стал для меня реальным миром, а окружающая действительность – сном прозы и лжи). N.A. Bogomolov, “Spiritizm Valeriia Briusova,” in *Russkaia literatura nachala XX veka i okkul’tizm* (Moskva: NLO, 1999), 235. In this way Bogomolov understands Briusov’s long attraction to séances and spiritualism as a means of legitimizing conclusions arrived at through non-rational experience: “Briusov was not interested in spiritualism as such, but tried to use it for the creation of his own artistic reality, tried to find an exit beyond the limits of the ‘three’ dimensions of space and quotidian psychological practice in mediumistic phenomena of all kinds” (Брюсов интересовался спiritизмом не как таковым, но пытался использовать его для создания собственной художественной реальности, пытался найти выход за пределы «трех» измерений пространства и повседневной психологической практики в разного рода медиумических явлениях) (Ibid., 295).
Chapter Three Bibliography

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Conclusion: Russian Modernism, Dostoevskii, and Nondramatic Tragedy

In the previous chapters, I presented three modes of tragic thinking, one philosophical (Minskii), the next religious (Merezhkovskii), and the last, historical (Briusov). In all three cases, drama – whether an original composition or, as in the case of Merezhkovskii, free translations from ancient Greek originals – was a vehicle for articulating each mode of tragic thinking. But none of the tragedies examined in this dissertation were well suited to the theater. Even though Merezhkovskii desired and ultimately succeeded in putting his translations of ancient tragedies on the stage, their critical reception was almost unanimously negative. I have argued that his choices as a translator paid less regard to the nuances of poetic language than they did to the rewriting of Greek tragic myth to suit his own eccentric religious preoccupations. In the case of Minskii, there was little philosophical rigor to buttress his tragedy Al'ma, a work which also has some dubious connections to its supposed genre. For Minskii and Briusov, examined previously, simply adding the subtitle “tragedy” could be viewed as an argument in itself about the significance of the work at hand. It provided both instructions for reading and set a certain tone.

The idea of a drama not intended for the stage but meant for the working out of philosophical-religious problems suggests the interconnectedness of the “philosophical drama” and tragedy during this period. Anticipating the completion of Briusov’s Zemlia, Ivanov asked whether his fellow poet was producing a “philosophical drama.” Ivanov probably understood the genre philosophical drama as a work of cosmic proportions, relating in symbolic fashion the existential plight of humankind (Faust, for example). In this sense, Briusov’s drama can certainly be called a philosophical drama, albeit a strange one. In Zemlia, Briusov produced a metaphysically engaged occult tragedy that might be considered a polemical answer to the religious understanding of tragedy in the cases of Minskii and Merezhkovskii.
This dissertation has assembled evidence to support the claim that theater was a secondary concern to early Symbolist work in the tragic genre. Minskii, Merezhkovskii, and Briusov used their tragic drama as a means of putting forward their own ideas about the tragic. Some questions arise from this that I will begin to answer by way of concluding the dissertation: Why was the tragic genre among early Symbolists predominantly used as a vehicle for philosophical, social, or even historical argument? Was the purpose of tragedy, though variously formulated, becoming less connected to the theater and instead a more serious religious or ethical category? What room was there in the aesthetics of early modernism for those things unspeakable, the fear of death, or the religious searching to quell it? Tragedy had been so disconnected from its theatrical presentation that, I would argue, it came to be expressed in a new genre: the novel-tragedy. With no Symbolist masterpiece in the theater, tragedy found a home in the nineteenth-century novel at the end of the Symbolist movement.407

Ilya Kliger has argued for the significance of the “novel-tragedy” genre as reflecting tensions about “the place and function of tragedy in contemporary Russian modernity, on the nature of that modernity, and on the characteristics of Dostoevskii’s poetics most relevant to these larger historiographical concerns.”408 For my part, I would like to focus purely on the religious import of the novel-tragedy as a necessarily non-dramatic, non-performable genre for the Symbolist interpretation of Dostoevskii, revealing the separation between tragedy and the theater in the modernist period. In my discussion, I will consider how theater, religion, and

407 It is interesting to note the connections between Belyi’s Peterburg, one of few works from the Symbolist movement that can be considered a true contribution to world literature, and the hybrid genre of the novel-tragedy. See Carol Anscheutz, “Ivanov and Bely’s Peterburg,” in Vyacheslav Ivanov: Poet, Critic and Philosopher, ed. Robert Louis Jackson (New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1986), 209-19.
politics – and the role of each in defining the tragic – came under greater scrutiny in the debate surrounding the 1913 Moscow Art Theater (MAT) production of *Nikolai Stavrogin*. This special case also shows the deep roots of early Russian modernism in Dostoevskii, especially in his novel *Besy* (*Devils*).\(^{409}\)

**MAT’s Nikolai Stavrogin and the Stage Adaptation of a “Novel-Tragedy”**

On October 23, 1913, the Moscow Art Theater under the directorship of Nemirovich-Danchenko premiered a carefully edited adaptation of Dostoevskii’s *Besy*, following up on a much celebrated staging of *Brat’ia Karamazovy* (*The Brothers Karamazov*) three years earlier. This production is known for provoking Maksim Gor’kii, who wrote publically against it, in fact against any transposition of Dostoevskii to the stage. Gor’kii thought that Dostoevskii’s characters were too dangerous for the theater, claiming “[…] I am sure that his images on the theater’s stage, emphasized by the play of the actors, acquires greater conviction and completeness than on the pages of his books.”\(^{410}\) His objections refer back to N.M. Mikhailovskii’s famous labeling of Dostoevskii as a “cruel talent” (жестокий талант).

