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Mystic Motifs in Silver Age Poetry and Prose

Abstract: The beginning of the 20th century was marked by a feeling of crisis, which overlapped different spheres of public life. Reality seemed vague and bleak, the future uncertain. At the same time it was a period of an intensive philosophical and religious quest, a search for values, which produced new forms and ideas in art and literature. It was Russian Symbolism that reflected the spirit of the time to the greatest extent. One of the recurrent themes both in poetry and prose of the Silver Age authors was the interaction of the world of the living and that of the dead. Love for Symbolists was mostly a tragic, mysterious, poignant feeling, and lovers were often doomed to part or to die. However, those who lose their beloved always feel their presence and continue to communicate with their souls which is brightly reflected in their poetry and prose.

Key words: Russian symbolism, modernism, ghosts, occultism, mystic motifs.

The turn of the 19th to the 20th century both in Russia and in the Western world at large was marked by the rejection of positivism and materialism as well as the classic approach to literature. This was the time when a feeling of crisis overlapped different spheres of public life. There was no longer any trust in rational thinking, reality seemed vague and bleak, the future uncertain. At the same time it was a period of an intensive philosophical and religious quest, a search for values, which produced new forms and ideas in art and literature as well as new figures who contributed to the treasury of Russian literature, and who made it possible to speak about a Russian cultural renaissance. In Russia it resulted in the appearance of a large group of artists, called 'Russian symbolists, who "like their French and Belgian counterparts, rejected the didactic depiction of the empirical world and conceived of a truer reality hidden by phenomenal experience. They believed that intuition was more important than objective knowledge. This borrowing of ideas from further west was accompanied by aesthetics of art for art's sake" (Bogomolov, 20).¹

Symbolism was the first and most significant modernist school in Russia. The symbolists rejected the crude naturalism of life-like descriptions and turned away from the social analysis of the nineteenth century in favor of the inner spiritual world of an individual. Creativity according to them is an unconscious intuitive contemplation of mysterious meanings, which only an artist is capable of. Moreo-

1 This and all other translations from Russian are by the author.

ver, it is impossible to relate these “mysteries” rationally. According to one of the most prominent theoreticians among the symbolists – Vyacheslav Ivanov – poetry is the “cryptography of the inexpressible” (qtd. in Bogomolov, 311). Valeri Brusov gives the following motivation for the symbolists’ aspiration to the other world:

Art is what in other spheres we call revelation, creation is opening the door into Eternity. We live amidst eternal, primordial lie. Thought and therefore science is unable to expose this lie. But... there are illuminations. These illuminations are the moments of ecstasy, super-sensual intuition, which give a different comprehension of the world of phenomena, and penetrate beyond the surface crust into their core. (*Kluchi ot tain*)

An artist is required to possess not only a super-rational sensitivity but also a most delicate talent of creating implications. It was the symbol which was called upon to relate the contemplated mysteries.

Philosophical theses of symbolism proceeded from an idealistic assumption that visible and tangible reality is fake, illusory while the true essence is hidden, transcendent. The teachings of idealistic philosophers from Plato to Kant, later Nietzsche and Schopenhauer and some Russian philosophers, Vladimir Solovyev in the first place laid the path for the symbolist theory about the two worlds between which the symbol can be an interlink. Visible reality according to them is just a distorted reflection of the mysterious world, which symbolists prefer to it. Symbolists often overemphasize the atmosphere of vagueness avoiding distinct characteristics of objects. Hence their works are filled with the images of *mist, fog, darkness, shade*. *Shadows* are a very typical attribute of symbolist poetry. Brusov used it more than once in his verses: “The shadows of uncreated creatures are swinging in the dream” (Тень несозданных созданий колыхается во сне) (*Poems*). In his poem “The Final Cup” Merezhkovskii writes: “Our life is but a shadow of a shadow” (Лишь тенью тени мы живем) (*Pustaya chasha*). It is interesting that both in Russian and in English one of the most evident synonyms of the word “shadow” is “ghost” or “dead soul”. Thus in Annenskii’s poem “Ghosts” we read:

“The shadows’re wondering and praying:
 “Oh, let us in!” (И бродят тени, и молят тени: / “Пусти, пусти!”)
 Through misty clouds the silver moon beams
 To window lean. (От этих лунных осеребрений / Куда ж уйти)
 The greenish ghost – the bush of lilac
 Knocks at the door... (Зеленый призрак куста сирени/ Прильнул к окну...)
 I pray thee, shadows
 Stay here no more. (Уйдите, тени, оставьте, тени,/ Со мной одну.../
 Please leave me, shadows
 With her alone... (Она недвижна, она немая,/ С следами слез/

She's dumb and lifeless /С двумя кистями сиреней мая/ В извивах кос...).
Her life is gone (*Prizraki*).

