

Diagnosing the Demonic: Reading Valerii Briusov's *Fiery Angel* as Pathography

By

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## ABSTRACT

Russian Symbolists struggled to write a counter-narrative to the prevailing master narrative of disintegration, degeneration, and social pathology advanced by the emerging fields of social science, psychology, and modern medicine at the turn of the twentieth century. The Symbolists invested their counter-narrative of transformation in the medieval alchemical promise of restored wholeness and transcendence of the material—even as the modern world rushed toward materialism. They attempted to realize their narrative through the process of poetic *zhiznetvorchestvo*, or life creation.

This dissertation examines one attempt to “practice” *zhiznetvorchestvo* by tracing Symbolist Valerii Briusov’s (1873–1924) experiment in life creation with the minor writer Nina Petrovskaia (1879–1928), which he captured in his major novel, *Fiery Angel* (1907–1908). In *Fiery Angel*, Briusov poeticized Petrovskaia as “Renata,” the unhappy and tortured psychopomp to Briusov’s own alter-ego, the rational Ruprecht. Setting the work in the sixteenth century, a period of change and confusion eerily echoed by the Silver Age, Briusov diagnosed his and Petrovskaia’s quest for mystical experience as an encounter with demonomania, a medieval condition indicative of demonic possession that afflicted witch and saint alike and whose signs and symptoms corresponded to hysteria as defined by the *fin de siècle*. Briusov’s novel chronicles Renata’s descent into illness, her suffering, and her eventual death by fusing autobiographical details with historical data and clearly-defined medical symptoms.

Briusov’s novel thus functions as a pathography—an extended account of an illness, individual or social, and the dysfunctionalities it introduces into the world of the sufferer and the people close to him or her. As a specific genre, pathography attempts to describe the illness, to find a way to come to terms with it, and to deal with its inevitable consequences. This genre

offered Briusov an opportunity to diagnose and explore the relationship that existed among himself, Petrovskaia, and Andrei Belyi (1880–1934; the Count Heinrich of the novel). It also allowed him to explore the dysfunctionalities of the Russian Symbolist milieu and to diagnose the *fin de siècle* as “mad”—in a particular way.

The dissertation explores the master narrative of the *fin de siècle* and the Symbolist counter-narrative, investigates the concept of life creation, describes the genre of pathography and its distinctive features, and examines Briusov’s Fiery Angel in this context.

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I hold dear my late father, Jeffrey David Knickmeier, who inspired this journey.

## TECHNICAL NOTES

The Library of Congress transliteration system was used in the dissertation. Titles of Russian works and specialized Russian terms and concepts are presented in English translation followed by the transliterated Russian in parentheses. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are the work of the author and the original Russian is quoted in the footnote. All citations are in accordance with the Chicago Manual of Style.

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## INTRODUCTION

A study of the life and works of Russian Symbolist Valerii Briusov (1873–1924) challenges investigators because Briusov intentionally interlaced the *realia* of his life with his attempts to shape the myth of that life for posterity, leading to deliberate attempts to mislead, shades of contradiction, and varying degrees of intended and unintended self-revelation. Perhaps one of the most erudite interpretations of Briusov was Oleksandr Biletskyi's, when he identified Briusov as a historian who excelled at the construction of mosaics: the pieces are all there, but they are capable of forming different, and even incompatible, images.<sup>1</sup> Briusov's diverse interests and the various masks he wore represented a calculated composition of multiple ideas, styles, and personae that stimulated and garnered public attention for the new literary movement of Russian Symbolism that Briusov claimed to have “invented.”

The success of Briusov's best-known “mosaic”—“the (auto)myth of Valerii Briusov”—is that it has, in fact, endured the test of time and the fluctuation of historical narrative over the course of the last century. Briusov's automyth remains one of the most compelling among

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<sup>1</sup> Beletskii, Aleksandr [Biletskyi, Oleksandr], “Pervyi istoricheskii roman V. IA. Briusova,” in *Ognennyi angel*, ed. S.P. Il'ev (Moscow: Vysshiaia shkola, 1993). [http://az.lib.ru/b/brjusow\\_w\\_j/text\\_0370-1.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/b/brjusow_w_j/text_0370-1.shtml). Originally published in the *Uchenye zapiski Khar'kovskogo pedagogicheskogo instituta* 1940, no. 3, 5-32.

Russian Decadents, Symbolists, and modernists. Briusov was a key player: he gave the phenomenon of Symbolism its enduring identity, played an important role in the shaping of its contours, and was the shadow in its chiaroscuro. The artist Mikhail Vruble' (1856–1910) captured the attitude and pose of the age when he captured in a sketch Briusov's consciously-assumed Mephistophelian mask (1906).

Briusov's relationship with Nina Petrovskaia (1884–1928) and his depiction of her as Renata in his novel *Fiery Angel* (*Ognennyi Angel*, 1907) has long been a productive departure point for defining and characterizing the Symbolist milieu. In their memoirs and own self-mythologizations, more talented Symbolists, including Andrei Belyi (Boris Bugaev, 1880–1934) and Aleksandr Blok (1880–1921), looked upon Briusov as a mentor who piqued their interest in exploring the possibilities and limitations of aesthetics and mythopoesis. Viacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949), Russian Symbolism's own philosopher, thanked Briusov for introducing him to the ideas of Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535), a controversial medieval mage who had a significant impact on Ivanov's subsequent thinking. Thus it comes as no surprise that scholars have asserted that when we study Briusov, we are in effect studying the Silver Age.<sup>2</sup> The automyth Briusov wove, at this point, is itself a symbol for not only Russian Symbolism, but also the innovation, individuality, and many-sided ambition and pessimism that characterized an often "mythologized" prerevolutionary Russia.

That said, Briusov's automyth is deliberately complex. Briusov the poet complemented Briusov the novelist. Briusov the spiritualist, the decadent and "powerful" medium, enhanced Briusov the rational naturalist, who grew up in a home environment that held positivism and the ideas of Darwin in high regard. Briusov the historian, with an expert knowledge of ancient Rome

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<sup>2</sup> Kornilov, S. I., "Rol' Erevanskikh sbornikov 'Briusovskie chteniia' v literaturovedenii vtoroi poloviny XX – nachala XXI veka," in *Briusovskie chteniia 2013 goda: Sbornik statei* (Erevan: EGUIAS-Antares, 2014), 8.

and the Middle Ages, propelled Briusov the science fiction writer and literary “visionary.” Briusov the dependable husband and level-headed, stern editor of Skorpion Press only served to empower the public mask he wore of a provocative lover and black mage. The rational Briusov contradicted himself when he gave his unstable lover Nina Petrovskaja a gun. Petrovskaja, friend and muse to Briusov for many years, recalled in her memoirs the striking difference between the person Briusov was in his office and the person Briusov was when he attended poetry readings and séances. Poet and literary critic Vladislav Khodasevich (1886–1939), too, recalled being intrigued by the seemingly contradictory dark and light sides to Briusov.

Briusov successfully created a composite identity out of the conflicting rational and irrational sides of his personality; he projected and fostered contradictions. The variegated whole of his self-mythologization captures the psychology of the period: its characteristic psychic fragmentation and its experimental quests for resolution and restoration. Briusov’s body of work is effective thanks to its depiction of the “neuroses” and inner cleavage of a changing society pulled in multiple directions. In that sense, Briusov excelled as a diagnostician, mediator, and historian of his own culture. One of the best examples of his skill as a master of the mosaic art is his autobiographical novel *Fiery Angel* and its self-referential and rational narrator, Ruprecht.

## **The Challenge**

The initial challenge I set for myself was to improve my understanding of the psychological and philosophical climate of the Russian Silver Age. I am fascinated by the unexpected ways in which art, politics, history, religion, philosophy, biography, and science intersected at the turn of the twentieth century and the analogical web these intersections formed.

Valerii Briusov's novel *Fiery Angel* drew my attention because it exemplifies the tangle of ideas, hopes, dreams, anxieties, and failures—the simultaneous pessimism and optimism, stimuli and reactions—that characterized and fueled the events of the age.

Briusov's novel is the Symbolist project in miniature: an intersection of life, art, philosophy, and history that reflects changing ideas about truth, perception, psychology, and the individual that characterized modernity. *Fiery Angel* was the logical starting point for me to begin investigating the climate of turn-of-the-century Russia. If this is so, I asked myself, why did Briusov place a “witch” at the center of his novel, and what does that image tell us about the mentality of the Silver Age?

Briusov admitted and his contemporaries were aware of the fact that he had collapsed into one the image of a witch and the image of a hysteric in his novel. No doubt one contributing factor was the extent to which Nina Petrovskaja exhibited the behavior of a hysteric in her everyday life. Belyi described her behaviors more than once in his memoirs. Briusov wrote in his diary and often in his letters to Petrovskaja herself that she was being hysterical.

The prickly but perceptive poet Vladislav Khodasevich, insisted that the “real” was too real for Briusov, that he had no respect for others, that women for him were as identical as “two drops of water,” and that he capitalized on the mental instability of Nina Petrovskaja in the selfish construction of his quest for greatness.<sup>3</sup> In his essay, “The End of Renata” (1928), written shortly after Petrovskaja's suicide that same year, Khodasevich claimed that she was “the true victim of decadence” at the hands of Briusov. “[Nina Petrovskaja] wanted to believe in her abilities as a witch,” Khodasevich wrote; he continued:

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<sup>3</sup> Vladislav Khodasevich, “Konets Renaty,” in *Vladislav Khodasevich: sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, eds. I. Andreeva and S. G. Bocharov (Moscow: “Soglasie,” 1997), 7-18.

She was hysterical, and this, maybe, is what especially attracted Briusov: from the latest scientific sources (he always respected science) he already knew that, in the “great age of witchcraft,” witches were considered and considered themselves to be hysterics. If witches of the sixteenth century in the light of science appeared to be hysterics, then in the twentieth century it was worth it for Briusov to turn a hysteric into a witch.<sup>4</sup>

Khodasevich collapsed both the fictional and non-fictional images of Renata and Nina Petrovskaia into a “witchy” hysteric and elevated this synthesized “woman” to the status of a symbol of the failure of the entire movement. In this, Khodasevich’s assessment of the Symbolist movement as a whole—the quest for the philosopher’s stone of art—came at the expense of his friend Briusov. Reduced to a hysteric, “Nina Petrovskaia was read for decades as a kind of gospel by literary scholars.”<sup>5</sup>

What interested me, however, was that Khodasevich inaccurately treated the definitions of witch and hysteric as if they were set diagnostic categories. Khodasevich also missed the fact that Briusov repeatedly labeled the mystical aspirations of Belyi, for example, as a form of hysteria.<sup>6</sup> Briusov applied the vague idea of “madness” as a diagnosis for both witch and hysteric not only individually to Petrovskaia, but collectively to his Symbolist milieu as the substance of their “psychopathology.” I recognized that Briusov’s goal was to displace more than Nina Petrovskaia’s hysteria into the sixteenth century. His intention was to displace the psychology of Russian Symbolism into the medieval past his peers both pined for and idealized.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 14: “Она хотела верить в свое ведовство. Она была истеричкой, и это, быть может, особенно привлекало Брюсова: из новейших научных источников (он всегда уважал науку) он ведь знал, что в “великий век ведовства” ведьмами почитались и сами себя почитали—истерики. Если ведьмы XVI столетия в свете науки оказались истериками, то в XX веке Брюсову стоило попытаться превратить истерику в ведьму.”

<sup>5</sup> Galina Rylkova, “Emma Gershtein, *Memuary*”; Nadezhda Mandel’shtam, *Vospominaniia* (review),” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2000) (New Series): 229.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Hart, “Time Transmuted: Merezhkovskij and Brjusov’s Historical Novels,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 193.

Pierre Hart argues that *Fiery Angel* is an example of a historical novel that strikes a deliberately-constructed balance between fact and fiction. By setting real-life events in the sixteenth-century German past, Briusov evoked the feeling of a continuous present: a goal Symbolists often wanted to achieve.<sup>7</sup> Hart states that Briusov was more interested in psychological themes and pathological responses than in philosophical systems. The way Briusov contrasted subjective and objective points of view and historical and fantastic planes of reality, Hart asserts, opened the novel up to diverse interpretations that did not have to depend on a temporal definition.<sup>8</sup> According to Joan Delaney Grossman and Maria-Regina Kecht, this accounts for Briusov's admiration of Edgar Allan Poe, who was a master of this style.<sup>9</sup> I realized that the glue holding Briusov's novel together was the psychological atmosphere he constructed.

Scholars have repeatedly approached the psychological aspects of Briusov as a person and the psychological aspects of his works. Irene Masing-Delic understands that pain was a motivating factor in Briusov's art. She notes that the psychological limitations of time, space, and knowledge generated an inner tension that stimulated his creativity.<sup>10</sup>

Danylo Struk's excellent article, "The Great Escape: Principal Themes in Valerij Brjusov's Poetry" (1968) was instrumental in my understanding of Briusov's life and art to such an extent that it is worth giving it special mention here. Struk determined that a "Ruprecht-psychology" characterized Briusov's approach to life, love, and art and asserted that Briusov

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 197-198.

<sup>9</sup> Joan Delaney Grossman, *Edgar Allan Poe in Russia: A Study in Legend and Literary Influence (Colloquium slavicum)* (Wurtzburg: Jal-Verlag, 1973) and Maria-Regina Kecht, "The Aberration of the Mind and the Revelation of the Soul: Some Critical Notes on V. Brjusov and E. A. Poe," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 12 (1983): 181-210.

<sup>10</sup> Irene Masing-Delic, "Limitation and Pain in Brjusov's and Blok's Poetry," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1975): 388-402.

never ceased being “Ruprecht” for the rest of his life.<sup>11</sup> Struk outlined the components of this “Ruprecht-psychology”: loneliness, love, and lore.<sup>12</sup>

In Struk’s opinion, Decadence taught Briusov loneliness, the belief that aesthetics and artifice are superior to nature, and how to retreat into fantasy and literature, a retreat that fostered his egotism. Second, love for Briusov was expressed and poeticized in his poetry and prose in four ways: as idyll, as exoticism and the macabre, as perversity and masochism, and as the aesthetic escape of the exhausted self through death.<sup>13</sup> Briusov often retreated into a world of fantasy and books, which fostered a lifetime of loneliness. As Georgette Donchin asserted, poetry allowed the Symbolists to escape the burden of real life.<sup>14</sup> Struk observed that according to his “Ruprecht-psychology,” Struk points out that Briusov also sought relief and escape in lore: ancient, modern, and future, by which he meant myth, history, and prophecy.<sup>15</sup> Struk’s final assessment is that Briusov’s lifetime of living according to a “Ruprecht-psychology”—shaped by his interpretation of loneliness, love, and lore—produced in him an amorality that only led to a dead end.<sup>16</sup>

With the help of Struk’s analysis, I realized that Renata’s death symbolized this “dead end” for more than just Briusov’s alter ego Ruprecht and the real-life Briusov’s psychological experiment in life creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*) with Nina Petrovskaia in his novel *Fiery Angel*. Briusov understood that it also represented the “dead end” that awaited Russian Symbolism and its “believers.”

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<sup>11</sup> Danylo Struk, “The Great Escape: Principal Themes in Valerij Brjusov’s Poetry,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 12, no. 4 (Winter 1968): 408.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.

<sup>14</sup> Georgette Donchin, *The Influence of French Symbolism on Russian Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton & Cie, 1958).

<sup>15</sup> Struk, “The Great Escape,” 417.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

## Historical Context

Psychiatrist and medical historian Henri Ellenberger argued that a new psychopathology characterized the turn of the twentieth century. A master narrative of transformation emerged, the result of exciting scientific, technological, and medical advancements that had developed over the course of the nineteenth century. However, despite the eager anticipation of such things as improved health and quality of life for the individual and society, the threat of *degeneration*, or state of decline, dominated the shape of this master narrative of transformation. The reality of change was intimidating and full of the unknown. Alongside one another the most despondent pessimist and the most determined optimist had to come to terms with the spirit of loss and the weight of Promethean hubris that accompanied the revaluation of past values for which Nietzsche had called. In the end, out of this crisis of culture and consciousness, the fear of degeneration (physical, mental, and cultural) emerged as the foremost pathology of the age. Russian Symbolism offered a counter-narrative and response to degeneration theory and proffered its own aesthetic and mythopoetic resolution in this turn-of-the-twentieth-century quest to find new managing mechanisms for the individual, society, culture, and the fate of the world.