Contemporaries responded to Gor’kii’s reactionary call for censorship and it is this controversy surrounding the performance of *Nikolai Stavrogin* that is better known.\(^{411}\) Rarely discussed is the

\(^{409}\) The radical press balked early on at Dostoevskii’s portrayal of nihilists in *Besy*. Summarizing the radical reception of Dostoevskii in the late nineteenth century, Temira Pachmuss notes Skabichevskii’s critique of *Besy* as, more than the writer’s other works, “reactionary in ideas.” See Temira Pachmuss, “Dostoevsky in the Criticism of the Russian Radical Intelligentsia,” *Russian Review*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Jan., 1962): 59-74; 67. The critic P.N. Tkachev, Pachmuss records, “saw in *The Possessed* only fantastic masks, pathological cases, [and] criminal acts […] viewing the novel as a monstrous distortion of Nechaev’s political actions” (Ibid., 68).

\(^{410}\) “Я уверен, что образы его на сцене театра, подчеркнутые игрою артистов, приобретают убедительность и завершенность большую, чем на страницах книг.” Maksim Gor’kii. “О ‘Карамазовщине,’” *Russkoe slovo*, 22 September 1913.

\(^{411}\) In his *Modern Russian Theater*, Nicholas Rzhevsky traces Gor’kii’s objections to the cliche that Dostoevskii’s emotional intensity threatened to consume all other aspects of his novels (he cites Belyi and Kundera as examples, but one can add Nabokov to this list). See Nicholas
response to Gor'kii, and more specifically to the production itself, from Russian religious thinkers. This performance is also important to consider alongside the formulation of the “novel-tragedy.” Ivanov first wrote about the novel-tragedy in the context of Besy and he later developed his ideas into the broader book-length study, *Freedom and the Tragic Life* (published in English from the German original, 1952).

It was the religious question at the heart of Besy that members of the Religious-Philosophical Meetings responded to in 1914 lectures and published as articles in *Russkaia mysľ* (Russian thought); Nikolai Berdiaev in “Stavrogin,” Sergei Bulgakov in “Russkaia tragedia” (Russian tragedy), and Viacheslav Ivanov in an addendum to his now famous “Dostoevskii i roman-tragediia” (Dostoevskii and the novel-tragedy), “Osnovnoi mif v romanе ‘Besy’” (The foundational myth in the novel *Devils*), which appeared in the same issue as Bulgakov’s essay.

The Symbolist response to the production was not as supportive as might be expected. Given their attention to the symbolic eroticism of Dostoevskii’s novels, they could have disagreed with the production’s focus on the love story of Stavrogin and Liza, which Nemirovich-Danchenko hoped would deflect attention from Dostoevskii’s critique of radical revolutionaries that was so problematic for Gor'kii. For Symbolist critics, Liza was not the true beloved of the novel, whom they saw as Stavrogin’s legal wife, Maria Timofeevna Lebiadkina. Positioning himself in this Symbolist reading of Lebiadkina, Ivanov claimed that “clearly all [Dostoevskii’s] works are

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concerned with man’s revolt against Mother Earth, the latter’s resentment and her appeasement by the expiation demanded by her and made unto her.\textsuperscript{412} They received Besy as a “symbolic tragedy” whose plot unfurled in the drama of Stavrogin, the self-affirming masculine principle, who fails to merge spiritually with the feminine principle, in the guise of the mentally ill Lebiadkina. In this way, the spiritual dilemma of the novel was conveyed in the case of all three writers as an abstract philosophical drama. What during Dostoevskii’s time had been a novel about the radical extremism of the younger generation and their spiritual bankruptcy was a drama unfolding across all of human experience: a Symbolist novel, a novel-tragedy.

The dramatization of such cosmic principles is a tall order for any theater and one expects Bulgakov, Berdiaev, and Ivanov to have objected to the attempt. Without engaging with the stakes of the debate that most concerned Nemirovich-Danchenko and Gor'kii, they capitalized on the opportunity to return to their life-long interest in Dostoevskii. They instead expounded their ideological stance on the issue of whether Dostoevskii was the spiritual core or the dreadful abyss of the Russian people.\textsuperscript{413} They disagreed with Gor'kii on this point, but their unanimous insistence on Dostoevskii’s “tragic” and “realistic” symbolism is opposed to Nemirovich-Danchenko’s dramatization of Besy. Dostoevskii was to them a writer of non-dramatic tragedy and he could not be reduced to theater. Turning to Nemirovich-Danchenko’s vision of Stavrogin on the stage will provide context for the adaptation before moving to the religious-philosophical critical response.

Probably as a way of avoiding the political dimensions of Dostoevskii’s most ideological novel and to quell Gor'kii’s further objections, Nemirovich-Danchenko for his stage adaptation

made Stavrogin a brooding lover, a role that in the novel was just one of the character’s more uninteresting masks. Reshaping the novel according to its melodramatic elements, Nemirovich-Danchenko challenged the mystical eroticism that religious-philosophical critics considered fundamental to Dostoevskii’s poetics.

In a letter to Alexander Benois from August, 1913, Nemirovich-Danchenko shared his notes for how the play would look. He separated Stavrogin’s drama from the political intrigue of the novel, which was planned for a future performance to be called, “Shatov i Kirillov” (Shatov and Kirillov). As in the earlier production of Brat’ia Karamazovy, Nemirovich-Danchenko used unedited dialogue from Besy, chosen carefully to suit the love plot. The play thus took its form from four “sections” (отделения), beginning with the scene at the church with Mar’ia Timofeevna and Varvara Petrovna, and ending with an “Epilogue,” with Dasha’s reading of Stavrogin’s suicide letter and, possibly, the discovery of his hanged body. Nemirovich-Danchenko considered one scene essential to establishing the main drama: that of Nikolai’s secret marriage to Mar’ia Timofeevna and the strange attraction existing between him and Liza Tushina. This tension was to be exhibited in the second scene of the first “section,” entitled in his letters “in the living room of Varvara Petrovna” (у гостиной Варвары Петровны). In it, Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote to Benois, “What makes the act interesting is its concentration on Nikolai’s relationships with the Lebiadkins and Liza: on this also rests the whole play. There’s no doubt that on the stage these lines must receive a keenly romantic interest.”