Thus ghosts in the poetry and prose of symbolists act as agents connecting the world of the living with that of the dead and thus life itself acquires a spooky, illusory quality. No wonder almost all of them have a poem or a story with such a title. In some of them apparitions as such are not present, but they determine the comprehension of reality by the characters, the author and in the long run induce the reader to feel like the characters of Bunin's story *Fog* lost in the all-embracing mist.

This brings us close to another characteristic feature of the symbolists' world-view – comprehension of love and death as an inseparable unity. It was already in the early critical responses to the works of symbolists that their interest to the themes of love and death was stressed (Ivanov, 9). On the one hand it was very much due to the general eschatological mood of this period – the feeling of an increasing cultural, political and global crisis. This mood was also supported by the feeling of a 'boundary' existence of an individual "between two abysses" – life and death, as Andrei Belii puts it. On the other hand the lives of many symbolists themselves were filled with dramatic love affairs and tragic deaths.

Valeri Brusov's first love – Elena Kraskova suddenly died of smallpox. Many of his poems written in 1892–1893 were dedicated to her. In 1913 the poet suffers another tragedy when his young lover – the poetess Nadezhda Lvova commits suicide. In his poem *The Demon of Suicide* Brusov creates an image of a dark-eyed youth who appears among the mortals softly seducing them. The image of a dying woman seemed to be haunting the poet. In his poem *The Ghosts* he describes sinful shadows of the past jeering at a dead woman.

Konstantin Balmont who expressed a vivid interest in everything unfathomable and mysterious, even infernal, which can be traced in his poems *The Voice of the Devil*, *The Witch*, *The White Angel*, or *The Sea Devil* twice attempted to commit suicide. Leonid Andreyev also attempted suicide after an unhappy love affair in 1894. And later, in 1906 in Germany his wife would die of postpartum fever.

Fyodor Sologub's wife Anastasia Chebotarevskaya drowned herself, which became an unbearable misery for her husband for the rest of his life. In his works he would again and again recollect her image as in the poem "You passed unnoticed...": "Your eyes and lips were numb and listless/ Without either pain or gloom ("Твои глаза не выражали/ Ни вдохновенья, ни печали, /Молчали бледные уста") [...] "The end has come to mortal wondering/The deathly path is now yours" ("Конец пришел земным скитаньям, /На смертный путь вступила

ты”) (*Poems*). In another poem she again appears visible only to her loving husband: “Invisible to others / Appeared you to me...” (ibid).

No less dramatic was the love-life of Nikolai Gumilev: he fell in love with a young poetess Elizaveta Dmitrieva but she rejected his proposal and married another poet, Maximilian Voloshin, with whom later Gumilev had a duel, in which however no one was injured. In his early poems he also often writes about the interaction of love and death, which found its reflection in his collection *Romantic Flowers*, which include such poems as *The Cave of Dreams*, *Horrible Visions*, *Death*, *Beyond the Coffin* and *Horror*. The key motive of this cycle is the motive of fatal seduction with love, which is inseparable from death. Thus in the poem *Horror* he pictures an image of a phantom with a head of a hyena on a slender maiden’s shoulders, which acquires a paralysing power over the poet: “It was your wish to come and you are mine!” (“Ты сам пришел сюда, ты мой!”) – claims the phantom (*Uzhas*). The phantasmagoric image is multiplied in the mirrors, which is another recurrent symbol in the Silver Age poetry and prose. The mirror in old beliefs symbolised a magic connection between the object and its reflection (Zaharieva, 65). For symbolists it was the door to the other world, the other side of life, and one cannot be sure which is more real. For example A. Chayanov in his story *Venetian Mirror* describes the adventures of a glass-man – a mirror double of the protagonist, who takes his place in real life (*Venetsianskoye zerkalo*).

But perhaps the most tragic and mysterious was the story of Vyacheslav Ivanov. He loved his wife dearly but in 1907 she suddenly died and in five years Ivanov married her daughter Vera from the first marriage who seemed to him a reincarnation of the deceased wife. He wrote: “She is the image and reflection of my beloved – her mother. I am scared to lose her as suddenly as I lost her mother” (qtd. in Bavin, 174). In 1920 Vera died. It seems only natural that all this brought Ivanov to mysticism and occultism which resulted in his association with a certain lady, A. Mintslova, who gained strong influence on Vyacheslav Ivanov and soon acquired in Moscow the reputation of a prophet. Together they practiced spiritism, which became quite popular among the symbolists at the beginning of the 20th century. “Russian symbolism directed its major efforts towards the unfathomable. Alternately it fraternised with mysticism, theosophy, occultism” – wrote Gumilev (*Naslediye symbolisma i acmeism*) who later rejected its aesthetics and had his own way in art.