Max Nordau popularized degeneration as the foremost social and biological pathology of the *fin-de-siècle* in his book with the straightforward title *Degeneration*.<sup>17</sup> Nordau determined that the direst signs and symptoms of degeneration were mysticism and hysteria, criteria that blurred the boundaries between religion and medicine. Nordau also determined that these indicators were most rampant among the Decadent and Symbolist artists of his day, whose unconventional aesthetic practices, so he believed, stirred dangerous and uncontrollable emotions

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<sup>17</sup> Max Nordau [Simon Maximilian Südfeld, 1849-1923], *Degeneration (Entartung)*, 1892. His book was an immediate success throughout Europe. The first Russian translation was published in 1893.

in their admirers. Creative illness was increasingly perceived as a pathology unto itself, as both artists and their art became intriguing subjects of study.<sup>18</sup>

In an earlier book, *The Conventional Lies of Our Civilization* (1883), Nordau described the state of society as he saw it at the *fin de siècle*: “The world of civilization is an immense hospital ward, the air is filled with groans and lamentations, and every form of suffering is to be seen twisting and turning on the beds.”<sup>19</sup> Nordau was not alone in his use of a daemonic diagnostic language to capture the anxieties and psychic fragmentation of his age, nor was medicine the only field that engaged such language.<sup>20</sup> The emerging fields of sociology, anthropology, and psychology also participated in this discourse.

*Fin-de-siècle* psychiatrists studied hysteria as a disease that could reveal the relationships among the brain, body, religious feeling, and sexuality. Many believed that the late medieval world view offered clues about mental illness and functioned under the assumption that history acts as an unseen but nonetheless influential force on the present day, much as a palimpsest preserves past narratives while offering a new one. Psychiatrists offered psychoanalysis as a transformative resolution for the existential anxieties of the day.

Medicine and psychiatry were not the only fields to respond to the pathologies of the period. People also sought meaning in the diverse social, political, economic, philosophical, religious, and aesthetic theories and ideologies. Where some saw opportunities to build new worlds and improve society, others saw disintegration, failure, and impending doom. Theologian

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<sup>18</sup> Irina Sirotkina, *Diagnosing Literary Genius: A Cultural History of Psychiatry in Russia, 1880-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) and Line Joranger, “Mental Illness and Imagination in Philosophy, Literature, and Psychiatry,” *Philosophy and Literature* 37, no. 2 (October 2013): 507-523.

<sup>19</sup> Max Nordau, *Conventional Lies of Our Civilization* (Chicago: Laird & Lee, Publishers, 1895), 1. Translation of Nordau’s *Die conventionellen Lügen der Kulturmenschheit* (Leipzig: B. Elischer, 1883).

<sup>20</sup> I make a distinction between the terms *daemonic* and *demonic*. I use *daemonic* according to its *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* definition with no value judgment of “good” or “evil”: “of or relating to an inner or attendant spirit, esp. as a source of creative inspiration or genius; (also) inspired by such a spirit.” I use the term *demonic* to mean: “of or relating to demons or a demon; of the nature of a demon. Also: of, relating to, or caused by demonic possession.”

and socialist Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), for example, described Russia apocalyptically in 1909, four years after the Revolution of 1905: “A legion of demons has invaded Russia's enormous body and is convulsing, tormenting, and crippling it. Only a religious feat, invisible but mighty, can cure Russia and free her from this legion.”<sup>21</sup>

In a world defined by confusion and change, many people at the *fin de siècle* felt psychically shattered and feared, if not felt, the erasure of themselves as individuals. Russian Symbolists mythologized the melancholy and madness wrought by this fragmentation. They upheld that by writing and rewriting the material of their lives into art forms and, at the same time, by imitating those very forms of art, they could experience what they identified as mystical cognition. The notion of Symbolist life creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*), characterized by a Gnostic teleology, offered artists a principle, method, and mythopoetic world view that enabled them to translate “madness” into meaningful poetry and art, if not to realize a process of restoration and redemption of humankind.

The development of psychiatric medicine in Russia at the turn of the twentieth century was stimulated by the new trends in literature. As decadence and symbolism made inroads into Russian letters, the tenets of naturalism, entrenched in the realism and positivism that had characterized the nineteenth century, increasingly came into conflict with the ideas of spiritualism and mysticism promoted by the new gurus, such as Theosophist Mme. Blavatsky (1831–1891). The mixed messages of the period (positivism/mysticism, creativity/degeneration, real life/art, etc.), combined with considerable shifts in class and social structures, generated an index of mental illnesses and pathologies of interest to psychiatrists. However “degenerate” their

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<sup>21</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, “Heroism and Asceticism: Reflections on the Religious Nature of the Russian Intelligentsia,” in *Vekhi: Landmarks*, trans. and ed. Marshall S. Shatz and Judith E. Zimmerman (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 49.

minds may or may not have been, these artists inspired dialogue about the health of a nation in crisis.

As medical professionals turned to literature as a resource for the exploration of science and belief, writers and artists responded in kind: *fin-de-siècle* literature depicted the new pathologies uncovered by psychiatrists and experimented with new forms of expression. In tandem, the new literature (Symbolism) and the new science (psychiatry) explored the seemingly unbounded potential of human expression and communication. Both lay and professional questions about thought-transference and mediumism were examples of this. They raised ideas about cultural memory, the repeating patterns of human history, and the nature of individual consciousness and the collective unconscious. Pathography, or illness narrative, which was gaining a foothold as a genre, was a conjunct product of this discourse between medicine and literature. It followed that, in their depictions and analyses of pathologies and neuroses, *fin-de-siècle* writers of pathography often negotiated and profited from the tension generated by the two competing scientific orientations of naturalism and spiritualism. This was a practice at which Russian Symbolists excelled.

The success Russian Symbolism witnessed at the turn of the twentieth century was in large part due to Briusov's skills as an editor, translator, and mentor, enhanced by the provocative hubris embodied in the demonic mask he wore, the ruthlessness he projected as a leader and as a lover, and his success as a medium. Briusov was responsible for transplanting the ideas and mimicking the style of Decadent artists, such as Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), Paul Verlaine (1844–1896), Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898), and Emile Verhaeren (1855–1916), and reviving interest in the philosophy of poets from an earlier generation—Fedor Tiutchev (1803–1873), Afanasii Fet (1820–1892), and Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), for example. Briusov

constructed, stimulated, and literally gave a name to the movement through his adeptness as a publisher. He cleverly introduced the idea of new aesthetic forms alongside “Russian” examples of those very forms. In doing so, Briusov “invented,” packaged, and “sold” a movement to the Russian public as though it had a long, established history and Russian roots of its own.<sup>22</sup>

Briusov’s vision for a Russian Symbolist movement found a slim, but receptive audience thanks, but not limited, to: 1) the decadent attitude, aesthetics, and posture that had already been introduced by poets and authors, such as Dmitrii Merezhkovskii (1865–1941), Zinaida Gippius (1889–1941), Fedor Sologub (Teternikov, 1863–1927), and Konstantin Bal’mont (1867–1942); 2) the mythopoetic ambition and Gnostic visions of Russian philosopher Vladimir Solov’ev (1853–1900); 3) the recent importation of and interest in Nietzsche and his call for a revaluation of values; 4) a new *fin-de-siècle* master narrative of transformation and the master pathology of degeneration that accompanied it; and 5) a mounting dissatisfaction and disfavor throughout society toward a cultural status quo that had stood for centuries. This dissertation examines Briusov’s *Fiery Angel* as an expression of the *fin-de-siècle* malaise in which Russian Symbolism played its own role.

## **Goal and Definition of Terms**

If the history of the Russian Silver Age, of which Briusov was a leading representative, reads as the history of a “crisis of culture and consciousness” expressed in a variety of perceived social pathologies, then this dissertation attempts to read Valerii Briusov’s novel *Fiery Angel* as an example of pathographic writing. Pathography, or illness narrative, is a genre that provides an

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<sup>22</sup> See Jonathan Stone, “Conceptualizing Symbolism: Institutions, Publications, Readers, and the Russian Propagation of an Idea” (PhD dissertation, University of California: Berkeley, 2007), ProQuest (3306355).

extended account of an illness and the dysfunctionalities it introduces into the sufferer's world and perhaps into the world at large.<sup>23</sup>

Pathographies generally follow a particular illness (individual or societal) through its various stages, which represent the genre's five basic elements: 1) signs and symptoms, 2) diagnosis, 3) treatment, 4) prognosis, and 5) outcome. These stages point to the "plottedness" of illness experiences.<sup>24</sup> Pathographies often describe how the sufferer or witness deals with each stage (whether subjectively or objectively). They can incorporate any combination of biographical, scientific, historical, or fictional narrative. They can be literary or visual, expressed in word, the plastic arts, and/or media. Illness narratives are often emotionally moving, stylized, metaphorical, and subjective. The form that a pathography takes can be as varied as poetry, fiction, memoir, diary, manifesto, quest narrative, or an incoherent "anti-narrative."<sup>25</sup>

Pathography points to the centrality of narrative in the formation of identity and culture.<sup>26</sup> Illness is a common denominator of the human condition across all times and spaces, and its story is one of the oldest we tell ourselves. Arthur Frank notes, for example, that "the figure of the wounded storyteller is ancient: Tiresias, the seer who reveals to Oedipus the true story of

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<sup>23</sup> The *OED* defines pathography broadly: "The study of the life of an individual or the history of a community with regard to the influence of a particular disease or disorder."

<sup>24</sup> Hilary Clark, *Depression and Narrative: Telling the Dark* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009), 2; Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 106; and Kathryn Montgomery Hunter, *Doctors' Stories: The Narrative Structure of Medical Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 63.

<sup>25</sup> Russian literature has a long and rich history of depicting pathologies: individual, social, political, philosophical, environmental, and medical. Nikolai Gogol's "Notes of a Madman" (1835), Fedor Dostoevskii's "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" (1877), Leo Tolstol's "The Death of Ivan Ilych" (1886), Anton Chekhov's "Ward No. 6" (1892) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), and Vsevolod Garshin's "The Red Flower" (1883) are just a few internationally-known and celebrated examples of Russian authors who excelled at this practice.

<sup>26</sup> Here I use the *OED* definition of narrative: "an account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing of connections between them; a narration, a story, an account." See Hilary Clark, *Depression and Narrative*, 1-2 and Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1993), 7. See also Ann Jurecic, *Illness as Narrative* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012); G. Thomas Couser, *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); and David A. Karp, *Speaking of Sadness: Depression, Disconnection, and the Meanings of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

whose son he is, has been blinded by the gods. His wound gives him narrative power.”<sup>27</sup> The field of medical humanities teaches that narrators of, and narratives about, illness play a role in literature and art, ethics, law, medicine, economics, scientific discourse, theology, and the histories we write. These narratives are key pieces in the process of self-definition and our ideas about culture(s) as a whole.<sup>28</sup> Writing a pathography requires a process of self-discovery, self-creation, and (re)interpretation of lived experience.<sup>29</sup> For these reasons, I believe pathography is a genre compatible with the Symbolist notion of life creation, a poetic practice through which life imitates art and art imitates life.

Symbolists offered life creation as a new cultural managing mechanism to resolve the psychic fragmentation wrought by the crisis of culture and consciousness that characterized the *fin de siècle*. People found themselves coming to terms with the new “truths” of evolutionary biology and psychology, the seeming indifference of nature, the waning power of traditional religion, and the eschatological and millenarian responsibilities, opportunities, and uncertainties that accompanied all of these new trends. Some looked back to the past for mechanisms to help them cope with accelerating modernity. Some of the Symbolists, for example, invested life creation in the medieval alchemic promise of restored wholeness and transcendence of the material through a kind of divine madness they believed was a form of mystical cognition.

Briusov used the genre of pathography to diagnose and deal with the madness he experienced in his psychological experiment with Petrovskaia and the nature of the madness he perceived among his peers and throughout Russian society as a whole. The specific diagnosis Briusov put forth for this madness was demonomania, a medieval form of demonic possession

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<sup>27</sup> Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), xix.

<sup>28</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness and Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999), 15.

and trial of faith suffered by sinner and saint alike, whose signs and symptoms corresponded to hysteria as defined by the psychiatrists of Briusov's own period.<sup>30</sup> Briusov chose to set his novel in sixteenth-century Germany, a period also characterized by change and confusion strikingly similar to the cultural dynamics that defined the Silver Age. On a personal and microcosmic level, Briusov's novel is a poetization of the psychological consequences of his failed aesthetic experiment with Petrovskaia. On a grander, macrocosmic level, Briusov's novel is a poetization of the madness and hysteria that shaped a critical time in Russia's history.

Documented by the writings and letters of the Symbolists themselves, the practice of life creation may be traced through many works of the time, but it is epitomized by the personal and creative relationship among Briusov, Petrovskaia, and Belyi. This relationship Briusov mythopoetically transformed into *Fiery Angel*. From Spring 1903 to Autumn 1904 Belyi played the role of "angel of light" (*svetlyi angel*) Nina the "rapturous woman" (*vostorzhennaia zhenshchina*), and Briusov the "black mage" (*chërnyi mag*).

Belyi had selected Petrovskaia to fulfill the role of priestess in his personal "religion" and experiment in life creation, which he called the "new" Eleusinian mysteries. However, Petrovskaia's intense sensuality, her interest in spiritualism, and her use of drugs eventually led Belyi to sever his connection with her. She turned for solace to the "demonic" Briusov, who empathetically shared her increasingly negative feelings toward Belyi. Belyi felt the antipathy and began to think that Briusov was sending dark telepathic messages and evil vibrations against him. Briusov wrote this personal history into *Fiery Angel* and used his novel not only to depict, but also to diagnose the psychological consequences of their failed "group" experiment in life

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<sup>30</sup> Adam Weiner, "The Demonomania of Sorcerers: Satanism in the Russian Symbolist Novel," in *Russian Literature and Its Demons*, ed. Pamela Davidson (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), 371-400. See also Weiner's *By Authors Possessed: The Demonic Novel in Russia* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

creation as an encounter with demonomania and hysteria. For this reason, among others, Briusov's novel can usefully be read as a medical case study.

The autobiographical details of the uneasy relationship among these three people inform the plot and mood of *Fiery Angel*. Briusov rendered Petrovskaia's lifetime struggle with depression, drug abuse, and the inevitably-failed love affairs that followed in their wake into a novel that resembles an illness narrative. He displaced the emotional fall-out from Petrovskaia's break with Belyi and his own, subsequent psychological experiment in life creation with Petrovskaia into an idealized medieval past. Plausibly this gave him some distance from which to view and evaluate the emotions and events involved.

*Fiery Angel* is set in Germany in the year 1534. Briusov's fictional character, Ruprecht, having made a modest fortune in the New World, returns to Germany with the intention of reuniting with his parents. On his journey, he becomes entangled in a doomed love affair with a mentally-ill woman named Renata, Nina Petrovskaia's fictional character. Since her adolescence Renata has suffered from demonic attacks and has been visited by a fiery angel named Madiel. Renata is homeless, having been abandoned by her former lover Count Heinrich, a character modeled after Belyi. Ruprecht assumes her care and pledges to help Renata find the Count by whatever means possible, even if that means turning to black magic. When they find him, the Count traumatically rejects Renata yet again. Ruprecht challenges him to a duel, is injured, and, after all is said and done, his relationship with Renata falls apart.

As Ruprecht's own journey continues, he becomes acquainted with several famous medieval figures: the fictional Dr. Faust and his traveling companion Mephistopheles and two historical characters, Dr. Johann Weyer (1515–1588) and the famous Agrippa von Nettesheim. When Ruprecht finally crosses paths with Renata again, it is at a convent. Now Sister Maria, she

has been accused of being a witch for her supposed healing powers and strange attacks. After she is condemned to burning at the stake, Ruprecht tries one last time to rescue her, but fails. Renata dies in the same fit of convulsions he has so often witnessed. Ruprecht abandons his original plan. Instead of returning home, he heads once again to the New World to begin a new life .

Three quarters of Briusov's novel consists of Ruprecht's account of Renata's illness. Ruprecht's narrative details the progression of Renata's suffering and resulting death; in fact, it aligns with the five basic elements of a pathography (given above). Ruprecht outlines the signs and symptoms of Renata's suffering. He acquires a diagnosis from a historical character, Dr. Johann Weyer, presented in the novel as still an apprentice to Agrippa. Ruprecht then outlines the treatment options Renata pursues, provides a prognosis, and, finally, relates how she meets her death.