After sketching out the rest of the play for Benois, Nemirovich-Danchenko writes, “In the end, an entire romance

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414 “Интерес действия сосредоточивается на отношениях Николая, Лебяжкиных и Лизы: На этом и вся пьеса. Нет сомнения, что на сцене эти линии должны получить остроромантический интерес.” Nemirovich-Danchenko to Benois, 1 August 1913, Tvorcheskoe nasledie v chetyrekh tomsakh, t. 2 (Moskva: Moskovskii Khudozhestvennyi teatr, 2003), 345.
comes out of the marriage of Nikolai and his connection with Liza; moreover, the external actions, having an influence on this romance are taken from other parts of the novel – the revolutionary portion that remains in the shadows.” 415

There were concerns that by removing the novel’s revolutionary radicalism he would sacrifice its spiritual significance. About the Stavrogin plot line, Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote to Stanislavsky the summer before, “It is the most romantic and, perhaps the most scenic, but not the most profound part of the novel.” 416 In his letter to Benois, he was reticent to remove a key scene between Shatov and Stavrogin in the chapter, “Night,” reasoning, “This scene is not entirely necessary for the development of the plot. But it clearly depicts Nikolai besides being one of the most amazing scenes of the novel both in terms of its power as in the idea that it conveys (the people as ‘god-bearer’).” 417 In the end he left this scene in. With a character like Stavrogin, whose actions are limited to the reactions of those surrounding him, removing the scene with Shatov was risky simply from the perspective of dramatic action. Nemirovich-Danchenko had chosen to simplify the plot such that Stavrogin began to resemble more closely the Byronic prototypes on which Dostoevskii had modeled him. Stavrogin was now like one of Turgenev’s heroes, whose egotism kept him from his beloved Liza Tushina. Reviewers of the time remarked on the influence of Turgenev in the staging, a figure whom Dostoevskii famously ridiculed in the novel in the figure of Karmazinov. 418 Incidentally, the Art Theater had staged

415 “В конце концов получается полный роман женитьбы Николая и его связи с Лизой, причем внешние события, имевшие влияние на этот роман, выхвачены из другой части романа – революционной, остающейся в тени” (Ibid., 346).
416 “Это самая романтическая и, пожалуй, самая сценичная, но не самая глубокая часть романа” (Nemirovich-Danchenko to Stanislavskii, 25 July 1913, 342).
417 “Эта сцена для развития сюжета не очень нужна. Но она ярко рисует Николая, кроме того, это одна из самых замечательных сцен романа вообще, как по силе, так и по идее (народ-богоносец)” (Nemirovich-Danchenko to Benois, 1 August 1913, 345).
418 Rzhevsky, Modern Russian Theater, 38.
Turgenev’s *Mesiats v derevne (A Month in the Country)* just a few years previously. Lavish set designs were provided by Mstislav Dobuzhinskii, who would design the comparatively austere sets for *Stavrogin*.*419* Any atmospheric resonances of the production of *Mesiats v derevne* in that of *Stavrogin* would strike audience members aware of Dostoevskii’s polemic with Turgenev in *Besy* as quite ironic.

Dobuzhinskii’s published reminiscences of working on the production provide more insight into the play’s visual components and how they responded to Nemirovich-Danchenko’s overall commitment to the romance of Stavrogin. Dobuzhinskii saw traces of “Lise” from *Brat’ia Karamazovy* in the portrayal of Liza Tushina, perhaps an attempt to synthesize Mar’ia Lebiadkina and Liza. He wrote of the actress playing Liza, “Liza-Koreneva, who is so striking in Dostoevskii coincided in *The Brothers Karamazov* with the type of the other ‘Lise’ – of a frail,

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*419* There seems to be a lack of scholarly consensus on the success of Dobuzhinskii’s set designs. Nick Worrall claims that “the production was […] hampered by Dobuzhinskiy’s ‘atmospheric’ settings which, with the exception of one or two scenes, appeared out of keeping, both tonally and spatially, with the novel’s predominant moods.” See Nick Worrall, *The Moscow Art Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1996), 202. This comment does not reflect Rzhevsky’s interpretation that “the result was a well designed production, thanks to the artist Mstislav Dobuzhinskii’s sense of harmony and proportion, but without Dostoevskii’s ideological intensity” (Rzhevsky, *Modern Russian Theater*, 38). According to his own recollections and contemporary letters from Nemirovich-Danchenko, Dobuzhinskii seems to have worked enthusiastically on the production of *Stavrogin*, his third production at the Art Theater. After the planned production of Schiller’s *Intrigue and Love* came to naught (Stanislavskii had acted in the role of Ferdinand in 1889), Dobuzhinskii claims that he “was entirely consoled by the new work, which fascinated me greatly and was one of the most unforgettable for me at MAT” (полностью был утешен новой работой, которая меня увлекла чрезвычайно и была одной из самых незабываемых для меня в М.Х.Т). See M. Dobuzhinskii, “O khudozhestvennom teatre,” *Novyi zhurnal*, vol. 5 (1943): 23-62, 53. He strove to make a clear distinction between the sets for *Stavrogin* and the designs for the production of *Mesiats v derevne: “In contrast to the symmetry, the calm colors and lines – those suggested in the good-humored Turgenev plays – the dynamic of Nikolai Stavrogin and the entire teeming atmosphere of Devils required something absolutely different” (В противоположность симметрии, спокойным краскам и линиям – тому, что подсказывали благожелательные тургеневские пьесы – динамика Николая Ставрогина и вся кипучая атмосфера Бесов требовали абсолютно другого) (Ibid., 54).
capricious half-woman, half-child – here she finally revealed her exceptional dramatic talent.”¹⁴²⁰

Dobuzhinskii’s comment about the actress playing Liza Tushina reveals that, at least on the level of performance, the Lebiadkina line remained stubbornly present despite Nemirovich-Danchenko’s attempts to deemphasize it. This observation would have only enhanced the religious-philosophical reading of the play, which viewed Lebiadkina as the source of the novel’s redemptive power.