This mood manifested itself in the choice of themes, imagery and expressive means. As we have already shown one of the recurrent themes both in poetry and prose of the Silver Age authors was the interaction of the world of the living and that of the dead and especially so the communication with those whom the

poets once loved. According to Uri Lotman dramatic relations between Eros and Thanatos constitute the core of the “erotic utopia” of the fin de siècle generation in Russia, which was based on the belief that “only love can overcome death and make the body immortal” (Lotman, 425).

The poets who lost their beloved ones feel their presence and continue to communicate with their souls both in their poetry as well as at the séances of spiritism. Most of them share Georgy Chulkov’s belief that, “the one who once existed may not be found on the earth but his existence is not less real than that of the living” (*Sestra*).

As a matter of fact Georgy Chulkov, a younger symbolist, was one of those who frequently incorporated all sorts of spooky imagery into his stories. He was born in 1879 and died in 1939 in Moscow. He started his creative work with poetry, but later wrote mostly prose – he published four volumes of stories, one volume of critical essays, and one volume of drama and poetry. He was especially interested in religious and philosophical problems, he explored the depths of human psychology in his stories, and was not alien to mysticism. The general mood of Chulkov’s stories is distinctly melancholy. Chulkov’s heroes are always aware of some mystery beneath the surface of everyday life. Even in those cases when the story is set in some concrete historical environment, reality seems to have dream-like qualities and the characters are like sleep-walkers. “We are all blind,” exclaims the heroine of the story *The Blind*. Social events, like war or revolution, are not specified and perceived by the author and his characters as symbols of a hostile environment, as in the story *Fate*. The idea of irrational doom, blind humanity lost in the obscure hostility of the universe, is most clearly expressed in his allegory *The Sheep*. Here the author shows a flock of sheep making its way without a shepherd in the fog and mist, moving forward without any direction with black hawks hovering over them, looking for prey.

The theme of interaction of the world of the living with the world of the dead is especially prominent in his two stories – *The Voice from the Grave* and *The Sister*. In both cases the story concerns the death of a beautiful young woman who has some unfathomable disease. In both stories Chulkov’s hero strives to penetrate into the eternal mystery of death using the power of reason but fails, coming to the conclusion that human possibilities are limited. Both stories are narrated by the main character, which imparts verisimilitude to the narration and provides deep psychological insight into the hero’s mind and soul. The narrator is anonymous and is characterized only by his own confessions. The historical setting in both stories is hard to identify, possibly it is the turn of the century but we do not see any historical particularities as they are hardly relevant to the action, which

makes them sound like fables or parables rather than stories of a historically specified narrative. The first story, *The Voice from the Grave*, is set in Rome, the second, *The Sister*, in an old Russian family manor house. Though the first story is more topographically concrete, what really matters in both cases is that the action unfolds itself in the atmosphere of antiques: old paintings, tapestries, sculptures, books – all this creates a kind of a baroque framing for the mysterious story and imparts grandeur to the sufferings of the heroes.

In the first story we find the motif, which is quite frequent in Edgar Allan Poe's stories – that of two women linked by hidden bonds through their love to one and the same man. The first woman is the narrator's wife Vera. Her name in Russian means "faith" and that is what she really is for him. She is earthly and heavenly harmonious; she is the embodiment of love, patience, wisdom, and forgiveness. The other one, whom Vera and her husband meet in an old church – mysterious and infernal – is Princess Elena (the name is also not randomly chosen, as Elena reminds us of the Trojan war, treachery, breach of marital obligations, etc.), who combines rare beauty with some cruelty, which is reflected in her ominous smile. Besides, she bears distinct marks of the forthcoming death. All this puzzles and fascinates the narrator. The hero falls in love with the princess, though he feels guilty because of his treachery. This feeling of guilt becomes unbearable, and finally he decides to break up with his mistress. When he informs her about his decision, Elena's face suddenly acquires a strangely hostile expression, and she ominously declares: "But you are mine, only mine! ... Remember then that you will never be with your wife again!" The very next moment she is herself again – tender, submissive, loving. She asks for three more dates, and when he comes for the third time to say "Farewell," he finds her dead. Then comes the climax of the story, the major conflict, which is not so much in this love affair but in the confrontation of the rational and the irrational. The story starts with the narrator's speculations about René Descartes, who declared that he could live as long as he wanted and who believed in the unlimited power of man's reason and will. Throughout the whole story the protagonist is trying hard to convince himself that everything in the universe can be rationally explained. He does not change his opinion even when a friend of Princess Elena, a mysterious Hungarian with the Italian name of Jemisto, who according to the narrator looks like a death mask, like a phantom from the grave, demonstrates his supernatural abilities at a spiritualistic séance. He even calls up a ghost from the beyond. But the protagonist, though acknowledging the existence of other dimensions inhabited by demons who may have direct influence on our life and fate, still insists that all these phenomena can be scientifically studied and explained. Actually, he is convinced that matter