As an example of pathography, Briusov's novel was relevant at the turn of the twentieth century. Anne Hunsaker Hawkins states that the genre of pathography first gained momentum in the early 1900s, when illness became a phenomenon isolated from an individual and his or her life and often perceived as correctable.<sup>31</sup> Better medical knowledge meant more detailed pathologies. The emergence of pathography reflected a transformed understanding of the human body, mental processes, and disease etiologies. The new fields of psychiatry and neurology brought with them a dramatic shift in ideas about spirit, will, and the conscious and unconscious mind. The new schools of criminology and sociology introduced the use of convincing statistical analyses. Max Nordau's degeneration theory pointed at decadent artists as the fullest biological and neurological expression of the dusk of Western Civilization. All of this added up to a perceived illness of spirit at the turn of the century. It only followed that literature reflected and engaged with these redefined cultural concerns and priorities.

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<sup>31</sup> Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness*, 3.

This cultural trend wrought what Daniel Beer has called the “biologization of the social” and examples of “biomedical studies” that blended fiction and non-fiction.<sup>32</sup> This “biologization” led to the development of genres that conflated literature and science: the detective story, science fiction, the fantastic tale, and pathography. Psychiatrists and writers began to approach their research, creative works, and criticism with what Christine Mazzoni calls a “literary-turned-clinical interest.”<sup>33</sup> Irina Sirotkina asserts that at this time pathography blossomed as a genre in Russia and served social, scientific, and political uses. Sirotkina defines pathography as a “medical biography of famous people, which mixed clinical case study with moral fable and art criticism.”<sup>34</sup> She emphasizes the medical and social manipulation of pathography; in my dissertation, I emphasize its function as a possible sub-genre within a given work.

Because all people and groups at some point in time must endure, encounter, witness, and/or acknowledge illnesses, deaths, and physical and psychological challenges of various sorts, sickness and suffering underscore our shared experience as human beings and have long informed literature and art. As a result, master narratives about illness and disease are imbedded in every society and culture. Thus illnesses are both private and public phenomena. Jeremiah Dyehouse asserts that “the processes of responding to illness, like the processes of illness and dying, are not merely personal processes and neither are they personal issues: they are political, historical, and social issues of the present and of the future.”<sup>35</sup> As such, pathography reflects more than the world view, mind-set, education, life experiences, and identity of a particular

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<sup>32</sup> Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity, 1880–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>33</sup> Cristina Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 109.

<sup>34</sup> Sirotkina. *Diagnosing Literary Genius*, vii.

<sup>35</sup> Jeremiah Dyehouse, “Writing, Illness and Affirmation,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 35, no. 3 (2002): 212.

author. Pathographies also indicate what expectations are applied to the (anticipated) audience and what assumptions are made about the (intended) reader.

Facilitated by our current understanding of the individual and society, what we consider to be examples of illness can now be interpreted as medical, social, religious, political, ideological, cultural, and environmental maladies. Today we recognize that definitions of disease are multifactorial. Illnesses of an individual or a community are conceptualized according to categories and determinants, such as “intrinsic biological experience, biological exchange, social-cultural position, and precipitate of the fantasies of a particular psyche-soma.”<sup>36</sup> Diseases, maladies, and ailments each have their own anecdotal, experiential, and scientific histories, and, certainly in the case of mental illnesses like melancholia, hysteria, and bipolar disorder, they also have long philosophical histories, written on the palimpsests of earlier understandings and earlier scientific, literary, and aesthetic depictions. These narratives shape our understanding and acceptance of specific medical and cultural diagnoses, and the etiologies, diagnostic criteria, and approved treatment options for these diseases and disorders. Kay Tourney Souter asserts that “cures” can become elusive because “multifactorial diseases, with their ecological, social, biochemical, and psychological aspects, certainly resist cure.”<sup>37</sup> The genre of pathography embraces the many levels, perceptions, and understanding of disease and sickness and because of this, it engages master narratives and ideological myths according to, as Cate Reilly asserts, “primary, inter-subjective, and secondary types of diagnosis.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kay Tourney Souter, “Narrating the Body: Disease as Interpersonal Event,” *Health and History* 1, no. 1 (1998): 39.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Cate Reilly, “Diagnosis and Revelation in Vsevolod Garshin’s ‘The Red Flower’ and Anton Chekhov’s ‘An Attack of Nerves,’” *Literature and Medicine* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 287.

Thus pathography is a narrative quest for a personal, aesthetic, and cultural validation of the sickness experience determined by our sense of agency and the communities we choose.<sup>39</sup> Pathographies are often counter-narratives to master narratives. They offer an opportunity to restore an individual's and group's self-reflexive identity and agency. Because of this, authors of pathographies address the factors influencing the process of self definition and social definition of themselves. In this process they employ metaphors from a collective cultural consciousness and at the same time challenge "popular mythologies" about illness.

Over the century and more since the novel appeared, critics have attempted to "decode" Briusov's novel from various points of view: *Fiery Angel* is a *roman à clef* setting out the tangled affairs, romantic and professional, of Andrei Belyi, Nina Petrovskaiia, and Briusov himself in fictional form; *Fiery Angel* is a literary hoax that Briusov perpetrated, actually convincing people that he translated a genuine, previously-unknown, late medieval German manuscript; *Fiery Angel* is an occult novel reflecting Briusov's interest in witchcraft and the hermetic and dark arts; *Fiery Angel* is a document of decadence. But whatever the interpretation, the novel must revolve around the figure of Renata—Nina Petrovskaiia's fictional incarnation—because at its core is the meticulously-detailed story of Renata's radically shifting spiritual states; it chronicles Renata's illness and its effects on her and on the people around her. At the same time, it chronicles the radically shifting spiritual states of Germany during the decadence of the Middle Ages and the eve of modernity, and it hints at similar patterns in *fin-de-siècle* Russia. As such, the novel is a classic pathography in addressing both Renata's life and the life of her community.

Because their personal and aesthetic relationship played a key role in the development of Symbolism as both a literary and philosophical movement, Briusov's decision to diagnose,

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<sup>39</sup> Nelson, *Damaged Identities*, 9-11.

describe, and depict his history with Petrovskaja as an encounter with an example of psychosis that is rooted in ideas about “possession” deserves close consideration. His diagnosis illuminates aspects of their private relationship and can also tell us things about the mind-set of the Symbolist community and the philosophical and aesthetic choices they made. The theme of illness in Briusov’s novel *Fiery Angel* brings into focus the psychology and the actual “reality” of the Russian Symbolists’ quest for mystical experience and their theories about mystical cognition—at least according to one privileged eye-witness, Briusov, disguised as the *medically trained* narrator Ruprecht. When read as a pathography on a macrocosmic level, it becomes clear that Briusov’s novel asked what a particular definition of hysteria, at a particular historical moment, can tell us about the psychology of an age and the human condition overtime.

## **Methodology**

In this dissertation, I approach *Fiery Angel* in a traditional manner informed by interdisciplinary research in literary and cultural history, literary analysis, psychology, philosophy, and pathography. Peter Christensen considers Briusov’s novel “one of the world’s finest genre experiments—the psychological, fantastic, historical novel.”<sup>40</sup> Because pathography is itself an interdisciplinary, arguably universal genre, compatible with and complementary to a wide range of media, subjects, historical periods, ideologies, and purposes, it provides a means by which to account for *Fiery Angel*’s multivalency without detracting from its important biographical, aesthetic, and cultural role as a significant signpost in the Russian Silver Age.

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<sup>40</sup> Peter G. Christensen, “Psychology, History, and the Fantastic in Valery Bryusov’s ‘The Fiery Angel,’” *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies* 3, no. 2 (1989), 15.

Pathography has allowed me to explore the novel as an “experiment” without having to choose or privilege one classification over the other. In his own way, Briusov, too, pointed me in this methodological direction. In *Fiery Angel* he cited—at points simply listed—well over 100 religious, philosophical, occult, and medieval “medical” books, manuscripts, and treatises. Briusov emphasized one in particular, Johann Weyer’s *De praestigiis daemonum (On devilish delusions*, Basel, 1563), a medical study often regarded as the first book of psychiatry that defended mentally ill women against condemnation as witches. Briusov’s own “medical” and interdisciplinary approach to the composition of *Fiery Angel*, reassured me that pathography would be a productive point of departure for making sense of a *roman à clef*, definitive of the Russian Symbolist attempt to practice life creation.

Four books in particular demonstrated this methodology and served as examples of how to put it into action: Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* (1999); Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (1977) (and its sequel *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 1988); Irina Sirotkina, *Diagnosing Literary Genius: A Cultural History of Psychiatry in Russia, 1880–1930* (2002); and Kathryn Montgomery Hunter, *Doctors’ Stories: The Narrative Structure of Medical Knowledge* (1991). The authors of these works introduced me to the concept of the medical humanities, the nature, uses, and possible abuses of diagnoses, the relationship between literature and psychiatry in prerevolutionary Russia, and the parallels between literary criticism and medical case studies.

Anne Hunsaker Hawkins's book *Reconstructing Illness* explores the concept of pathography, its mythic and often archetypal structure, and its universality. Hawkins outlined the prevalence of the genre, often poised somewhere between fiction and nonfiction, and the extent to which illness narrative is often latent in literary works where it may have been previously

overlooked. *Reconstructing Illness* also introduced me to the medical humanities and to the scholarship of Rita Charon, Arthur Frank, Arthur Kleinman, G. Thomas Couser, Ann Jurecic, David Karp, Oliver Sacks, and others. In Slavic studies, Frederick H. White has set a high bar for a pathographic approach to literature and biography in his extensive examination of the life and work of Leonid Andreev (1871–1919) and the role mental illness played not only in his private life and creative efforts, but also in the literary portraits his contemporaries wrote about him: *Memoirs and Madness: Leonid Andreev through the Prism of the Literary Portrait* (2006), *Degeneration, Decadence, and Diseases in the Russian Fin de Siècle: Neurasthenia in the Life and Work of Leonid Andreev* (2015), and numerous articles.<sup>41</sup>

Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, though more politicized, demonstrated the extent to which “diagnoses” are cultural and ever-changing constructs. She argued that diagnoses often have their own enabling myths and revealed how the acceptance of such myths wholesale can have detrimental consequences for the individual and society. Sontag's work led me to ask what enabling myths were at work in Briusov's novel. Renata was a witch and hysteric modeled after the real-life hysteric, Nina Petrovskaja, who perceived herself (or at least wanted) to be a witch and powerful medium. Briusov, Belyi, Khodasevich, Petrovskaja herself, and numerous others have confirmed this biographical detail. After reading Sontag, however, I felt that there had to be a bigger “why” behind Renata's and Petrovskaja's diagnosis. I began to look for the congruencies and incongruencies among the enabling myths that characterized these similar, yet dissimilar spiritual and psychological illnesses. This led me to look at scholarship that addressed some of these questions and concerns, respective to the sixteenth and nineteenth century, if not across time.

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<sup>41</sup> The list is extensive. Please see bibliography.

My research into “hysteria” was exciting. I realized that the diagnostic criteria of hysteria, perhaps more so than any other disease, is a place where all cultural categories converge; these include but are not limited to: art, literature, philosophy, myth, science, religion, history, ethnography, gender, identity, and medicine. Roy Porter and Mark Micale’s scholarship on hysteria and the history and philosophy of medicine is extensive and invaluable. Sander L. Gilman’s *Disease and Representation: Images from Madness to AIDS* (1988) and the several essays in *Hysteria Beyond Freud* (1993) confirmed for me that Briusov was doing more in *Fiery Angel* than retelling his autobiographical history with Petrovskaja and Belyi in medieval disguise; I began to understand that he was creating some sort of “Other” and distancing himself from the said “Other.” *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture* (2007) further contextualized mental illness and its place in Russian history and cultural consciousness.

I am also appreciative of the studies by Asti Hustvedt, Martha Noel Evans, Elaine Showalter, Julie Brown, Cristina Mazzoni, and Janet Beizer into *fin-de-siècle* literary depictions of and medical research on hysteria. Relative to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the relationships among possession, hysteria, sexuality, religion, and medicine, H. C. Midelfort, Stuart Clark, and Walter Stephens were a tremendous help. Compilations such as Jennifer Radden’s *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (2000) and Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst’s *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History c. 1880–1900* (2000) complemented one another, giving me a picture of hysteria across time and at a particular historical moment.

Irina Sirotkina's book *Diagnosing Literary Genius: A Cultural History of Psychiatry in Russia, 1880–1930* presented a slightly different definition of pathography than Hawkins presented. Sirotkina approached it as a form of medical biography about famous people that was

used by medical professionals to culturally validate and develop their theories at the turn of the twentieth century. In that sense, pathography helped professionalize the school of psychiatry in its early years in Russia. Though I veered from Sirotkina and chose Hawkins's more literary approach to pathography and illness narrative, I found Sirotkina's work invaluable; it confirmed for me that Briusov would have read "pathographies" and been introduced to, if not participated in, some of the early Russian attempts at the psychoanalysis of literary characters, authors, and historical greats.

I began to research the historical and cultural context of the turn of the twentieth century. I looked into the medical and quasi-medical literature of Briusov's historical period: Max Nordau, Cesare Lombroso, and Émile Durkheim, the "father" of sociology. Henri Ellenberger's classic *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (1970) introduced me to the texts and contexts of some of psychiatry's greats—Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, and Carl Jung—which I investigated further. The demonic dressing of Briusov's novel and his own deep interest in spiritualism led me to also read N. A. Bogomolov's *Russian Literature at the Beginning of the XX Century and Occultism* (*Russkaia literatura nachala XX veka i okkul'tizm*, 1999), Ilya Vinitsky's *Ghostly Paradoxes: Modern Spiritualism and Russian Culture in the Age of Realism* (2009), and the essays in *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (1997), in particular the chapters by Kristi Groberg and Irina Gutkin, who both addressed Briusov's novel. More broadly, I dove into studies about the phenomena of witchcraft and witch trials and the history of their perceptions. Allison Coudert's work introduced me to the history of alchemy and magic and their roles in medieval culture. To better understand Petrovskaia's role as a muse in the Symbolist milieu, I sat down with Kirsti Ekonen's

*Creator, Subject, and Woman: The Strategies of Women's Letters in Russian Symbolism*  
(*Tvoret's, sub'ekt, zhenshchina: Strategii zhenskogo pis'ma v russkom simvolizme*, 2001).

Kathryn Montgomery Hunter's *Doctors' Stories: The Narrative Structure of Medical Knowledge* gave me the tools to put these diverse and seemingly scattered trajectories of research together. After reading her book, I realized that Briusov had written not only a medical case study about his own psychological experiment with Petrovskaia in life creation, but also a cultural case study about the psychology of his Symbolist milieu and the Russian Silver Age. Hunter asserts that "medical narrative is created as surely as a work of fiction," adding that the medical case study developed alongside the "most modern of Western literary forms, the detective story."<sup>42</sup> Hunter notes that

physicians are like literary critics, who (whatever pleasure they may expect from their reading) arrive at the text laden with theory, assumptions, hypotheses. These expectations concern what will be read there, how to read it, and what it will be understood to mean. Every reader has habits and prejudices and expectations, of course. The competency that distinguishes literary critics from ordinary readers is based on the familiarity with a wide range of similar texts, a knowledge of genres (or taxonomy) of those texts, and the traditions from which they derive.<sup>43</sup>

Often self-conscious "readers" armed with their own "perceptual equipment" and cultural awareness, both medical professionals and literary critics understand that "the way the story is told is a part of its meaning."<sup>44</sup> I could not find for myself a better "banner" or "battle cry" for Briusov's personal understanding and pursuit of Symbolist poetry and prose, nor could I find a better one for his novel *Fiery Angel*.

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<sup>42</sup> Hunter, *Doctors' Stories*, 62, 21.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

My research relied on the memoirs, diaries, and letters written by and among Briusov, Nina Petrovskaia, and Andrei Belyi. My dissertation would not have been possible without the publication, and therefore ready accessibility, of Briusov and Nina Petrovskaia's correspondence between the years 1904 and 1913; N. A. Bogomolov and A. V. Lavrov's extensive footnotes and excellent commentaries themselves constitute an entire book. Vasilii Molodiakov recently published his thorough, well-written and -researched *Valerii Briusov: Biography* (2010). The two best analyses of the biographical background and historical context of *Fiery Angel* remain A.V. Lavrov and S.S. Grechishkin's seminal articles, "Biographical Sources of Briusov's Novel 'Fiery Angel'" and "About Briusov's Work on the Novel 'Fiery Angel.'"<sup>45</sup>

Over the years, the academic series *Readings on Briusov (Briusovskie chteniia)* have provided sound contributions to our understanding of Briusov, his life, work, and relevance. Because its publication spans several years intermittently from 1962 to the present, *Readings on Briusov* chronicles approaches and attitudes toward Briusov from Soviet to post-Soviet perspective.<sup>46</sup> Joan Delaney Grossman's *Valery Bryusov and the Riddle of Russian Decadence* continues to be an accessible and comprehensive resource for English speakers.<sup>47</sup> A considerable number of biographical items about Briusov and his interest in spiritualism and documents related to the many séances he attended and his popularity as a powerful medium are also available for research.