**The Religious-Philosophical Response to Nikolai Stavrogin**

Berdiaev, Bulgakov, and Ivanov, who along with Merezhkovskii, ushered in the religious-philosophical tradition of Dostoevskii criticism, were not as interested in the debate on censorship and the question of whether Dostoevskii was harmful for contemporary society (he was not, they agreed). Instead, they remarked on aspects of what Ivanov termed a few years earlier the “novel-tragedy” toward promoting a tragic worldview whose stage depiction was impossible.¹⁴²¹ Putting Dostoevskii on the stage idealized his tragic genius and masked its penetrating verisimilitude. Ivanov wrote more directly later in *Freedom and the Tragic Life* that

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¹⁴²¹ Rzhevsky explains that the Symbolist critique of *Brat’ia Karamazovy* on the stage – Merezhkovskii’s negative appraisal – was proof that they “share with Dostoevsky an interpretation of theater form as potentially reductive relative to literature,” but he does not investigate how their objection to theater was tied to their conception of tragedy (Rzhevsky, *Modern Russian Theater*, 35). Voloshin stated more tentatively, “But by which paths could a Russian tragedy emerge from Dostoevskii? Not by stage adaptations… They are important for the actors. This path will lead nowhere for the dramaturge. But every dramaturge has a right to use a novel as an epic – taking from it fundamental conflicts and foundational characters, transforming them in his own worldview. It’s not only a right, it’s a historical necessity with respect to Dostoevskii” (Но какими путями может возникнуть русская трагедия из Достоевского? Не инсценировками… Они важны для актеров. Драматург этот путь никуда не приводит. Но каждый драматург имеет право использовать роман как эпос – беря оттуда основные коллизии и первоосновы характеров, претворяя их в своем миропонимании. Это не только право – это историческая необходимость по отношению к Достоевскому). See Maksimilian Voloshin, *Liki tvorchestva* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1988), 365.
Dostoevskii’s tragic vision could not be externalized. “Life as a drama,” writes Ivanov, “both in
the fate of the individual and in the history of the world, is enacted invisibly – beneath the
empirically recognizable pragmatism of events and the surface of spiritual impulses – by God
and the innermost human Ego.”422 The novel, Dostoevskii’s novelistic form, which Ivanov refers
to as “realistic symbolism,” was for these critics the preferred conduit of his tragic perception.423

Nikolai Berdiaev’s response to the Art Theater is probably the least direct. In his essay
“Stavrogin,” he tellingly does not mention the production at all, but his explanation of
Stavrogin’s tragedy suggests that he had doubts about Besy’s staging. In this essay and elsewhere
in his writings, Berdiaev is concerned with the idea of the creative act as the ultimate expression
of human freedom. Stavrogin, as an essentially stagnant character, regularly acts in the interests
of destructive chaos and against positive creation. Berdiaev argues in “Stavrogin,” that “only an
authentic creative act preserves the personality, not exhausting it. The exhausting emanation
creates nothing and kills the personality. And the tragedy of Stavrogin, like universal tragedy,

422 Ivanov, Freedom and the Tragic Life, 49.
423 In Ivanov’s essay “Dve stikhii v sovremennom simvolizme,” the author writes that the
realistic symbolist “видящий глубочайшую истинную реальность вещей, realia in rebus, и не
отказывающий в относительной реальности и феноменальному постольку, поскольку оно
вмещает реальнейшую действительность, в нем сокрытую и им же ознаменованную.”
Viacheslav Ivanov, “Dve stikhii v sovremennom simvolizme,” in SS, t. 2 (Brussels: Foyer
Oriental Chrétien, 1974), 536-61; 549. In Robert Bird’s translation: “sees the deepest, true reality
of things, realia in rebus, and does not refuse phenomenal being a relative reality, insofar as it
contains the more real reality that is hidden within it and signified by it.” Viacheslav Ivanov,
makes the argument, important for a consideration of Dostoevskii as a writer of tragedies, that
“Если возможен символизм реалистический, возможен миф” (Ivanov, “Dve stikhii v
sovremennom simvolizme,” in SS, t. 2, 554). In Bird’s translation: “If Realistic Symbolism is
possible, then myth is also possible” (Ivanov, “Two Elements of Contemporary Symbolism,” in
can be connected with the problems of creation and emanation.”424 This remark juxtaposes Stavrogin’s detrimental powers of “emanation” with the positive creative act. Berdiaev distinguishes between emanation and creation when speaking about Shatov’s and Kirillov’s relation to Stavrogin, since these are not the fruits of creative effort, but evidence of the hero’s casting off of positive parts of himself. Berdiaev explains that Stavrogin creates nothing, but wastes away as one might expect from a decadent prototype, producing mere “emanations” (эманации), a word with ties to occultism and spiritualism. These emanations are features of Stavrogin’s subjective consciousness. For this reason, Berdiaev further defines the “symbolic tragedy” of the novel with the additional classification “a phenomenology of Nikolai Stavrogin’s spirit.”425 Berdiaev’s assertion about the inner, noumenal basis of tragedy would seem to relate skeptically to the Art Theater’s system, committed to the successful externalization of authentic emotion.

Berdiaev and his fellow commentators refer not to the Stavrogin-Liza line, but to the Stavrogin-Lebiadkina line as the symbolic foundation of the novel. His distinction between emanation and creation underscores Stavrogin’s impotence as the representative male principle, who in the guise of Christ is meant to enter – with the sexual connotations that this implies – and thus, heal, the moist mother earth that the “cripple,” Mar’ia Lebiadkina represents. Berdiaev wrote, “Stavrogin is incapable of marriage, powerless to unite, he cannot fertilize the earth.”426

425 “феноменология духа Николая Ставрогина” (Ibid., 86).
426 “Ставрогин неспособен к браку, бессилен соединиться, не может оплодотворить землю” (Ibid., 87).
This erotically marked unification with the earth, for Ivanov in “Osnovnoi mif v romane ‘Besy,’” is part of the novel’s structural thematic:

Having thought to ground the novel on the symbolics of the correlation between the Soul of the Earth, the human I, daring and creative, and the powers of Evil, Dostoevskii naturally must have looked back at already existing depictions in world poetry of that same myth in its symbolic composition: in Goethe’s Faust.  