and only matter underlies all phenomena in the universe, though we may not yet know certain forms of its transformation. When the protagonist sees his dead mistress, he has a feeling that she is not actually dead but is in a state of lethargy and that by the concentration of his will he can bring her back to life. Then an exercise in mesmerism follows: Chulkov's hero tries by the power of his will to transcend the boundaries of the two worlds, and succeeds: for a moment Elena opens her eyes to say: "You are mine, aren't you, only mine!" – and then closes them forever. And ever since then when in moments of passion he kneels down before his wife and speaks the words of love he hears the tender voice whispering: "You are mine, only mine!" The prophecy has come true; the protagonist could never be intimate with his wife again.

These themes and especially that of the reincarnation of souls are also explored in Chulkov's story *The Sister*. As previously mentioned, the story is set in an old Russian family manor house, exquisite but decaying and stuffed with different objects of art. Paintings on religious subjects hang next to books on philosophy and mysticism. Gothic furniture and tinted windows in some rooms, as the author says, contribute to the general atmosphere of mystery. The protagonist, who as in the previous story is its narrator, feels "surrounded by the shadows of the past ... who stretched their arms to him, exhausted by the life beyond the grave, and called him to their unfathomable paths." The narrator comes to this house to visit his sister, whom he hasn't seen since his childhood, as she has been brought up by their aunt who has died recently. He can hardly recognize the little creature he remembers from his childhood in the slender girl with "wise and mysterious eyes." Thus, from the very beginning the image of the heroine is associated with some enigma: "she seemed to bear a stamp of fatigue," and later the protagonist learns that she is fatally ill. Talking to her he is constantly aware of some secrets known only to her. She often talks of her deceased aunt as if she were alive and once declares that "the one who already exists may not be found on the earth but his existence is not less real than that of the living." Very soon the narrator gets some proof of this statement when at night he sees the ghost of his aunt sitting at the foot of his bed. He attributes it to hallucination but by strange coincidence his sister has a heart attack this very night. When the protagonist comes to her room she asks him to read the letter that their aunt wrote before her death. It reads: "I must warn you that now you are living through the seventh circle of your existence and the one who was once your bride is now your sister." At first he does not attach much importance to this, ascribing these mysterious lines to the state of his aunt's nerves and soon forgets about it. But later he becomes very sensitive to the state of his sister's health and does not even need to be told when

she has a heart attack. Like the hero of the previous story by Chulkov, the brother concentrates all his will to make his sister's heart restore its rhythm. The narrator feels that death is at her feet and it is only due to the effort of his will that he "can still keep the mourning guest away." Another thing that troubles the hero is his dreams. While in the daytime his attitude towards his sister is absolutely chaste, in his dreams he sees her naked and desires her. Finally this unequal struggle with death exhausts his will and he gives in. At this last moment when he feels that the link between them is breaking and he is letting death get hold of its prey, his sister opens her eyes and utters: "Fiancée, my beloved!" and then closes them forever.

Thus, we cannot fail to trace in Chulkov's stories some obvious motifs inherent in the works of all Russian symbolists – desire to understand and give rational explanation to the irrational, fascination with the mystery of death. "This desire to peer into the fissures connecting the mortal world with the immortal," writes Adam Weiner, "becomes an irresistible temptation, fraught both with artistic promise and moral danger" (16). This was one of the problems which Russian symbolists were confronted with; therefore in many of their works we find an intention to interlink occultism with Christianity, mainly Russian orthodoxy, which seldom if ever succeeded. However, it was Russian Symbolists who through their spooky visions and mystic motifs questioning materialistic omniscience and challenging rationality intuitively foreshadowed the turbulence of the years to come and the destruction of the old world with its values and beliefs.

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