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<sup>45</sup> A. V. Lavrov and S. S. Grechishkin, "Biograficheskie istochniki romana Briusova 'Ognennyi Angel,'" and "O rabote Briusova nad romanom 'Ognennyi angel,'" in *Simvolisty vblizi: stat'i i publikatsii*, eds. A.V. Lavrov and Vasilii Prigodich (Sankt Peterburg: Skifiia, 2004), 6-62, 63-77.

<sup>46</sup> The series is published by the Yerevan Briusov State University of Languages and Social Sciences.

<sup>47</sup> Joan Delaney Grossman, *Valery Bryusov and the Riddle of Russian Decadence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

## Chapter Description

Chapter One contextualizes the master narrative of transformation at the *fin de siècle*, the master pathology of degeneration that emerged from it, and the impact they had upon the psychology of the age.

The first half of Chapter Two considers the counter-narrative to Nordau's degeneration theory that Russian Symbolists proposed to resolve the rampant neuroses and inner cleavage of their historical moment. This counter-narrative rejected modernity and yearned to return to a mythic version of the Middle Ages that preceded the Renaissance and Age of Enlightenment. Symbolists founded their counter-narrative to the threat of degeneration in an idealized medieval past, characterized by a religious mind-set and an essentially magic and occult world view, and in Vladimir Solov'ev's promise that Beauty, Love, and Art have the power to change the world. The implementation of this counter-narrative was based on the method of life creation, which allowed the artist to transcend mundane reality and elevate his creative spirit to become something greater than himself.

Extrapolating from the counter-narrative described in its first half, the second half of Chapter Two describes Briusov's experiment with life creation. It outlines the alchemy of love, madness, and art that Valerii Briusov pursued with Nina Petrovskaja in the summer of the year 1905, the way in which Briusov constructed her as his "muse," and the emotional consequences their failed psychological experiment in Symbolist life creation had upon them both.

Chapter Three demonstrates that Briusov's *roman à clef* *Fiery Angel* meets the definition of pathography and its five basic elements (signs and symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, prognosis, and outcome). It examines Briusov's quasi-medical analysis, dissertation, and testimonial

warning against the spiritual “dangers” of the Promethean project of self-fashioning and self-mythologization proffered by the alchemic ambitions of Russian Symbolism. In medieval disguise, Briusov diagnosed the alchemic aspirations of Russian Symbolism as a confrontation with madness. In doing so, Briusov expanded the polemics of the elite and exclusive community of the Russian Symbolists into a larger *fin-de-siècle* medical, philosophical, and aesthetic discourse about the relationship among madness, creativity, and genius as it revolved around one of its most prominent pathologies: hysteria.

The Conclusion considers Briusov’s purpose in diagnosing his personal experience with “madness” (microcosm) against the backdrop of two historical periods of tremendous change, confusion, and neuroses of their own (macrocosm)—the sixteenth and the turn of the twentieth centuries—in the form of pathography. In his comparison, Briusov excelled as a diagnostician of an age which was physically and psychologically unstable.

### **Purpose and Contribution**

In her influential book, *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag pondered the use of metaphor to describe illness and outlined the history of mythologies (and the limitations of these metaphors and mythologies) surrounding the reality and nature of disease. My dissertation explores Briusov’s motivations in choosing the images of a witch and hysteric in the diagnosis of his age against the backdrop of the history of how hysteria has been perceived, metaphorized, mythologized, and treated. This affords me the opportunity to analyze not only how Briusov used these images, but also to consider what the metaphors and myths surrounding them can tell us about the values and worldview of early twentieth-century Russia. Where Hawkins demonstrates

how myth enables pathography, Sontag asked us to “diagnose” the enabling metaphors of illness and overthrow them.

Most analyses of madness in Russian literary works follow the early-twentieth-century Russian psychiatric approach to the subject of illness among authors who are themselves ailing and its depiction by said authors; the common assumption is that these authors are “victims” of suffering or are “wounded storytellers” in the image of Tiresias, whom Frank describes.<sup>48</sup> The relationship between female sexuality and psychiatric theory has also received attention.<sup>49</sup>

Briusov’s novel *Fiery Angel* stands out from these illness narratives and studies because his pathography is not told from the vantage point of a “wounded storyteller”; if anything, Briusov is a part of the problem, an instigator of Petrovskaiia’s real-life suffering, which he poeticized in the novel. Rather, Briusov wrote his pathography in the capacity of a historian, an eyewitness, diagnostician, and chronicler of his age and milieu. As Hunter insists, *how* a story is told is a part of its *meaning*.<sup>50</sup> Briusov approached the composition of his pathography as a scholar, not as a “specimen” of degeneracy or victim of creative illness. In this sense, when read as an example of pathography, Briusov’s *Fiery Angel* is an unapologetic document of the psychology of the Russian Silver Age.

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<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Frances Geballe, “Literary Disorders and Translation Treatment: Curing Chekhov’s ‘The Black Monk,’” *Literature and Medicine* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 257-276; Cate Reilly, “Diagnosis and Revelation”; Dennis Patrick Slattery, “Pan, Embodiment, and Epilepsy: Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*,” *Dragonflies: Studies in Imaginal Psychology* 1, no. 2 (1979): 39-45.

<sup>49</sup> Kirsti Ekonen, “Kristeva Before Kristeva: Gender and Creativity in Russian Symbolism,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 149-166; Kirsti Ekonen, *Tvoret, sub"ekt, zhenshchina: Strategii zhenskogo pis'ma v russkom simvolizme* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2001); and Julie Vail Brown, “Female Sexuality and Madness in Russian Culture: Traditional Values and Psychiatric Theory,” *Social Research* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 369-385.

<sup>50</sup> Hunter, *Doctors’ Stories*, 8.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Principles of Change: The *Fin-de-Siècle* Master Narrative of Transformation**

#### **The Prevailing Master Narrative of Degeneration and Pathology**

At the *fin de siècle* the advent and application of new and developing scientific schools such as criminology, neurology, anthropology, sociology, and psychiatry fostered a dynamic medical and scientific awareness of new illness categories and pathologies. All levels of Western society, lay and professional alike, applied these emergent scientific methodologies and vocabularies to diagnose and classify new physical and psychological illnesses and what were also perceived to be new social, political, cultural, moral, and spiritual maladies. Daniel Beer notes that at the *fin de siècle*

science played a key role in defining *both the optimism and the pessimism* of modernity. On the one hand, it was constantly ‘discovering’ –naming, defining, measuring, quantifying, investigating –new problems and threats. On the other hand, and on the basis of codification of each, science was also constantly ‘identifying’ new solutions to those

problems, new fields of inquiry and expertise and new technologies to contain and resolve them.<sup>51</sup> [italics mine]

The increased suicide and crime rates, overflowing insane asylums, food and housing shortages, widespread drug abuse, pessimism, and documented cases of hysteria, neuroses, physical abnormalities, and what some called cultural fatigue fueled a public conversation and debate about the progress or decline of humankind at a moment of intellectual and social crisis in European history.

The exciting scientific discoveries, inventions, and imperial impulse throughout the nineteenth century had indeed altered the face and topography of the world and wrought a faith in and worship of science and the scientist. By the end of the century, this had led to an expanding trust in the authority of doctors and psychiatrists. As Henri Ellenberger explained, advancements in hygiene and surgical procedures, such as the discovery and application of anesthesia, for example, eliminated pain and further stimulated biological experimentation and understanding of the human body.<sup>52</sup> As a result, throughout the nineteenth century physicians played an increasingly important cultural role.

The image of the doctor became a common motif in literature. Perceived as a savant or scientific saint, the doctor served as the central figure and symbol of the growing authority of medicine and a positivist and naturalist world view. At the turn of the twentieth century, the psychiatrist emerged as the new figurehead of the application and advancement of science into the exploration of the realm of mind-body, individual-community, and phenomenal-noumenal interrelationships. The new field of psychiatry contemplated the function and impact of these

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<sup>51</sup> Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity, 1880–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 6-7.

<sup>52</sup> Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 228.

relationships in the human psyche and also in the science of reproduction and sexuality.

Ellenberger aptly summarized the psychological consequence of nineteenth-century progress that spurred this investigation:

Man was no longer conditioned to pain as he had been previously, and he became more sensitive and also more fearful of pain. Thus, man at the end of the century was not quite the same biological being as he had been at its beginning, and it is therefore not surprising that he did not have quite the same psychopathology.<sup>53</sup>

The foundation of this *fin-de-siècle* psychopathology was the notion of *transformation, or a principle of change*. Transformation functioned in more than one capacity and in more than one context, but its root grew out of the seed of secular scientific naturalism.<sup>54</sup> Fueled by the arduous task of coming to terms with the new psychopathology wrought by a scientific and positivist mind-set, by industrialization, and by advancements in medicine (thanks to a more sophisticated knowledge of biology), modern men and women realized that they ruled, or could rule, their own and even the world's eschatology. Humankind now held the keys to the mysteries, the theological realization of—if not mastery over—death, judgment, heaven, and hell.

This new-found awareness that scientific knowledge offered humankind access to realms and possibilities that were previously accessible only through *theosis*, or “divine” means, was a key aspect of the crisis of culture and conscious. This awareness inaugurated more than critical

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> I derived my notion of “transformation” from Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s (1744–1829) biological theory of transformism which he put forth in his 1809 study of invertebrates, *Philosophie Zoologique*. Transformism is the idea that organisms adapt to their environment, and, in time, will change and acquire capacities to become increasingly complex. Lamarck asserted a universal creative principle of transmutation and the notion that these genetic changes and new capacities could be passed down to the next generation, usually father to son. By refuting Jean Leopold Nicolas Frederic Cuvier’s (1769–1832; known as Georges Cuvier) creationism and fixism theory, which insisted that any change within a species would render it unfit to survive, Lamarck heralded the development of modern biology.

theological concerns; it introduced *ambivalence* and led a disorienting assault on “truth” and identity. At that very moment, psychiatrists like Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Carl Jung (1875–1961), Pierre Janet (1859–1947), and Alfred Adler (1870–1937) were positing the nature and function of such things as memory and (multiple) personality in respect to the individual and the community. These psychiatrists also speculated the extent to which memory, personality, identity, and communities, for example, were influenced by the possibility of “encrypted” images, allegories, icons, and narratives about the “numinous.” Dynamic psychiatrists believed that, despite the secularization of science and medicine, all of these images, allegories, etc. represented “texts” that nevertheless persisted in the archetypal recesses of the (collective) unconscious of Western civilization.<sup>55</sup> They proposed that these archetypes perhaps affected behavior and social patterns. Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst, in their “reading” of the *fin de siècle*, assert that the notion of “cultural studies” was born out of these years of exhilaration, trauma, and transition: “in diverse ways, [scholars in the humanities have] come to regard the late nineteenth century as a crucial moment in the formation and *transformation* of the object of study” [italics mine].<sup>56</sup> Since the turn of the twentieth century, this “new” object of study had often been modernity itself.

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<sup>55</sup> Dynamic psychiatry studies mental and emotional processes and their interrelatedness as underlying forces that interact with biochemical and environmental factors in the makeup up a person’s condition and treatment. Examples of influential contributors and champions of the school at the turn of the twentieth century include prominent medical professionals, such as Franz Friedrich Anton Mesmer (1734–1815; animal magnetism), Sigmund Freud (1856–1939; psychoanalysis), Carl Jung (1875–1961; analytic psychology), Alfred Adler (1870–1937; individual psychology), and Pierre Janet (1859–1947; dissociation theory and traumatic memory). In contrast to dynamic psychiatry is descriptive psychiatry, which studies outward and empirically observable symptoms and behavioral phenomena, such as spoken words and actions. Emil Kraepelin (1856–1926) contributed to this school of thought in the early twentieth century and it forms the backbone of the American Psychiatric Association’s professional standard, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Both schools of thought are dedicated to the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of mental and emotional disorders. Today professional psychiatrists recognize the limits and uses embodied in both approaches and value a more complementary biopsychological model. Additional foundational figures in psychology include Wilhelm Maximilian Wundt (1832–1920; experimental psychology) and William James (1842–1910; functional psychology), among many others. The turn of the twentieth century was an exciting time in the study, examination, and explication of the human mind.

<sup>56</sup> *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History c 1800–1900*, eds. Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xiv.

The psychological consequences of the Enlightenment culminated at the *fin de siècle* in the seeming indifference of Nature and the “disproving of the sacrosanct” by the recently-discovered law of biological and reproductive science. These psychological consequences expressed themselves in a sense of loss and fostered a growing interest in and revival of “ancient” mysteries, such as paranormal activity, telepathy, magic, and the occult. For example, as it developed as a field of study at the *fin de siècle*, the school of anthropology invested many of its early theories and research into the documentation and explanation of the phenomenon of magic, magical thinking, and their possible remnants in Western thinking.

One such representative and foundational book in the study of mythology and comparative religion was James George Frazer’s (1854–1941) *The Golden Bough* (1890). Frazer proposed three developmental stages in human systems of belief: primitive magic, which was replaced by religion, and which in turn was replaced by the advent of secular science. Our understanding of the history of medicine today in many ways engages these same three developmental stages in the relationship between the efficacy of science and religion in the world view of Western society. We see this in the way that cultural and medical historians—those who write the history of dynamic psychiatry in particular—debate the persistent role that shamanism and/or multiple personalities play in or have played in ideas about possession, witchcraft, exorcism, and therapeutic methods for the physical, mental, and social care of individuals and communities.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, at the *fin de siècle*, for Christian and atheist alike, the new eschatology promulgated by the secular scientific world view resulted in a philosophical “reevaluation of

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<sup>57</sup> See, for example: *Discovering the History of Psychiatry*, eds. Mark S. Micale and Roy Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); *The Anatomy of Madness: Essays in the History of Psychiatry*, vol. I and II, eds. W.F. Bynum, Roy Porter, and Michael Shepherd (New York: Routledge, 1985); Henry E. Sigerist, *A History of Medicine, vol. II, Early Greek, Hindu, and Persian Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); and the classic work by Izla Veith, *Hysteria: The History of a Disease* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965).

values”—as Nietzsche had called for—which was experienced by most people as the *loss* of guiding principles, “truths,” and “absolutes” that had stood for centuries. The sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) observed this loss of magic and mystery in the face of reason and secularization and identified it as “the disenchantment of the world.” This overwhelming sense of loss was a defining feature of the *fin de siècle* that produced an eschatological illness of spirit. Mark Steinberg has shown the pervasiveness of this illness of spirit, widely discussed by *fin-de-siècle* Russian journalists and public as (psychological) sickness, and has outlined the extent to which the men and women of Petersburg at the *fin de siècle* expressed their anxieties through suicide, often publicly “performed” at places of work, at expensive restaurants beyond one’s means, or ritually in pairs.<sup>58</sup> The act of suicide itself spoke to the community on behalf of its victim’s pain, suffering, mental illness, disgust with life, or helplessness in the face of a (perceived) collapsing world. Steinberg writes:

As in other modern societies, suicide became a defining measure of civic health, a barometer of progress or crisis, and a symbol and trope with which to speak of the modern experience. The efforts to answer this most “painful, burning, and cursed question” of the age [the “why was this so?”] tell us much about the mental and emotional world of the urban public in *fin-de-siècle* Russia.<sup>59</sup>

Steinberg points out that Russians at the turn of the twentieth century, especially following the failed 1905 Revolution,

wrote of these street behaviors using the same diagnostic language applied to so much else in public life: depraved egoism, degenerate values, savagery. And this was not only as a definition of a threatening “other,” but very often as a sign of a sickening self.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Mark D. Steinberg, *Petersburg Fin-de-Siècle* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

I believe this illness of spirit was an expression of *demonic despair*, or of psychic fragmentation and existential anxiety not unlike the medieval diagnosis of demonomania.<sup>61</sup> The *OED* defines demonomania as “the belief that one is possessed by an evil spirit”; in the Middle Ages it was defined as a mental illness that sinner and saint alike endured and suffered as a trial of faith. Because the late Middle Ages and the *fin de siècle* were both historical moments affected by master narratives of transformation and major shifts in culture and consciousness, I believe a “demoniac” psychology underscored them in an analogous spiritual fashion. A fascination with demonology colored and influenced the medicine, art, philosophy, religious discourse, and politics of both “apocalyptic” periods.