Elaborating on this idea, Ivanov wrote in Freedom and the Tragic Life,

In the metaphysical unity of the people two principles may be distinguished. One is feminine and pertaining to the soul; the other is masculine and pertaining to the spirit. The first has its roots in the universal Mother, the living Earth, as a mystical entity; the second corresponds, in the personality of the people [...] and may be termed, in Apocalyptic language, the Angel of the people.

Instead of becoming an “Angel of the people,” Stavrogin participates in acts of violent debauchery, spreading his seed on all sides in flagrant betrayal of his symbolic holy bride. This deeper level of the novel’s erotic symbolism was obviously not the focus of Nemirovich-Danchenko’s staging. Liza, claims Bulgakov in “Russkaia tragediia,” is merely Stavrogin’s “elective affinity,” a match between two corrupted natures too much alike. Indeed throughout


428 Viacheslav Ivanov, Freedom and the Tragic Life, 57.

429 “Between Stavrogin and Liza exists a musical correspondence of souls, a Wahlverwandtschaft, but this is an affinity in possession, for Liza also belongs not to herself, and it attracts with a blind and evil power” (Между Ставрогиным и Лизой существует музыкальное соответствие душ, Wahlverwandtschaft, но это есть сродство в одержимость, ибо и Лиза принадлежит не себе, и оно влечется слепой и злой силой). See S. Bulgakov, “Russkaia tragediia,” Russkaia mysl’, no. 4 (1914): 1-26, 11. Scholars may overlook signals of Liza’s redemption in the novel, just before she dies at the hands of an angry mob. If reading this scene from the perspective of Symbolist criticism, one could argue that she is reconciled with Lebiadkina, and with God, at a key moment on a muddy field. Mavrikii Nikolaevich sees her fall and the narrator gives an account: “To see the woman he adored running insanely across a field at that hour, in such weather, wearing only a dress, the same splendid one she’d worn yesterday, now all crumpled, muddied from her fall…” (Он видел ту, пред которой столь благоговел,
Besy, Dostoevskii mocks Stavrogin’s would-be romance with Liza through the mouth of Petr Stepanovich, who refers sardonically to their elopement as the denouement of a “tragi-romance [or, novel].” Bulgakov indirectly critiques the Art Theater production when he writes about Stavrogin, “However, it is not feminine love that can save Stavrogin. And how is it possible to require from a woman that which the Feminine itself cannot even achieve (the cripple).”

Unlike Berdiaev, both Ivanov and Bulgakov make explicit remarks with regard to the question of whether Dostoevskii’s “realistic symbolism” can be incarnated on the stage. Here Bulgakov’s “Russkaia tragediia” is in dialogue with Ivanov’s “Osnovnoi mif v romane

безумно бегущей чрез поле, в такой час, в такую погоду, в одном платье, в этом пышном вчерашнем платье, теперь измятом, загрязненном от падения...). See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Devils*, trans. Michael R. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 605; and F.M. Dostoevskii, *Pss v 30 tomakh*, t. 10 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1974), 410. Not long after, Stepan Trofimovich sees her and comments, “‘But Lise, you’re drenched!’ he cried, jumping to his feet, feeling his knees also had got soaked on the wet ground. ‘How can you be wearing a dress like that?... and you’re on foot, in country like this…” Dostoevsky, *Devils*, trans. Katz, 607. (Но как вы измокли, Lise! – вскричал он, вскакивая на ноги, почувствовав, что промокли и его колени на мокрой земле, – и как это можно, вы в таком платье?.. и пешком, и в таком поле... Dostoevskii, *Besy*, 412). Her humiliation before God is symbolically represented by the moist Russian earth.

“Then you really don’t know? Phew! Why, all sorts of tragic romances have taken place: Lizaveta Nikolaevna switched from the marshal’s wife’s carriage into Stavrogin’s and then slipped off to Skvoreshniki with the ‘aforementioned gentleman’ in broad daylight. Only an hour ago, less even.” Dostoevsky, *Devils*, trans. Katz, 565 (Да неужто же не знаете? Фью! Да ведь тут трагироманы произошли: Лизавета Николаевна прямо из кареты предводительши изволила пересесть в карету Ставрогина и улизнула с «сим последним» в Скворешники среди бела дня. Всего час назад, часу нет.” Dostoevskii, *Besy*, 383). Other characters, like Karmazinov, only notice the external drama of Stavrogin, answering Petr Stepanovich’s question “And what do you think of Stavrogin?” with “I don’t know; he’s a womanizer, I hear,” joking, “that womanizer will probably be the first to be strung up on a tree.” Dostoevsky, *Devils*, trans. Katz, 393 (“А о Ставрогине как вы полагаете?” “Не знаю; волокита какой-то,” “вероятно вздернут первого на сук.” Dostoevskii, *Besy*, 288). For members of the group, Stavrogin’s dealings with Liza are an irritant, petty intrigue.