In his outline of the history of dynamic psychiatry, Ellenberger drew a similar conclusion: “One may wonder to what extent modern dynamic psychiatry was influenced by the old notion of the pathogenic secret and its healing.”<sup>62</sup> Ellenberger understood the notion of pathogenic secret according to Moritz Benedikt’s (1835–1920) assertion that neurosis results from a painful secret, often sexual in nature, that can be cured through confession. Thus, Ellenberger understood that the notion of “temple healing” intersected with “philosophical psychotherapy”; he drew a comparison between priestly medicine and medicine proper. Despite their history of antagonism, he believed that the systemized bodies of knowledge fostered in religious colleges of priests prefigured a science of observation and deduction: “For many

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<sup>61</sup> Adam Weiner, in his chapter “The Demonomania of Sorcerers: Satanism in the Russian Symbolist Novel,” in *Russian Literature and Its Demons*, ed. Pamela Davidson (New York: Berghahn Books), 371-400, recognizes the Russian Symbolist fascination with the Devil. Weiner’s use of the term “demonomania” is a reference to an important sixteenth-century work by Jean Bodin (1530–1596), *La Démonomanie des sorciers* (Paris: J. du Puys, 1580). Briusov referenced the work in his “editorial” introduction to *Fiery Angel* to underscore the polemic among Johann Weyer, Agrippa von Nettesheim, and Bodin regarding the uses and abuses of the occult sciences, the psychological health of women accused of practicing maleficium, and the role mental illness should or should not have in the courtroom and legal decision-making.

<sup>62</sup> Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, 46.

centuries the physician and the healing priest lived side by side.”<sup>63</sup> After all, both Hippocrates and Galen attended the Asclepeion.<sup>64</sup>

More recently, however, historians in the medical humanities such as Mark Micale and Roy Porter, for example, have observed that the history of psychiatry is often composed with “usable pasts” and that “psychiatry boasts no stable or consensual theoretical vantage point from which to construct itself historically.”<sup>65</sup> They cite one of the most famous voices in this development of this form of historiography, Gregory Zilboorg (1890–1959), who wrote that “the history of psychiatry is essentially the history of humanism,” and asserted that “every time the spirit of humanism has arisen, a new contribution to psychiatry has been made.”<sup>66</sup> Starting in the 1960s, intellectuals like Thomas Szasz (1920–2012) and Michel Foucault (1926–1984) challenged such “enlightened” histories of the treatment of the mentally ill and asserted that madness and multiple personality disorders were, in fact, metaphors and arbitrary diagnostic designations of control.<sup>67</sup>

My humble suspicion is that the “truth” lies somewhere between these divergent ideological positions. Furthermore, my choice of demonic despair as a diagnosis of the *fin-de-siècle* emotional negotiation of the master narrative of transformation, as we shall see, engages the religious and mythic vocabulary that contemporary dynamic psychiatrists often referenced. I

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>64</sup> The Asclepeion was a temple of healing, dedicated to the Greek God of Medicine, Asclepius, where people could receive both spiritual and physical healing treatments. The temple’s foundations are located on Kos, a Greek island in the Aegean Sea.

<sup>65</sup> Mark S. Micale and Roy Porter, “Introduction: Reflections on Psychiatry and Its Histories,” in *Discovering the History of Psychiatry*, eds. Mark S. Micale and Roy Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 7. See Zilboorg’s *A History of Medical Psychology* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967). Note that Zilboorg was born in Kiev, Ukraine, and translated works by Russian authors such as Leonid Andreev (1871–1919) and Evgenii Zamiatin (1834–1937).

<sup>67</sup> See Thomas Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) and Michel Foucault, *Folie et Déraillement: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961), translated into English in 1964 as *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* and republished as *History of Madness*, ed. and trans. Jean Khalifa and trans. Jonathan Murphy (New York: Routledge, 2006).

will demonstrate that the Russian Symbolists, among many others, employed these vocabularies to poeticize their ideas and anxieties about the relationship between life and art, science and belief, matter and spirit.

### **The Struggle of Science and Spirit**

For many *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals, though not all, the certainty and confidence of nineteenth-century positivism in the Western mind-set had been replaced by a highly-strung apprehension of impending change and transformation, if not apocalyptic doom. For better or worse, people intuited that something “new” and very different from the present was fast approaching. Society experienced intense emotionalism, which was expressed, voiced, and performed through an abundance of forms and diagnoses, such as: hysteria, mania, malaise, perversion, indifference, escapism, anger, drug abuse, suicide, Satanism, spiritism, Theosophy, revolutionism (both spiritual and political), and “decadent” behavior *à la* Oscar Wilde. Not all reactions to this uncertainty were necessarily “negative.” In the case of Russia, the promise of transformation led to optimistic movements like “going to the people,” health and sanitation (*ozdorovlenie*), and other initiatives to improve the education, well-being, and opportunities of peasants.<sup>68</sup>

Steinberg’s research confirms that, certainly after the 1905 revolution, a new diagnostic language had fully entrenched itself into the collective Russian twentieth-century psyche to voice people’s uncertainties about the health of society and the possibilities of the future. In Russia, a medical and psychiatric vocabulary was used to describe and voice two tendencies inherent to

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<sup>68</sup> See Irina Sirotkina, *Diagnosing Literary Genius: A Cultural History of Psychiatry in Russia, 1880–1930* (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

the modern eschatological mind-set: the demonic despair of the decadent imagination and “the belief, indeed faith, that happiness was something that must and could be ‘made’ by human will, reason, and effort.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, Steinberg asserts that the “pessimism of spirit” negotiated the “optimism of will” of the new Russian *fin-de-siècle* psychopathology.<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, a Neo-Romantic, Counter-Enlightenment, and often-mystical outlook also pervaded medicine, science, politics, religion, law, philosophy, art, and literature as thinking people reconsidered the values of the Enlightenment—those of Kant, for example. Popular culture, print, and entertainment responded in kind: ghost sightings, mediumism, Mesmer’s animal magnetism, and ideas about thought and energy transfer are representative of what had become, by 1890, common topics of conversation. Middle and upper-class society attended séances and joined new societies dedicated to the serious research of psychical phenomena; others secretly joined Masonic Temples, like the prominent Russian psychiatrist and author Nikolai Bazhenov (1857–1923). Though peasants did not do this, nor did factory workers, revolutionary messages of change and social and political transformation percolated among them, often facilitated by journalism. These messages rarely embodied the esoteric or occult discourse of the gentry and professional classes. “Boulevard mysticism,” however, in the form of such things as public displays of hypnosis, fortune-telling, and palmistry, was widespread, not to mention age-old vernacular beliefs in the supernatural that followed peasants from the villages to the factories. In sum, *fin-de-siècle* society sought opportunities for repair and resolution of their demonic despair. People sought *a restoration of wholeness*, or refreshed “truths,” in the face of psychic fragmentation and societal ailments.

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<sup>69</sup> Steinberg, *Petersburg*, 208.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

Mircea Eliade asserted that at the historical moment of the *fin de siècle* this quest to resolve the demonic despair wrought by the master narrative of radical change was a reinterpretation—what I will call a *re-storying*—of “the millenarian dream of the alchemist”: “in the alchemist's eyes, man is *creative*: he redeems nature, masters time; in sum, he perfects God's creation. The myth of alchemy is an optimistic myth; it constitutes, as it were, a ‘natural eschatology,’” because, Eliade further intuited, “the central secret of ‘the Art’ is related to the alchemist's mastery of cosmic and human time.”<sup>71</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, dynamic psychiatrists—Jung, for example—invested their theories in this ancient archetypal myth of alchemy; in fact, they argued that this myth expressed the core belief of Western civilization. To complete his argument, Eliade posited:

The myth of the perfection and redemption of nature has survived in camouflaged form in the Promethean program of industrialized societies, whose aim is *the transformation of nature*, and especially *the transmutation of matter into energy*. It was also in the nineteenth century that man succeeded in supplanting time. His desire to accelerate the natural tempo of organic and inorganic beings now began to be realized, as organic chemists demonstrated the possibility of accelerating and even eliminating time by preparing in laboratories and factories substances that would have taken nature thousands of years to produce. With what he recognizes as most essential in himself—his applied intelligence and capacity for work—modern man takes upon himself the function of temporal duration; in other words, he takes on the role of time.<sup>72</sup> [*italics mine*]

Following in the wake of Ellenberger and Eliade, historians of medicine and psychoanalysis explored the interdisciplinary relationships among science, religion, mysticism, art, and subjectivity in the modern mind. In his discussion of the history of psychoanalysis,

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<sup>71</sup> Eliade, Mircea, "Alchemy: An Overview," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 1, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Thompson Gale, 1987; 2005), 236.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Stephen Frosh cites Hans Eysenck (1916–1997), one of the most influential voices against Freud’s perceptions of and claims to scientific truths of the mind, both individual and collective:

[Freud] was, without doubt, a genius, not of science, but of propaganda, not of rigorous proof, but of persuasion, not of the design of experiments, but of literary art. His place is not, as he claimed, with Copernicus and Darwin, but with Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm, tellers of fairy tales.<sup>73</sup>

Nevertheless, the science of psychoanalysis and dynamic psychiatry promulgated by Freud and his peers, such as Jung, Janet, and Adler, for example, has generated convincing and appealing explanations of the “irrational.” In fact, oftentimes it occurred that the *fin-de-siècle* psychopathology of the scientist, analyst, poet, and priest led them to a desire to *experience* firsthand the creative force and “transformative capacity” they intuited “hiding” in the “shadows” behind this archetypal, yet elusive, text of the history of human consciousness.<sup>74</sup>

According to Frosh, what Freud, Jung, and many others upheld—and what we today have accepted—is that “the genre of novels and fairy tales—of narratives—has a considerable amount to offer in the pursuit of human understanding.”<sup>75</sup> Frosh agrees with Ernest Gellner, who compared the scientific method of psychoanalysis to “mystical experience,” and adds that “where it differs from other forms of mysticism is not in its scientific standing, but in its use of mystical means to attain knowledge of the natural rather than the spiritual world.”<sup>76</sup> Frosh cites Gellner’s description of the mystical and “transformative capacity of psychoanalytic

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<sup>73</sup> Stephen Frosh, *For and Against Psychoanalysis*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1997; 2006), 30. See H. Eysenck, *Decline and Fall of the Freudian Empire* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1965).

<sup>74</sup> Frosh, *For and Against Psychoanalysis*, 31.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

knowledge,” the insight gained through the therapeutic action of (re)reading, interpreting, and rewriting an individual and community’s fundamental narratives; Gellner asserts:

Psychoanalysis does indeed consist of the penetration of a Special Realm, discontinuous from the ordinary world though dominating it, and accessible only to forms of exploration distinct from those prevalent in the ordinary world: success is heralded by intense emotion, and a deep transformation of the knower himself. All this it shares with older forms of mysticism. But: the Other Realm *is part of Nature*. This is mysticism with a naturalistic face.<sup>77</sup>

Ellenberger had agreed with Gellner in his understanding of the history of dynamic psychiatry and its interrelationship with mysticism and art: taken to its fullest conclusion at the *fin de siècle*, the transformative capacity of psychoanalytic knowledge became a “mythopoetic function of the unconscious.”<sup>78</sup>

At the very moment in history when dynamic psychiatry—this “mysticism with a naturalistic face”—was gaining momentum and validation as a scientific discipline and practice within the new school of psychiatry at the *fin de siècle*, Western society was experiencing a crisis as people were forced to come to terms with a new master narrative of transformation. As diverse fields of study and scientific disciplines revisited, dissected, and synthesized old narratives along with new ones, demonic despair accompanied this newfound awareness of impending transformation. Intellectuals like the zoologist Sir E. Ray Lankester (1847–1929) followed the implications to their full conclusion. Lankester drew from biological theory and argued that species could develop along less varied and less complex lines of descent when the conditions of food and safety became more easily obtained. He noted that industrialization and

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 31. Frosh cites Ernest Gellner, “Psychoanalysis, Social Role, and Testability,” in *Psychotherapy and Its Discontents*, eds. W. Dryden and C. Feltham (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1992), 43.

<sup>78</sup> Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, 111.

modernization offered humankind precisely these two things. Lankester surmised that not only worsening physical but also moral conditions fostered degeneracy, or devolution: “Possibly we are all drifting, tending to the condition of intellectual Barnacles or Ascidians.”<sup>79</sup> Earlier Bénédict Augustin Morel (1809–1873) had defined degeneracy as “*a morbid deviation from an original type*,” a deviation that had a direct impact on the mental progress of the next generation.<sup>80</sup> Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911) had demonstrated that the characteristics of offspring such as height, for example, regress toward a mediocre point, or the mean, a genetic theory still standing today, while Charles Darwin’s (1809–1882) idea of natural selection had exposed the indifference of nature and the vulnerability of the human species.

The threat of hereditary regression that was imbedded in these discoveries scientifically, and therefore “objectively,” implied that the peril of devolution, even extinction, was indeed a real possibility. In this way, degeneration theory, or the threat of devolution, emerged at the *fin de siècle* as a powerful and persuasive narrative. Degeneration became the master pathology of the day. The foremost popularizer of the master pathology of degeneration theory was a Hungarian physician named Max Nordau.<sup>81</sup>

In his famous and widely-read book, *Degeneration*, Nordau asserted that “unconscious life is subject to the same biological laws as conscious life.”<sup>82</sup> Nordau medically diagnosed what he perceived to be the social and cultural crisis of his age, “The Dusk of Nations” (a term he gave to the first chapter of his book).<sup>83</sup> Nordau insisted that the rampant *mysticism* and *hysteria*

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<sup>79</sup> Jenny Bourne Taylor, “Psychology at the *Fin de Siècle*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 15.

<sup>80</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895), 16. Here Nordau cites Morel’s 1857 *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l’espèce humaine*.

<sup>81</sup> Pseudonym of the Hungarian-born physician, author, and Zionist Simon Maximilian Südfeld (1849–1923).

<sup>82</sup> Nordau, *Degeneration*, 232. Nordau’s *Entartung* (Berlin: C. Dunker, 1892) was immensely influential. Two Russian translations quickly followed, one by V. Genkevich (Kiev: Ioganson, 1894) and the other by R. I. Sementkovskii (St. Petersburg: Pavlenkov, 1894). D. Appleton’s English translation followed in 1895.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 10. Aspects of this would be echoed by Oswald Spengler in his two volumes of *Der Untergang des*

he witnessed among Decadent and Symbolist artists and writers represented the most explicit biological signs and symptoms of devolution:

But the physician, especially if he has devoted himself to the special study of nervous and mental maladies, recognizes at a glance, in the *fin-de-siècle* disposition, in the tendencies of contemporary art and poetry, in the life and conduct of the men who write mystic, symbolic, and 'decadent' works, and the attitude taken by their admirers on the tastes and aesthetic instincts of fashionable society, the confluence of two well-defined conditions of disease, with which he is quite familiar, *viz.* degeneration (degeneracy) and hysteria, of which minor stages are designated as neurasthenia.<sup>84</sup>

European society was quick to digest and apply Nordau's theory of degeneration and, as a result, the threat of devolution became the definitive anxiety of the day.

The narrative of degeneration stood on the shoulders of equally convincing theories about transformation and principles of change outside of biology, which intersected and interacted in ways that only served to facilitate apocalyptic anxieties and dire pessimism on the one hand, or motivated optimistic enthusiasm and critical reaction on the other. At the turn of the twentieth century, two discoveries in particular shaped the dynamics of this conversation: Albert Einstein's (1879–1955) theory of relativity (accepted in 1905) forever changed our view of the universe, and Wilhelm Röntgen's (1845–1923) invention of the x-ray forever changed the image of our inner and outer selves.<sup>85</sup>

While achievements like Einstein's theory and Röntgen's x-rays evoked optimism and faith in a bright future and better life for humankind, they carried with them waves of philosophical, political, and economic destabilization and led to instances of psychic and

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*Abendlandes (Decline of the West; 1918, 1922-23).*

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>85</sup> Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen (1845–1923) was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1901 for the first successful detection of electromagnetic radiation in 1895.

(perceived) physical fragmentation. The idea of degeneracy at the *fin de siècle* represented more than an emotional reaction to Darwin and an about-face from the scientific positivism of the nineteenth century. As Nordau had diagnosed in his book *Degeneration*, the master pathology of degeneration pointed to a widespread cultural fatigue driven by the culmination of Enlightenment thought in an age of experiment and discovery and the exhausted disequilibrium it had wrought. Biographers have claimed, for example, that when Röntgen took an x-ray of his wife's hand, she exclaimed: "I have seen my death."

As Ellenberger stated, this new *fin-de-siècle* psychopathology—expressed so well by Anna Bertha Röntgen—had been building throughout the nineteenth century. The new scientific theory of transformation and the principles of change it embodied were expressed and realized in such forms as: socio-economic conditions, genetics, aesthetics, and rediscovered "truths," absolutes, religions, and ideologies.