“Впрочем, не женская любовь могла спасти Ставрогина. И как можно требовать от женщины того, чего не могла совершить сама Женственность (Хромоножка)” (Bulgakov, “Russkaia tragediia,” 11).
In an attempt to further clarify previous claims (Shestov, Merezhkovskii, Ivanov) that present Dostoevskii as a national tragedian, Bulgakov asks the preliminary question, “What is the inner meaning of tragedy?” (Что есть трагедия по внутреннему смыслу?) Dostoevskii’s art, in his view, can still be called tragic because his novels, though they do not adopt a dramatic form, reflect the inner workings of the pace and development of the tragedy, which unfolds not according to human will, but according to the law of divine fate. Bulgakov explains, “Tragedy is therefore the inner law of human life, being realized and revealing itself palpably in the face of attempts to destroy it or make it deviate from its orbit.” Divine law is the “authentic hero” of this “inner,” religious tragedy, which Bulgakov views as a universal existential phenomenon. Clearly responding to Ivanov’s spiritual allegory of Besy’s plot, Bulgakov’s religious view of tragedy leaves him skeptical of its possible dramatization.

An announcement advertising Bulgakov’s talk presents in crystallized form the fundamental ideas of his paper. Particularly important to note are the first two statements of this abstract, republished in the commentary to Bulgakov’s collected critical writings, “Dostoevskii as a tragedian. Devils as a religious tragedy of the Russian soul, a negative mystery play” (Достоевский как трагик. «Бесы» как религиозная трагедия русской души, отрицательная мистерия). What Bulgakov means by “negative mystery play” reveals his attempt to argue for

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434 “Трагедия есть поэтому внутренняя закономерность человеческой жизни, осуществляющаяся и раскрывающаяся с очевидностью при попытке ее нарушить или отклониться от своей орбиты” (Ibid.).

the profundity and relevance of Dostoevskii’s novel against others who call it reactionary and devoid of positive hopes for Russia’s future. By admitting to the novel’s profoundly pessimistic conclusion, Bulgakov plays up the admonitory value of the story that so disgusted his radical contemporaries. At the conclusion of a mystery play, the ultimate resolution is at least purification of the self through divine contact or, most often, revelation and reward for the virtuous in heaven. Despite the novel’s murders and suicides, Bulgakov makes a claim for the tiny instances of redemption marginalized in its dark image of humanity. Insisting on Dostoevskii’s original plan to depict in this novel a Christ-like, “beautiful” character, Bulgakov sees even in Besy an ultimately positive work – though it was never fully realized – demonstrating Dostoevskii’s Christian intentions. Bulgakov noted in the abstract, “‘The Book about Christ’ as a fundamental concept of Dostoevskii, partly realized in all of his novels, in part, even in Devils” («Книга о Христе» как основной замысел Достоевского, частично выполнившийся во всех его романах, в частности, и в «Бесах»). 

Though Bulgakov seems respectful of the Art Theater’s attempt to stage Dostoevskii – he compliments Nikolai Stavrogin a few times – he is wary of the capability of dramatic art to depict Stavrogin. Bulgakov interprets Stavrogin as a medium for the demonic possession that cripples the heroes of Besy. What he terms, “mediumness” (медиумичность) is the “feminine receptivity, the paralysis of the masculine principle of Logos” (женственная рецептивность,

436 Ibid.
437 Bulgakov places special emphasis on Dostoevskii’s choice to write novels, not plays: “For not about this art did Dostoevskii pronounce his prophesy: ‘beauty will save the world.’ Not theatrical, not aesthetic beauty will save the world, – it is valuable and important so long as it calls to this saving beauty and does not distract from it, does not bewitch, does not deceive” (Ибо не об этом искусстве произнес Достоевский свое пророчество: «красота спасет мир». Мир спасет не театральная, не эстетическая красота, – сама она ценна и важна, пока зовет к этой спасающей красоте, а не отвлекает от нее, не завораживает, не обманывает) (Bulgakov, “Russkaia tragediia,” 4-5).
If Berdiaev suggested that Stavrogin was the sun from which various emanations are emitted, then Bulgakov compares Stavrogin to the actor for his role as pretender and medium for others. This point resonates with Mar'ia Timofeevna’s direct speech when she says to Stavrogin, “No, my dear, you’re a bad actor, even worse than Lebyadkin” (Нет, голубчик, плохой ты актер, хуже даже Лебядкина). Bulgakov wrote, continuing the references to occultism and mediumistic phenomena,

He is an actor, but not on the stage, not in art, but in life. For an actor is also a medium and also a provocateur: neither he, nor a living person, exists in his role; he gives himself away, his psychic mechanism, as a means, like material, for the mediumistic reproduction of alien content.

Bulgakov’s focus on Stavrogin as actor reveals his reservations about the idealism of the stage. He writes, “The stage is the realm of the bad idealism of mirroring and illusoriness, in contrast to the reality of the liturgical rite. […] in one person’s skin is room for several bodies, just as a great variety of make-up can be applied on one face, but in this also lies its limitation.”

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438 Ibid., 6.
440 “Он – актер, но не на сцене, не в искусстве, а в жизни. Ведь и актер есть тоже медиум и тоже провокатор, – его, как живого лица, нет в его роли, он отдает себя, свой психический механизм, как средство, как материал, для медиумического воспроизведения чужого содержания” (Bulgakov, “Russkaia tragediia,” 12). In his speech responding to Bulgakov’s paper, Ivanov disagreed on this point: “In no sense, neither in the political, nor the Christian sense, is he a provocateur, and he is not even possessed by devils, but he is only Judas, about whom it is said that Satan entered the heart of Judas” (Ни в каком смысле, ни в смысле политическом, ни в смысле христианском он не провокатор и даже не одержимый бесами, а только Иуда, о котором сказано, что вошел сатана в сердце Иуды). See V.I. Ivanov, “Vystuplenia po dokladu S.N. Bulgakova v Religiozno-filosofskom obschestve 2 fevralia 1914 g.,” in Viacheslav Ivanov. Arkhivnye materialy i issledovaniia (Moskva: Russkie slovari, 1999), 62-80; 67. Ivanov’s comparison of Stavrogin to Judas corresponds to his view of Besy as Russian myth (with its foundations in Christian mythology) and the plot detail of Stavrogin’s suicide by hanging. Adding his voice to the conversation, S.N. Durylin strongly agreed with Ivanov’s designation of Besy as tragedy and particularly emphasized the heritage of that tragedy in ancient models (Ibid., 70).
441 “Сцена есть область дурного идеализма зеркальности и призрачности, в противоположность реальности литургического обряда. […] в одной человеческой коже
description of the actor is striking, because it recalls demonic possession. Putting Stavrogin “the actor” on the stage would essentially make Stavrogin an emanation of himself. The result would be an idealization, a deceptive reproduction of a living type, however empty, who for Bulgakov can exist only in Dostoevskii’s novel.