In the field of philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) identified an aesthetic antagonism, which he believed had defined ancient Greek culture: the conflict between the domesticated, rational Apollonian and barbaric, irrational Dionysian nature of humankind, a conflict that could only be bridged by art. Once properly balanced, the aesthetic resolution of the two natures would lead to the emergence of higher men. Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) combined philosophy and the biological theories of his historical moment and coined a concept we continue to negotiate today: "survival of the fittest."<sup>86</sup> In a similar manner, in the realm of economic and political theory, Karl Marx (1818–1883) identified what he believed was the crisis-prone nature of capitalism; he anticipated revolution and socio-economic emancipation. In the realm of literature, Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) echoed Spencer and asserted the "laws of the jungle" and imperialism in his children's novel *The Jungle Book* (1894). Readers were left

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<sup>86</sup> See his *Principles of Biology* (1864).

pondering the narrator's question, posed in the epilogue of H. G. Wells's science fiction novel *The Time Machine* (1895): whether or not, through the "Advancement of Mankind," we "saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end."<sup>87</sup>

The philosophical ideas of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) formulated earlier in the nineteenth century were equally influential during the *fin de siècle*. He poetically described the struggle between the freedom of individual will and the collective force of the species, or evolutionary biology. In the end, he concluded, individuality is, like the consequence of original sin, a fall into the world of representation, and a person's attempt to realize himself/herself is a mere folly, if not a "crime" of existence.

Just as the spraying drops of the roaring waterfall change with lightning rapidity, while the rainbow which they sustain remains immovably at rest, quite untouched by that restless change, so every Idea, i.e., every species of living beings remains entirely untouched by the constant changes of its individuals. But it is the *Idea* or the species in which the will-to-live is really rooted and manifests itself; therefore the will is really concerned only in the continuation of the species.<sup>88</sup>

Many *fin-de-siècle* thinkers and artists, the Russian Symbolists among them, attempted to transcend or resolve Schopenhauer's pessimism and socio-biology; his competitive colleague Nietzsche was only one of them.

This master narrative of transformation at the turn of the twentieth century generated a cultural trend that Daniel Beer has called the "biologization of the social" and cited as examples

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<sup>87</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1895). Accessed on May 25, 2016.  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/35/pg35.html>

<sup>88</sup> Paraphrase of Schopenhauer by Roger Scruton in "Continental Philosophy from Fichte to Sartre," in *The Oxford History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 213; Scruton does not provide precise documentation for the passage.

the “biomedical studies” that walked a fine line between fiction and non-fiction.<sup>89</sup> This “biologization” led to the development of genres that conflated literature and science: the detective story, science fiction, the fantastic tale, and pathography, to list a few examples. These innovative genres represented the advent of modernism in art and literature and found a captive audience among both intellectual elites and ordinary readers. Psychiatrists and writers began to approach their research, creative works, and criticism—and the public began to read these texts—with what Christine Mazzoni calls a “literary-turned-clinical interest.”<sup>90</sup>

Not surprisingly, pathography as a genre blossomed at this critical and “hysterical” moment in Western civilization. Pathography, or illness narrative, is a genre that provides an extended account of an illness and the dysfunctionalities it introduces into the sufferer’s world and perhaps into the world at large. Anne Hunsaker Hawkins states that the genre of pathography gained momentum in the early 1900s (and blossomed after the 1950s), when illness became a phenomenon isolated from an individual and his or her life and was often perceived as correctable.<sup>91</sup> Better medical knowledge meant more detailed pathologies. The emergence of pathography as a genre reflected a transformed understanding of the human body, mental processes, and disease etiologies—that is, the reconfigured *fin-de-siècle* psychopathology and eschatology Ellenberger and Eliade had described.

At the end of the nineteenth century, modern medicine had been rendered, as Edward Shorter asserts, into a “*method of investigation.*”<sup>92</sup> As the field of medicine modernized, Shorter continues, “clinical investigation started to become both *art and science*, in the form of

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<sup>89</sup> Beer, *Renovating Russia*, 7.

<sup>90</sup> Cristina Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 109.

<sup>91</sup> Hunsaker Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness*, 3.

<sup>92</sup> Edward Shorter, “The History of the Doctor-Patient Relationship,” in *Companion Encyclopedia of the History of Medicine*, vol. 2, eds. W.F. Bynum and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 787.

percussion, palpation, and auscultation” [italics mine].<sup>93</sup> The principle of change and the act of re-storying narratives could now be expressed in multiple forms, such as scientific theory, an aesthetic motif, a socio-economic condition, a philosophical “truth” or “absolute,” or, as we shall see, it could even be manifested among Russian Symbolists as a form of aesthetic behavior. All are examples of “methods,” if you will. Once again, we can see how attractive the alternative stories thinkers like Nietzsche and Schopenhauer put forth would have been to those burdened by the new modern psychopathology at the turn of the twentieth century.

The new school of dynamic psychiatry told a convincing story of transformation at the *fin de siècle* and, as a result, quickly gained an authoritative “spiritual” voice in the resolution of demonic despair.

One unusual feature of psychoanalysis is that knowledge is given the status both of “scientific” advancement—pursuing understanding of the general functioning of human subjects, of the unconscious, of psychopathology, and so on—and also as the route to personal change.<sup>94</sup>

Jung, a contemporary of this era, took the long view in his interpretation of its social and cultural ills. He identified the sense of loss and overwhelming grief and despair as a psychological and cultural by-product of the Reformation at the end of the sixteenth century.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid. Percussion, palpation, and auscultation, together with inspection and inquiry, are the five standard methods used in clinical examinations and, when performed properly, can lead to a successful diagnosis of the patient’s complaint. Percussion is a method of tapping body parts with hands or small instruments to determine the underlying structure, consistency, and borders of body organs or the internal presence or absence of fluid. Palpation is another method used to determine the size or consistency of body organs, but with the application of pressure of the hand or fingers to the body’s surface. Auscultation refers to the listening of the internal sounds of the body such as breath and heart beats, often with a stethoscope. Inspection in medicine is the visualization of the patient that assesses external signs and gross deviation (scars, swelling, visible masses, etc.). Inquiry in a clinical examination is used to determine the medical history of the patient and his/her specific complaint. This involvement of the patient in the telling of the illness’s “story” has revolutionized the process of consultation, diagnosis, and treatment because the patient actively participates in the dialogue. Pharmaceutical companies today play no small part in influencing this conversation and the empowerment of the patient.

<sup>94</sup> Frosh, *For and Against Psychoanalysis*, 31.

Jung asserted that Martin Luther's theology, when carried to its full conclusion, had "demonized" the world by removing the mystery, magic, enchantment, immediacy of the sacred, or wholeness—however one chooses to name it—from life's purpose and meaning. In fact, decades later, Foucault would arrive at a similar conclusion.

Freud's notion that the human psyche was not ruled by reason was as revolutionary in the realm of psychiatry as Luther's notion that the Devil ruled the earth had been in the realm of theology at the end of the sixteenth century. Ann Casement posits that the rationale behind Freud's theories about the human psyche forever altered and transformed the Western understanding of human thought processes and led to a bleak conclusion: "Freud [was] the medical man who at the turn of the nineteenth century showed that reason was not the ruler in the human psyche but that human nature was instead steeped in an abysmal darkness."<sup>95</sup> Freud's conclusions differed from Luther's, however, in that Freud translated the philosophical quandary about "suffering" and the nature of the dark recesses of the human mind into a (subjectively) "scientific method" of investigation. Freud applied reason to explain a pattern that seemed to function, like the abstract forces (and absolutes) of "good" and "evil," outside of human reason. Ann Casement posits that "since then psychotherapy has explored this darkness in one way or another."<sup>96</sup>

Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564), writing at the intersection of the Middle Ages and the burgeoning Renaissance, already hinted at the Enlightenment to come. Their transitional, confounding age was in time followed by the emergence of a new age embracing a scientific world view, the appearance of new value systems and institutional structures, and, ironically, the Protestant demonization of the world (leading both to the witch

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<sup>95</sup> Ann Casement, "The Shadow," in *The Handbook of Jungian Psychology: Theory, Practice and Applications*, ed. Renos K. Papadopoulos (New York: Routledge, 2006), 96.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

trials and to the reaction against them). Another set of transitional, confounding conditions at the turn of the twentieth century would spur dynamic psychiatrists onward into the dark chasm of the human psyche, into the archetypal, collective unconscious, into the invisible yet intuited text that Nietzsche described. Both historical moments, the sixteenth century and the *fin de siècle*, were defined by their attempts to systematize what had come before and to decipher newly-emerging, as-yet-unshaped value systems and institutions. This pattern suggests that the European *fin de siècle* witnessed a crisis of culture and consciousness as destabilizing, frightening, and loaded with unformed potentialities as the one that European society had experienced at the end of the sixteenth century.

The medieval historian William Bouwsma defines culture as “the collective strategies by which societies organize and make sense of their experience. Culture in this sense is a mechanism for the management of existential anxiety.”<sup>97</sup> Crises arise when a particular culture undergoes a major historical moment of transformation, and “culture” can no longer serve as the mediator of ideas, influences, and identities. Bouwsma added that constructions and functions of belief—religion, theology, and especially spirituality—are instructive pieces to the puzzle of how the people of a specific historical moment understand themselves and their experiences, because belief “transcends intellectuality”: “Religious symbolism and practice seem to me,” he claims, “to concentrate and integrate singularly well what a society is finally ‘about.’ So, of course, do various secular substitutes for religion, though, I suspect, less comprehensively.”<sup>98</sup>

Bouwsma’s argument leads me to believe that demonic despair is a fruitful “diagnosis” for moments of cultural crisis and transformation. In his explication of the psychology of sixteenth-century Germany, the medieval religious historian H. C. Erik Midelfort observes that

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<sup>97</sup> William Bouwsma, *A Usable Past: Essays in European Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 2.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

“demonic possession [is] a culturally sanctioned way of experiencing and understanding acute states of mental alienation.”<sup>99</sup> In that sense, it provides opportunities to express, perform, and purge one’s fears and anxieties. Possession, demonic or otherwise, and however defined, has arguably always served that purpose in human thought and civilization. Not surprisingly, crises of culture and consciousness, such as the Reformation and the *fin-de-siècle* narrative about and encounter with transformation, assume religious and spiritual proportions both to the people who endure them and in the retrospective histories we write.

What I will further explore in the chapters that follow is the extent to which the Russian Symbolists attempted an aesthetic experiment in transformation and naturalistic eschatology, which they called life creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*), to overcome the crisis of change at the turn of the twentieth century. Through the vehicle of art and the ancient narrative of spiritual alchemy, Russian Symbolists strove to reconcile conflicting definitions of the historical process with the Apollonian and Dionysian natures of the human psyche Nietzsche had determined. Their experiment became a mythopoetic quest and, much like its contemporary, the emerging school of dynamic psychiatry, the vocabulary Symbolists often chose to engage was a mystical, religious, spiritual, and/or ideological one—that is, they engaged the substance of myth itself. The genre of pathography fits squarely in this discourse.

The medical historian Roy Porter, like Bouwsma and Ellenberger, identified this spiritual impetus as a characteristic trait of human thought in moments of significant shifts in consciousness. He also asserted that the desire for and pursuit of spiritual certainties served as a defining psychological feature of the crisis of culture wrought by the advent of modernism at the end of the nineteenth century: “Religion and medicine share a single aim, that of making whole.

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<sup>99</sup> H. C. Erik Midelfort, *A History of Madness in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 19.

It is no accident that ‘holiness’ and ‘healing’ have a common etymology, rooted in the idea of wholeness; as do salvation and the salutary, cure, care, and charity.”<sup>100</sup> He eventually concluded:

But, surveying the whole development of human consciousness, it is arguable that it was the experience of suffering, sickness, and death which gave birth to religious devotion in the first place; and equally, that modern medical advances (the conquest of disease, the prolongation of life) have played no small part in widespread secularization.<sup>101</sup>

The result was that the psychoanalyst projected the “healer.” As Jung pointed out, “the first beginnings of all analytical treatment of the soul are to be found in its prototype, the confessional.”<sup>102</sup> Shorter agrees: “Although not unknown in traditional medicine, this cathartic benefit of the consultation was more commonly obtained in the modern style of medical practice,” asserting that “this kind of confidence is conferred only upon physicians whom patients regard as healers.”<sup>103</sup>

The assertion of Jung and numerous others—that the patient-doctor consultation resembles the experience of confession—is underscored by the research of another one of his outstanding peers. In 1897 Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) published *Suicide (Le Suicide)*, a ground-breaking foundational text in the field of sociology and political philosophy.<sup>104</sup> Durkheim employed a multivariate statistical analysis to demonstrate that suicide, thought to be an individual act, was actually socially patterned and therefore had both psychological and social causes. Durkheim revealed that suicide was influenced by factors such as a person’s country, religion, marital status, and education. Catholics, for example, had lower suicide rates than

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<sup>100</sup> Roy Porter, “Religion and Medicine,” in *Companion Encyclopedia of the History of Medicine*, vol. 2, eds. W.F. Bynum and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 1449.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Casement, “The Shadow,” 96.

<sup>103</sup> Shorter, “The History of the Doctor-Patient Relationship,” 792.

<sup>104</sup> *Suicide* was translated into Russian in 1912.

Protestants, who tended to be more highly educated. According to Durkheim, a higher level of education fosters individual consciousness and less community integration. One's "religious" or "spiritual" mind-set and the set of conditions that framed one's intellectual atmosphere—what could now be statistically and therefore "objectively" proven, if not measured—had a tremendous impact on the individual's perception, cognition, and interpretation of lived experiences. In this sense, Durkheim's research facilitated Freud and Jung's ideas about transference, the (collective) conscious and unconscious, and the myths and archetypes that seemed to govern human thought, behavior, and communities.

Just as Nietzsche had contrasted the refined Apollonian and wild Dionysian tendencies in human thought, dynamic psychiatrists such as Freud developed and applied a "systematized metapsychology" based upon what they perceived were the light and dark sides of the psyche.<sup>105</sup> Building on this notion, Jung posited a concept of compensation. He determined that psychological processes were shaped by what he called one's *shadow*, a psychic phenomenon "charged with affect and an autonomous life beyond one's control," which assumes both personal and collective forms.<sup>106</sup> According to Casement, the shadow represents the "dark" side of the human psyche: "the repository of all the aspects of a person that are unacceptable or distasteful to them."<sup>107</sup> The collective shadow, or archetypal shadow, is a projection of the dark side of the culture and the foundation of a community's understanding and depiction of evil.

For Jung, the process of individuation, or the often painful journey of becoming cognizant of and "at peace" with one's shadow(s), is the path that leads toward the restoration of psychic wholeness. In her outline of Jung's notion of the nature and purpose of the realm of shadow, Casement aptly summarizes the substance of *fin-de-siècle* demonic despair. The

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<sup>105</sup> Casement, "The Shadow," 94.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 95.

principle of change evoked a generic anxiety and apprehension about transformation in European culture. Many people comprehended that before repair and restoration could be achieved, both individual and collective identities would have to undergo a process of fragmentation and dissolution (a process, by the way, also outlined in philosophical alchemy). *Fin-de-siècle* society nevertheless experienced strong emotions toward this seemingly certain new scientific narrative of change.

Jung believed that Robert Louis Stevenson's novella, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), was one of the best depictions of the danger that lurks in the realm of shadow: neurosis is, as Casement describes it, "an inner cleavage—a state of being at war with oneself."<sup>108</sup> Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1899) is equally revealing. To the list of famous works that engage the realms of light and shadow, good and evil, matter and spirit, salvation and damnation, and the "neurosis of inner cleavage," I propose—and intend to support throughout the following chapters—the addition of Briusov's novel *Fiery Angel*.

As scientists rewrote and reconceptualized the relationship between mind and body—a long established function of religion and philosophy—fiction increasingly served as a field station for the exploration of science and belief, neurology (the physical and material of the phenomenal realm) and psychology (the spiritual, religious, and mental conditions of the noumenal realm). Some perceived creative writing itself as an example of pathology. The correlation between madness and genius was centuries old; both Plato and Aristotle, for example, had asserted the reality of divine inspiration. Active in the *fin-de-siècle* mentalité were the recent contributions of Romanticism and German Idealism, which had contributed significantly to the discussion about the relationship between madness and genius. After all, Ellenberger asserted,

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 100.

Novalis had defended the idea of *creative illness*.<sup>109</sup> Additionally, many “great” artists and philosophers had all gone “mad,” Nietzsche being but one immediate, *fin-de-siècle* example. Influenced by such philosophical, historical, and medical “case studies,” scientists analyzed literature in medical terms and reduced creativity and genius to products of disease.<sup>110</sup>

Not all medical professionals were in agreement as to whether the madness associated with genius was a good or bad trend in the history of humankind’s physical and psychological development. In his book *The Man of Genius (L’uomo de genio in rapporto alla psichiatria*, 1888) Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), while celebrating their accomplishments, labeled cultural greats like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Galileo, Goethe, and Schopenhauer as degenerate. Lombroso went so far as to call Darwin, who suffered ill health, a neuropath, claiming, “the creative power of genius may be a form of degenerative psychosis belonging to the family of epileptic affections.”<sup>111</sup> Lombroso also insisted that numerous historical events had come about through the political and religious mania of insane persons. As examples he pointed to the Anabaptists, the Flagellants, the witch-mania, and the Taiping revolution.<sup>112</sup> He admitted that such madness (and genius) had at times contributed to the progress of mankind, but Lombroso also asserted that it accounted for the impossible issues that consumed contemporary graphomaniacs and literary eccentrics who bordered on the psychotic (mattoids), such as “the

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<sup>109</sup> Henri Ellenberger, “The Concept of Creative Illness,” *Psychoanalytic Review*, no. 55 (1968): 442.

<sup>110</sup> Sirotkina, *Diagnosing Literary Genius*, 2.

<sup>111</sup> Cesare Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, trans. Walter Scott (London: Walter Scott Publishing CO., LTD., 1891), 336, 356. Lombroso’s work is foundational to the school of criminology. His study of mediumism and cases of documented psychic abilities influenced his theories. Lombroso’s ideas appear in numerous *fin-de-siècle* literary works. Joseph Conrad, Bram Stoker, and Leo Tolstoy mentioned his name in their novels and drew from his theories in the development of character and plot. Mikhail Bulgakov also alluded to Lombroso in his biting satire of the new Soviet man in his 1925 novel, *Heart of a Dog*. Lombroso’s theories have had sticking power.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 241-242. The Taiping Revolution (or Rebellion), regarded as one of the bloodiest in history, was a civil war in China that lasted from 1850 to 1864. Rebels challenged the reigning Manchu Qing dynasty and sought social reform, such as the imposition of Christianity, communal property, and increased gender equality. They were led by Hong Xiuguan, who believed himself a sibling of Jesus. Taiping was an example of a (“hysterical”) millennial movement that combined a religious world view with social and political reform.

quadrature of the circle, hieroglyphics, exposition of the Apocalypse, air-balloons, and spiritualism.”<sup>113</sup>

Throughout the pages of *Degeneration*, Nordau, who dedicated his book to Lombroso, correlated a degenerate mind with a religious one. Hans-Peter Söder asserts that “most terrifying to Nordau was not only the uncontrollability of the mystical experience, but also the anti-emancipatory urge evident in self-abandonment.”<sup>114</sup> Nordau perceived that a healthy mind embodied a scientific world view based on Kant’s categorical imperative. In Nordau’s opinion, the Counter-Enlightenment point of view, Neo-Christian and “Catholic” mysticism, and the rebirth of occultism that defined the Decadent and Symbolist world view represented more than harmful atavism. The intensity of emotion that Symbolist authors and artists stirred in a degenerate mind resulted in psychoses. Nordau believed that religion functioned as “the natural enemy of science,” “the lie that made all other lies possible.”<sup>115</sup> Nordau considered that the French Symbolists, Paul Verlaine (1844–1896) in particular, and Russian authors like Leo Tolstói (1828–1910) represented the most extreme example of this diseased tendency because their quest for mystical experience unified them into a homogeneous and hysterical community under the banner of “religion.”<sup>116</sup>

From Nordau’s perspective, the Symbolists’ zealous piety, emotionalism, delirium, and mysticism in the name of metaphysical theology were dangerous. Their manipulation of degenerately weak and impressionable minds produced “aping intriguers” and represented “the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>114</sup> Hans-Peter Söder, “Disease and Health as Contexts of the Fin-de-Siècle Modernity: Max Nordau’s Theory of Degeneration” (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1991), 481.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. In his analysis of Nordau’s *Degeneration*, Söder resolves the seeming contradiction between Nordau’s antireligious sentiment in his bestselling book and the fact that later in life he became a foundational leader in the Zionist movement. Söder argues that, although Nordau perceived religion to be an obstruction in his scientific Weltanschauung, he never suspended his Jewishness. Instead he reframed his identity along the lines of a utopian ideal. Nordau dreamed of a society of enlightened and unbiased individuals connected through mutual respect and solidarity, free from constructs of limiting ideologies and damaging images of “the Other.”

victory of the gang over the individual.”<sup>117</sup> Nordau drew two religious comparisons. Nordau did not take Christ and his disciples to task, but criticized instead the rabble impressed by the miraculous multiplication of fish and loaves. Nordau found the recipient public’s propensity to hysterical belief and obsession a threat to society. In his medical opinion, the hyper-sensibility of suggestion wreaks havoc on a degenerate mind. This had happened in 1858 when hysterical men and women flocked to Lourdes and convinced themselves that they, too, saw visions of now Saint Bernadette Soubirous’s Holy Virgin.<sup>118</sup> Nordau pointed to the fact that such religious enthusiasm tapped into a person’s unconscious. Such impressionable minds could be easily manipulated in the same way that the French pathologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893) was able to hypnotize a hysterical woman into the desire to murder her doctor.<sup>119</sup>

At the *fin de siècle*, psychiatrists often pointed to “the hysterical character of saintliness” and structured their theories about cognitive functioning, dual-personalities, and the unconscious around documented cases of possession.<sup>120</sup> The British psychiatrist Henry Maudsley (1835–1918) stated “epileptics often believe themselves patriarchs and prophets,” a notion that resulted from them “mistaking their hallucinations for divine revelations [as the] foundations of religious beliefs.”<sup>121</sup> Lombroso cited his medical peer Dr. Parchappe de Vinay (1800–1866), who correlated increased intellectual activity with insanity.

Increase of intellectual activity, says Dr. Parchappe, is frequently met with in insanity; it is even one of the most salient characteristics of this disease in its acute period. The annals of science—adds the same author—contain a certain number of well-authenticated facts, which have contributed to confirm the superstition of a supernatural heightening of the intellectual faculties, and which explain, up to a certain point, how the love of the

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<sup>117</sup> Nordau, *Degeneration*, 32, 104.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 32. Nordau perceived that there were in fact more male hysterics than female.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

<sup>120</sup> Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, 352.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

marvelous, in credulous observers, by exaggerating and distorting analogous facts, has been able to gain credit for the wonderful tales which abound in the history of religious sects at all epochs, and more especially in the history of diabolical possessions in the Middle Ages.<sup>122</sup>

Bénédict Augustin Morel documented a case in which a hysterical woman with exalted religious ideas could recite word for word sermons by famous Christian orators.<sup>123</sup>

Nordau stigmatized Decadent and Symbolist creative writing and the often-alternative lifestyles of the authors as pathologies. He supported his diagnosis on the grounds that artists who experimented with unconventional lifestyles in real life and in their literary works demonstrated tangible cases of mental irritation, grief, pessimism, and, in his opinion most alarming, hysteria. According to Nordau, the most dangerous *medical* symptom afflicting Decadent and Symbolist artists was their mysticism, which swayed them to conflate and confuse Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's (1744–1829) theory of transformism and Darwin's theory of evolution with religion and myth. Nordau was concerned that such artists, authors, and poets not only depicted, but also went so far as to celebrate, neuroses and illnesses in their works.

Nordau's conclusion was not entirely unfounded. Under the influence of occultism and spiritualism, such artists did in fact express their demonic despair. Both in their art and in their real lives they explored neuroses, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual perversion, the dark recesses of the human psyche, and the limitations and possibilities of material and psychical forms of communication. In his popular book *Sexual Psychopathy: A Clinical-Forensic Study* (1886), psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902), for example, attempted to explain many of these alternative and “dark” behaviors. He investigated sexual pathology and put forth new terms

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 164-165.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 166.

and concepts like sadism and masochism. His work became a medical and legal reference for trials involving sexual crimes.

Nordau and many of his peers also regarded the prominence of Satanism in visual and written media as a good indicator of neuroses and perversion. The alternative lifestyles and often-Mephistophelian mannerisms of numerous artists produced a demonic aura, which encouraged society to see artists as emblems of “darkness.” Tangible documentation for the actual practice of Satanism among the Symbolist milieu has proven elusive. The moods, shapes, and colors inherent to Satanism, however, informed not only the costume and posture of these young artists, but also the mentalité of their milieu and the themes they wrestled with, both in their personal lives and in their literature.

Kristi Groberg provides insight into why Satanism was so attractive to French Decadents and Russian Symbolists. She argues that the source of *fin-de-siècle* artists’ infatuation with Satanism and the topic of evil reflected a “disaffection from and rebellion against established norms,” that it was a sensationalistic act of “protest” against outdated artistic and cultural values.<sup>124</sup> The Devil served as a symbol of this protest and veneration for him was an expression of their Promethean rebellion against the status quo. Groberg cites Georgette Donchin: for the Russian Symbolists Satanism functioned as “a daring innovation, a reflection of *their* times, the last word in modernism, [and] a necessary component of their intensity of feeling.”<sup>125</sup> For these young artists, particularly Briusov, Lucifer was a tragic and Romantic hero and Mephistopheles was emblematic of evil. These artists celebrated and were widely influenced by the modern themes and imagery of Goethe’s *Faust*, the rebellious individualism inherent in Nietzsche’s writings, and the conceptualization of the will according to Schopenhauer. Philosophical

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<sup>124</sup> Kristi Groberg, “The Shade of Lucifer’s Dark Wing: Satanism in Silver Age Russia,” in *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 100.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

questions about the nature of evil gave a demonic ambience to the Russian Symbolist oeuvre. The Satanic theme served both as a backdrop and a posture against which the Symbolists evaluated such things as the source of creative generation, the efficacy of the individual in society and politics, and the role of the artist in human history. The conscious propagation of this demonic aura by Symbolists also fostered escapism through such things as drug abuse and suicide attempts.

Charcot's anachronistic research and Nordau's fear of "religious" ("mystical") hysteria, when laid over the *fin de siècle's* pervasive spiritualism and the Decadents' self-generated aura of Satanism, reflect the culture's larger attempt to find a compromise between the language of science and the language of religion as both attempted to construct an authoritative narrative of degeneration theory. "Religion" became a discursive stage for psychiatrists to address the foremost concerns of the age: the changing morality, political and aesthetic fanaticism, pessimism, skepticism, cultural fatigue, and, in Nordau's opinion, the mysticism that reflected the reality of degeneration and the ominous dusk of civilization. The very use of the word *stigmata* among theorists points to this and exposes the spiritualist inclination of *fin-de-siècle* medicine. Henry Maudsley exposed the notion of Old Testament sin and retribution in his conceptualization of degeneracy. "Multitudes of human beings," Maudsley asserted, "come into the world weighted with a destiny against which they have neither the will nor the power to contend," and, as a result, "they are the step-children of nature, and groan under the worst of all tyrannies—the tyranny of a bad organization."<sup>126</sup> What Nordau recognized was that the pathology of contemporary artists—most visible among Decadent and Symbolist poets and their "converted" admirers—problematized the relationship among science, medicine, religion, art,

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<sup>126</sup> Jenny Bourne Taylor, "Psychology at the Fin de Siècle," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 20.

and *literature* because they occupied this psychological, biological, theological, and anachronistic borderland.

Medical and literary discourse at the turn of the twentieth century were equally engaged in the same questions regarding body vs. mind, and both drew from religious, spiritual, and mythic vocabularies, images, and (ancient) philosophical narratives—such as demonomania and alchemy—to do so. Degeneration theory represented such a crossover. The relationship between flesh and spirit, between earthly love and spiritual love, between hysteria and religious fervor, and between the quest for either death and disease or immanent happiness and transcendent salvation functioned as topoi that cut across medical, religious, philosophic, artistic/aesthetic, and political discourse of the turn of the century.<sup>127</sup> Christina Mazzoni points out that the concept of “Catholicism,” whether in reference to medieval sources or to contemporary Decadent and Counter-Enlightenment examples, established a difference between *perceptions* of healthy and constructive “orthodox” religious experience on the one hand, and spiritualist and occult tendencies that only “led to madness and murder” on the other.<sup>128</sup>

I have chosen to diagnose the psychic fragmentation, eschatological anxiety, and “tearing asunder” of the age by naming it *demonic despair*. In similar fashion, Nordau insisted that whatever you chose to call it, it was a crisis of culture and consciousness that manifested itself as an illness of spirit and a mystical, if not hysterical, longing for healing and restoration.

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<sup>127</sup> Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria*, 96.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

## A New, Spiritual Master Narrative of Transformation

In the history of Western thought, one of the most pervasive narratives about spiritual and material cleavage and the restoration of psychic wholeness is the story of Christ. In Christian theology, the doctrine of the Trinity asserts that God is defined as three hypostases, or consubstantial persons: the Father, Son (Jesus Christ), and Holy Spirit. Christ is but one hypostasis and embodies a dual nature: He is *Logos*, or Word made Flesh, through which all things are made.<sup>129</sup> He is both *anthropos* (material) and *theos* (divine). Christ's incarnation, death, and ascension (descent and ascent) is a message of transformation and transfiguration. The incarnation and death of Christ are the climax of God's divine plan to facilitate humankind's salvation, an act of sacrifice to account for the consequence of sin in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. It is the archetypal opposite of the satanic theme.

Not surprisingly, the Christ narrative is one with which numerous turn-of-the-twentieth-century intellectuals engaged both directly and indirectly. Burdened with an illness of spirit and saddened by the demonic despair even Christ himself endured—despite the principle of *positive* change His story embodied—*fin-de-siècle* intellectuals feared that the New Testament message of salvation might, in fact, be a myth. People at the *fin de siècle* began to (re)generate their own mythic, religious, and/or archetypal *counter-narratives* about transformation.

After all, nineteenth-century scientific secular naturalism had emboldened people with an equal eschatological power, confidence, and authority—or at least a convincing challenge—to

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<sup>129</sup> The extent to which Christ embodies a dual nature and exactly how to define and describe what form of action and/or manifestation “Logos” has assumed/assumes/will assume in the process of human salvation has been debated among theologians since the time of the early church fathers. In fact, it was a key philosophical factor in significant schisms in the history of Christianity.

“divinity” and/or the Christian narrative in the *phenomenal* realm. To compose their counter-narratives, people at the turn of the twentieth century often conflated religious and scientific doctrines and discourses and historical moments of parallel crises of culture and consciousness to find patterns, meaning, and insight. As a result, prominent and influential counter-narratives engaged, if not incorporated, the noumenal or numinous in their new ideas.

In composing their personal counter-narratives in the face of an illness of spirit and demonic despair, many *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals reconsidered the major components of the master narrative of Christ’s story of salvation. This master narrative, until faced with the medical and technological accomplishments of the nineteenth century, had functioned as a culturally meaningful, if not always successful, “managing mechanism” for a wide swath of Western society. Dynamic psychiatry at the *fin de siècle*, however, asserted that even if the Christ myth were “disproven,” the message of Christ’s salvation and transformation was, at this point, a foundational, archetypal, iconic, and/or ideological component of the collective unconscious of Western civilization.

Within its narrative of cleavage and restoration, the story of Christ is informed by at least two additional, foundational narratives: one about Job and his suffering and the other about Sophia, the Wisdom of God (or Wisdom-Sophia). Turn-of-the-twentieth-century intellectuals often explored these two stories to gain insight into the meaning and function of the Christ archetype. In her discussion of Jung’s notion of shadow, Casement unravels how Jung understood the Christ and Sophia archetypes. According to Casement, Jung read the unnecessary suffering of Job at the hands of the shatan, under the direction of Yahweh, as the “revelation of the *shadow* of the Christian God.”<sup>130</sup> Jung proposed that Job’s unwavering faith and endurance proved his moral superiority to Yahweh and, acknowledging the wrong he had done, Yahweh

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<sup>130</sup> Casement, “The Shadow,” 105.

would become man. In the New Testament, God, incarnated as Christ, was forced into self-reflection. Only when Christ cried from the Cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” was Job’s suffering accounted for by Yahweh/God. Only when the Word made Flesh was forced to endure physical and material death was divinity, redemption, and/or revelation achieved, Job’s suffering *justified*, and Yahweh’s wrong-doing resolved.

In the other foundational narrative, Sophia is the mediator between God and creation. In Gnostic myth, she is an emanation of eternal light from the Godhead. Desiring to know Him, she was cast down and gave birth to the Demiurge, an evil and violent god, who created the corrupt, material world. Shattered fragments of her divinity were scattered throughout dark, painful, and slumbering creation. The salvation of humankind can be achieved through awakening and transcendence: the initiate must deny his earthly physicality and recognize the indwelling spark of immaterial light (the presence of Sophia). In death, if one possesses this knowledge, his/her divine spark can return to the one, true and good Godhead.