At the conclusion of his essay, Bulgakov decides that, although the MAT production of Besy is an example of “majestic and sublime tragedy,” it would still be better to organize a public reading of Dostoevskii’s works, even if stitched together from random fragments. He insists, “Even if completely uncoordinated, disconnected scenes from Dostoevskii had been staged, supplemented by the reading of fragments, then this itself would be more meaningful and necessary than many productions in the repertoire of even the [Moscow] Art Theater.”442 Ivanov wrote a few years before in “Dostoevskii i roman-tragediia” about what he considered a major weakness of Dostoevskii’s work: his reliance on effects from the stage. His criticism in the following passage reveals a similar reluctance to see Dostoevskii’s work as inherently dramatic in nature. This passage appeared in Freedom and the Tragic Life:

One may, however, discover a fault of literary style in the monotony of certain devices that Dostoevskii uses, which seem like a direct application of stage technique to epic narrative: the artificial juxtaposition, for example, of characters and events in the same place and time; dialogues that might be impressive behind the footlights, but are not true to life; likewise the presentation of every physical development in the form of catastrophic shocks, in passionate confessions and public disclosures made in circumstances that, although effective on the stage, lack all verisimilitude [...].443

442 “Если бы были поставлены даже совершенно разрозненные, бессвязные сцены из Достоевского, восполняемые чтением отрывков, то и это было бы более значительно и нужно, нежели многие постановки репертуара даже и Художественного театра” (Ibid., 24).
For Ivanov, Dostoevskii’s dramatic devices do little to enhance the mystical realism, the “inner experience of universal mystic reality (реальность)” operating in his novel-tragedies.444

Unpublished until 1999, Ivanov’s comment on “Russkaia tragediia” and the recorded discussion following its delivery gives a more positive, but by no means effusive, reception of the MAT production. Ivanov presents the staging as the beginning of a new appreciation of Dostoevskiiian spirituality:

[...] here one cannot thank the Art Theater enough for its amazing – by its appropriation – incarnation of this idea [the political aspect of Dostoevskii], for it is multifaceted, to such an extent instructive for the fate of our spirit, and however we might speak about this from the point of view of the aesthetic, the artistic, the technical, etc., but for the spirit these productions are nothing other than the first fruit of a certain Russian mystery play, so that I am basically and essentially in agreement with our eminent speaker [Bulgakov].445

Since Bulgakov was not enthusiastic about the production itself, but the fact of its existence and what it signified, Ivanov’s agreement assents to the general tentativeness about staging Dostoevskii. Stavrogin is rather “truly the first fruit of a certain Russian mystery play,” which one can read as a small indication of the broader spiritual movement toward a future mystery. However, Ivanov also admits that the tragic elements of Dostoevskii’s novels could be transferred naturally to the stage: “Concerning Dostoevskii’s suitability for portrayal at the theater, I personally argued in my article about Dostoevskii that his novel is already a tragedy and that this presumes that it might and should be broken down in a certain way for presentation

445 “[…] здесь нельзя достаточно благодарить Художественный театр за его изумительное по своему обретению обличение этой идеи, до такой степени оно многозначительно, до такой степени оно поучительно для судьбы нашего духа, и как бы мы ни говорили об этом с точки зрения эстетической, художественной, технической и т.д., но для духа эти постановки суть ни что иное, как начаток действительно некоей русской мистерии, так что в основном и главном я вполне с нашим глубокоуважаемым докладчиком согласен” (Ivanov, “Vystupleniia po dokladu S.N. Bulgakova…,” 64).
on the flat stage.” But here also Ivanov, in my reading, makes a subtle critique of this technically “natural” stage transposition by phrasing his comment as an ironic reversal of the embodiment possible in theater: in his view the page embodies the ideas, the stage may “flatten” them. In his comment, as in his longer essay about the novel-tragedy, Ivanov shows a reluctance to see Dostoevskii’s insight into the tragic as suitable for the stage. It is worth asking whether Ivanov is simply against the “theatricalization” of Dostoevskii as an isolated case, or whether his theory of the “novel-tragedy” (intertwined with Dostoevskii’s work) might put forward a more general idea of tragedy divorced from the social and religious aspects of the theater advanced in earlier essays such as “Novye maski” (New Masks, 1904) and “O sushchestve tragedii” (On the Essence of Tragedy, 1912). In his essay “Esteticheskaia norma teatra” (The Aesthetic Norm of the Theater, 1916), for example, written after his writings on Stavrogin, one can ask what had changed in Ivanov’s concept of tragedy as divorced from theater compared to his earlier writings on theater and the cult of Dionysus.

Ivanov’s efforts to promote the tragic genre during the build-up and peak of Symbolism and the diminished role of theatrical performance in his critical writing is curious despite the frequent discussion of theater in his essays. It could be said that Ivanov’s idea of the novel-tragedy is a manifestation of this tension between dramatic form, the social significance of theater, and the problems of performance and adaptation. However, some might cite his involvement with mass spectacles in the early Soviet period as evidence that Ivanov was

446 “Что касается до пригодности Достоевского до того, чтобы он был изображен на театре, то я лично доказывал в своей статье о Достоевском, что его роман есть уже трагедия, а этим самым предполагается и то, что он может быть и должен быть определенным образом разбит на плоскости сцены” (Ibid., 64-65).
genuinely interested in theatrical performance, even if this came only later and, conceivably, under pressure to conform to the demands of post-revolutionary Russia.\footnote{Robert Bird, “Viach. Ivanov i massovye prazdnestva rannei sovetskoi epokhi,” in Russkaia literatura, no. 2 (2006): 174-97.}

Weighing in, Victor Terras found “not all that much in Dostoevskii’s novels to justify calling them ‘novel-tragedies,’”\footnote{Victor Terras, “The Metaphysics of the Novel-Tragedy: Dostoevsky and Viacheslav Ivanov,” in Russianness: Studies of a Nation’s Identity (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1990), 153-65; 162.} however he sees a similar tension in Ivanov’s presentation of the theater and the non-theatrical nature of his own dramatic works in the aesthetics of the nineteenth-century novel:

Ivanov always speaks of the drama in terms of a living theater, even though his own plays have remained \textit{Lesedramen}. He sees the theater as an inherently communal activity which resists the poet’s efforts to convert it entirely into art. It is then, like the nineteenth-century novel, \textit{Kunst im Werden}.\footnote{Ibid., 155.}

Terras also sees in Ivanov’s separation of “the tragic” from any generic specificity as an idea that is first formulated by Hegel: “Like Hegel, Ivanov sees the content of tragedy as a dialectic of ideas. External clashes, such as between the forces of Nature and human intelligence, are therefore unfit to serve as the subject of tragic art.”\footnote{Ibid., 156.} But Terras does not agree, as Ivanov, Berdiaev, and Bulgakov did, that the dialectical conflict of ideas is represented in Dostoevskii’s work as a “battle of the sexes.”\footnote{Ibid., 159.} Indeed, Terras does not consider Mari'ia Timofeevna as a tragic hero at all, for the reason that she “does not occupy a focal position in the novel.”\footnote{Ibid., 160.} Is it important to insist on the centrality of the cosmic struggle between the masculine and feminine principles as the Symbolist critics have? If one recognizes \textit{Besy} as a novel in which ideas and not

just characters are in conflict, then a character’s “focal position” is not required. In fact, the reason to leave _Besy_ as a novel-tragedy is discovered in this problem of Dostoevskii’s style of characterization and the integral, often mysterious role of his more marginalized characters. In this way, a stage adaptation renders impossible the religious-philosophical interpretation of Dostoevskii’s novel as a symbolic struggle between Stavrogin and Mar’ia Timofeevna.

Ten years earlier during the Religious-Philosophical Meetings, members of the intelligentsia, poets, and clergy debated the relationship between sexuality and the religious life. It is difficult to find in the sexual symbolism of _Besy_ the struggle that so attracted Merezhkovskii in _Hippolytus_ between the chaste Hippolytus and his “Dionysian” step-mother. The supposed impotence of Stavrogin as the male principle, along with his deviant sexuality, and the far-fetched quality of Mar'ia Timofeevna as a bride and mother figure is a corruption of a heroic mythological paradigm that seems to hold predominantly political relevance for the commentators examined in this conclusion. In _Besy_, neither the male nor the female principle can achieve self-affirmation through overcoming or surrendering to the other. The “negative mystery” is thus perhaps closer to parody and the tragi-comic than the universal tragedy to which Bulgakov, Ivanov, and Berdiaev repeatedly refer in their writings.

Ultimately, the reluctance of Berdiaev, Bulgakov, and Ivanov to see Dostoevskii’s spiritual labyrinth in _Besy_ put on the stage shows their preference, at least in this case, for the written “novel-tragedy” over its transformation into theatrical play. It is striking that during a period of much creative experimentation and syncretism of the arts, some things still remained, in the eyes of some, best untouched. It might be that tragedy was never meant to play out dramatically in its Russian instantiations and the reason for this brings up the problem of
philosophical pessimism and doubts that an unintuitive optimism would translate in a public genre. Gor'kii’s essays directed against the MAT production were met with resistance from the religious-philosophical contingent, not because they believed Dostoevskii made great theater, but out of the conviction that Dostoevskii’s “Russian tragedy” should not be suppressed, even if it suggested a powerfully pessimistic view of Russian society and its future development.

The end of the pessimistic philosophical outlook, reaching its pinnacle with Dostoevskii and its decline with decadence, did not vanish with the rise in religious (often at the same time utopian and apocalyptic) thought but coexisted alongside it. Bulgakov’s “negative mystery play” and Ivanov’s consistent insistence on the tragedy of a relentless, admirable, and heroic individualism throughout his work is a reflection of this development. These trends – the Russian religious renaissance and the tradition of pessimistic thought in Russia – occurred simultaneously. Minskii, inspired in part by the work of Maurice Maeterlinck, and Merezhkovskii were dedicated to finding a positive, life-affirming pessimism that would make good on their literary pretensions and serve as a rebuttal to their critics. Bulgakov’s “negative mystery play” in 1913 suggests that some religious thinkers were also drawn to the same idea of the affirmative qualities lurking in tragic pessimism. In the struggle to assess Russia’s early twentieth-century political crisis, it was the mixture of faith and pessimism with which the Vekhi generation sought to temper the heroic atheism of revolutionary radicalism.453

The Soviet period marked the end of tragedy as the venue for philosophizing. The most ironic example in this regard is V. Vishnevskii’s play “Optimisticheskaia tragediia” (Optimistic tragedy, 1933), which draws a stark contrast with the meaning of Bulgakov’s similarly

oxymoronic “negative mystery.” Did the novel-tragedy abandon tragedy’s audience – the community awaiting its lessons and horrors – or did it preserve these messages for a new era, less tolerant of pessimism than even the harshest critics of Symbolism?

Conclusion Bibliography


______. “Venets ternovyi (Pamiati F.M. Dostoevskogo).” S.-Peterburg: 1907.


454 George Steiner mentions Vishnevskii’s work in the conclusion of The Death of Tragedy. See George Steiner, The Death of Tragedy (New York: Knopf, 1961), 344.