Casement describes the story of Sophia as the eruption of the need for God’s self-reflection. Christ’s message is a message of completeness, but one of *masculine perfection*: the story of Job’s integrity in the face of suffering and Yahweh’s acceptance of *His* shadow. Sophia, on the other hand, is equally a message of completeness, Casement argues, but it is a *feminine message* achieved through reflection, revelation, and the possibility of transfiguration.<sup>131</sup> In their writings, early Christians drew from and accommodated this feminine message and described Sophia in various ways: a distinct, fourth hypostasis alongside the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; personified knowledge and insight; the “soul”; the Holy Spirit; or Christ’s “bride,” a metaphor for the Church. In the Proverbs 9:10-13 (KJV), Sophia assumes two female forms, ideal Wisdom and the woman Folly:

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 106.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and knowledge of the holy is understanding. For by me thy days will be multiplied, and years of thy life shall be increased. If thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself: but if thou scornest, thou alone shalt bear it. A foolish woman is clamorous: she is simple, and knoweth nothing.

The woman Folly invites the simple passers-by into her home, “but he [the passer-by] knoweth not that the dead are there; and that her guests are in the depths of hell” (Proverbs 9:18). Thus, Sophia is on one hand a radiant symbol of God’s love and redemption and, on the other hand, she is the ultimate symbol of the consequence of sin, corrupt and whorish. The idea of Sophia embodies the expected duality of perfection and corruption, but, at the same time, points to its potential resolution. Sophia’s dual personality is clearly reflected in the system of Valentinian Gnosticism, where she plays the binary role of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom; in the world of spirit) and Sophia Prunikos (Wisdom the Whore; in the world of matter).<sup>132</sup>

At the *fin de siècle*, the Sophia narrative was a powerful one that resonated with many intellectuals. This was especially true in Russia. The masculine message of completeness embodied in Christ’s perfection, at least metaphorically, was arguably being achieved by science, medicine, and technology. The very process of modernization had made men and women rulers of their own destiny and “salvation.” The story of Sophia, however, had seemingly long ago anticipated the messiness and uncertainty of the sinful consequence of this “natural eschatology”: corruption, grief, illness, and loss—that is, demonic despair.

A select group of Russian thinkers was moved by the ancient idea of Sophia and invoked the redemptive story of her love, divinity, and transcendent knowledge and light in the construction and poetization of their own spiritual quests. In the composition of their personal *fin-de-siècle* counter-narratives, the principal features of the Sophia narrative—awakening,

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<sup>132</sup> See Maria Carlson, “Gnostic Elements in the Cosmogony of Vladimir Solov’ev,” in *Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Richard Gustafson and Judith Kornblatt (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 49-67.

knowledge, love, transfiguration, and unity—were synthesized into the symbol of the poet’s and philosopher’s muse. Thus the story of Sophia became the core archetype in the Russian Symbolists’ creation of myth—life creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*)—as contingent upon a notion of a supra-natural Eternal Feminine, described earlier by Goethe. The poet, like the alchemist and the scientist, possessed the knowledge, or perfected skill and technique, embodied in Christ’s message of masculine completeness in the phenomenal realm. Such a poet desired to unite with Sophia, the Wisdom of God, and transform himself into something higher or better, if not into the full realization of corporeality overcome. The poet’s wife, muse, or lover possessed the signs and symptoms of Sophia’s divine spark and mediated between the phenomenal and noumenal realms. For the poet, as Jennifer Presto asserts, Sophia’s message of feminine completeness served the “wife-function” or “muse-function” in “his” [the poet’s] quest for the restoration of wholeness and sought-after transcendence and transformation.<sup>133</sup>

The Russian Symbolists were inspired in this by the Russian philosopher and theologian Vladimir Solov’ev (1853–1900), who developed an aesthetic system by which the poet could access and employ the transformative capacity of Sophia’s message of feminine completeness. As we shall see below, Solov’ev’s aesthetic system asserted that it is the role of the (male) lyrical persona to read, translate, and make known, or bring about an awakening of, the meaning of the signs of the divine feminine principle—the catalyst for the realization of human history—within his muse. Thus, the foundation of the Russian Symbolist counter-narrative to degeneration—mythopoesis—was often “religious” and/or “theological” in vocabulary, pose, cognition, perception, and practice and closely tied to the duality embodied within the notion of Sophia.

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<sup>133</sup> Jennifer Presto, “Women in Russian Symbolism: Beyond the Algebra of Love,” in *History of Women’s Writing in Russia*, eds. Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M. Gheith (Port Chester: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 134-135.

Underpinning this master narrative of transformism that the Christ story tells—underscored by Job and Wisdom-Sophia—is the idea of cleavage—that is, cleavage between perfection and distortion, matter and spirit, light and dark, good and evil, salvation and damnation. The spiritual impetus for the resolution or healing of such cleavage(s) inspired Russian Symbolists like Andrei Belyi. To this list of cleavages can be added yet another: legitimate insanity and the madness of true belief. The diagnostic distinction between insanity and divine madness is ancient and classical in origin and its narrative has played a significant role in the history of philosophy. Plato spent time articulating its subtleties. St. Paul celebrated the foolishness of the faithful in his letters to the Corinthians, and Erasmus and Augustine devoted significant time to the explication of Paul’s assertion and its meaning and purpose for human salvation. This “official” discourse about noumenal versus phenomenal madness was complimented by a rich cultural history of holy fools and the persistence of magical thinking and shamanistic initiation rites and practices within human thought: the very things that the new discipline of anthropology was exploring.

For our interests, it is significant to note that the Russian Symbolists were part of this quest for higher truths and transformation. This longing for restoration of wholeness was not merely an elite phenomenon; rather, it touched all levels and layers of their contemporary society. At the *fin de siècle*, people experimented with a variety of treatment methods to resolve their illness of spirit, grief, and loss.

Briusov was no exception. In his novel *Fiery Angel*, Briusov described this pattern of philosophical seeking and study among his peers through the autobiographical character and narrator Ruprecht. Though he dropped out of his medical training, Ruprecht asserted that he was an enlightened man who had studied the works of Bernhard Walther, Paracelsus, Copernicus,

and Erasmus—that “wanderer in the valley of the humanities, *valli humanitatis*.”<sup>134</sup> To this already impressive list, Ruprecht added Catullus, Martial, Calpurnius, Plato, and numerous others throughout the novel. In his study with his friend Friedrich, Ruprecht stated: “In the compositions of our own age, less perfect but nearer to us, we learned *to be conscious* of that which, heretofore, had lived and swarmed within our souls, but had no words” [italics mine].<sup>135</sup> Here Briusov admits to Nietzsche’s influence on his generation. Briusov, via Ruprecht, continued: “We recognized our own, up to that point nebulous, views in the inexhaustibly amusing ‘Praise of Folly’” by Erasmus and other works by the great philosopher Plato.<sup>136</sup> Briusov asserted through his protagonist Ruprecht that, however “foolish” or “mad” it appeared, he and his fellow Symbolists sought, for a time, eternal human truths and strove to enact them. In line with Eliade’s assertion cited earlier, that modern, *fin-de-siècle* men and women assumed “the millenarian dream of the alchemist,” Briusov’s narrator stated: we read “everything that we could in our secluded backwater, transforming the attic of the apothecary into the Academy,” adding that “in the creations of the godlike Plato we looked into the remotest depths of human wisdom, not comprehending all, but moved by all.”<sup>137</sup>

In this manner, Briusov, in his admittedly autobiographical novel *Fiery Angel*, described his observation of the Symbolist attempts at alchemy and experiments with mythopoesis, or the writing of one’s own myth. Mythopoesis could also be described as an enterprise—born out of German transcendental philosophy—to construct a system of abstract thought, meaning, and

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<sup>134</sup> Valerii Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, v. 4 (Moscow: Khud. lit., 1974), 17: “путником долины человечности, vallis humanitatis.”

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 19: “В сочинениях нашего века, менее совершенных, но более нам близких, научились мы сознавать то, что уже раньше, не имея слов, жило и роилось в нашей душе.”

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.: “Мы увидели свои собственные, до тех пор ещё туманные, взгляды—в неистощимо-забавной ‘Похвале Глупости.’”

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.: “все, что могли достать в нашем захолустье, обращая чердак аптеки в Академию”; “а в творениях богоподобного Платона заглянули в самые глухие глубины человеческой мудрости, не всё понимая, но всем потрясённые.”

purpose for the self-conscious subject. Thereby the artist, poet, or author could produce a message and method of healing for the *fin-de-siècle* psychopathology of psychic fragmentation. Russian Symbolists sought to compose a narrative, their own counter-narrative, to traditional Christian eschatology and the potentially bleak outcome of evolution's story. It was the philosophical longing, as Roger Scruton states it, "to show how the *whole* of things can emerge from this tiny seed of self," the thing-in-itself that Kant had posited, and the processes of perception, cognition, and self-awareness that successive intellectuals like Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, Schiller, Marx, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche strove to explicate.<sup>138</sup>

For a few brief years at the turn of the twentieth century, a group of inspired and adventurous Russian poets "heretically" assumed for themselves the theurgy—divine or spiritual action among humankind—about which Christ's story of transformation told. As the next section will demonstrate, the story of Sophia and gnosis played no small part in this experiment. Successive chapters will show that after Russian Symbolists failed at this experiment, Briusov diagnosed the psychic consequences and ramifications as the madness or folly of true belief and, perhaps, a form of suffering once again wrought by the Devil or Satan himself.

### **Transformation according to Vladimir Solov'ev**

The intellectual and aesthetic movement Symbolism, along with its older sibling Decadence, was a reaction and response to this overwhelming sense of loss and demonic despair at the *fin de siècle*. To restore wholeness, the Russian Symbolists polemicized the mystical and theurgic potential offered by the act of artistic creation to resolve the crisis of culture and conscious. The movement was characterized by diverse and at times conflicting

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<sup>138</sup> Scruton, "Continental Philosophy from Fichte to Sartre," 193.

conceptualizations about the extent to and means by which “Art” could voice and identify, if not transfigure, an ailing civilization. If there were a unifying principle among the diverse intellectuals who identified as “Symbolist” at the turn of the twentieth century, it was their interest in occultism and desire to access and synthesize higher “truths.” They sought a philosophical system by which humankind could draw from the “faculties”—intuition, reason, understanding, imagination, reflection, and judgment (the components of freedom and will) discussed among idealist German philosophers—to gain possession of self-knowledge. With this new self-knowledge, the Russian Symbolists hoped to restore purpose and meaning in life in the face of the *fin-de-siècle* narrative of transformation and the new “natural eschatology” it carried with it. At the same time, emboldened by this opportunity to be the creative alchemists Eliade described, the theurgic opportunity to right the demonic despair of the decadent imagination at the *fin de siècle* was carried to its full philosophical, and, for many tragic, conclusion(s) among artists, theologians, and politicians in Russia.

The decadent imagination questioned the reality of the external world. Imbedded in this questioning was a re-evaluation of the nature of one’s place in it—a conceptual product of one’s processes of perception and cognition. As a result, *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals experienced a similar crisis of faith that had defined the sixteenth century. In their polemics about the notion of divine permission and the power and influence of the Devil in the phenomenal realm, Luther, Calvin, and Roman Catholic priests had debated the boundaries between the physical and spiritual world and the contours of demonic reality. For answers they looked to Plato, Aristotle, the lives of saints, the ideas of early church fathers such as Aquinas and Augustine, and the Christian humanism of their contemporary, Erasmus of Rotterdam. They also sought answers to numerous theological questions in the precedents set by documented legal and medical cases of

possession and demonomania, two afflictions that shared much in common with the *fin-de-siècle* diagnosis of hysteria and which will be further explicated in the following chapters.

As examples of afflictions wrought by “outside” influences or at least (perceived) revelation, possession and demonomania shone a bright light on questions about freedom and will. In the sixteenth century, this was selfhood in the face of the Devil; in the nineteenth century, this became human spirit in the face the indifference of nature, biology, and science.

The historian H. C. Erik Midelfort recounts that when sixteenth-century jurists, theologians, and medical professionals investigated cases of demonic affliction, they revisited cases of possession that dated back to Roman times. In like fashion, *fin-de-siècle* society looked to a similarly constructed “ancient” Classical past for philosophical answers and, as expected, often sought meaning and insight in the polemics of the sixteenth century. After all, did not many of the questions and “answers” raised by dynamic psychiatrists resemble and reflect the Gothic and supernatural “dark side” of the Enlightenment? Symbolists asked themselves this loaded question: can reason exist without “the irrational,” as light cannot exist without darkness, or good without evil? Briusov’s novel *Fiery Angel* is an excellent example of this kind of questioning, underscoring the cyclical nature of illnesses that repeatedly manifested in the signs and symptoms of “possession” and “hysteria” in Western history: two afflictions that often times revolved around a (perceived) “fixed idea.”

At the very moment that physicians like Max Nordau were denigrating and actively diagnosing mysticism as the foremost symptom indicative of degeneration, psychosis, and hysteria, an elite and exclusive group of Russian intellectuals, philosophers, and artists were writing a counter-narrative which upheld a mystical notion that the existential crisis facing Western civilization could be resolved through *theurgy*, or “god-working.” Nietzsche had

famously stated: “You will be like gods.” Russian Symbolists took upon themselves a mystical mission to emulate the creative act of God.

The Symbolists believed that in creating a textual world, the poet changes the surrounding world. For them, art became sacred; the act of creating texts became an act of creation imitating God’s, an act that transfigured reality. Thus, Symbolists elevated art to a religion and the act of creation to a religious act. Much like a master alchemist, the poet now functioned as a select and chosen priest in this process of transformation. One’s act of creation in the image of God, however, does not necessarily lead to redemption. Creating as God could also be a usurpation of divine prerogative; it could also be Promethean, demonic, or Luciferian—the root of Romantic rebellion and guilt. The result is a tension between two desires. The first is to be redeemed through the act of creation and the second is to prove one’s self to be the equal of god through the act of creation. These two desires are contrasted as a light goal and a dark goal, the first transcending while the second is damning.

The Symbolists’ notion of theurgic quest was influenced by the Russian philosopher Vladimir Solov’ev, who developed a telos, or ultimate end, aim, and purpose, for human life through a “universal process of reconciliation” between the physical and spiritual planes of existence. He sought an evolutionary reconciliation among beauty, sexuality, and reproduction that he called Vse-edinstvo—or “All-Unity.” Solov’ev believed that “All-Unity” functioned as a fundamental *Idea*, which Vladimir Wozniuk describes as a “unity-of-everything,” “originating in the mind of God, but only imperfectly realized in corporeal reality.”<sup>139</sup> Solov’ev’s theory of an all-unifying Idea synthesized the aesthetics and philosophy of Platonism, Gnosticism, German Idealism (especially dialectical philosophy), medieval theology (that of Erasmus, for example),

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<sup>139</sup> Vladimir Soloviev, *The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics by V. S. Soloviev*, ed. and trans. Vladimir Wozniuk (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), xiv.

and the science of evolution in an attempt to resolve the illness of spirit and demonic despair at the end of the nineteenth century.

Solov'ev identified two principles, or mysteries, at work in this process of reconciliation: 1) *syzygy*, or cosmic alignment, and 2) and *Hagia Sophia*, as described above, the embodiment of the feminine principle of completeness. A key figure in Gnosticism, Sophia is an eternal divine feminine emanation of God, whose eventual return and reabsorption into the Deity embodies the potential salvation of humanity and all of creation. "But where will art take this enlightening and regenerative power from?" Solov'ev asked, and then suggested a possible answer:

If art must not be limited to the distraction of man from the evils of life, but must correct the evils themselves, then this great goal cannot be achieved by the simple reproduction of reality. To configure does not yet mean to transfigure, and unmasking still is not improvement. Pure art lifted man above the earth, carried him off to Olympic heights; new art returns to earth with love and compassion, and not in order to be plunged into the darkness of earthly life. We do not need art for that, but rather for *the healing and renewal of this life*.<sup>140</sup> [italics mine]

In Solov'ev's application of the all-unifying idea, "artists and poets should once again become priests and prophets," for "the religious idea will not just reign over them, but they themselves will direct it and consciously control its earthly incarnations."<sup>141</sup> In other words, art and the artist could become "a *substantive force*, elucidating and regenerating the entire human world."<sup>142</sup> Once again, Eliade's words are relevant; for many *fin-de-siècle* thinkers, humankind was the master alchemist of this new natural eschatology established by modern science.

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<sup>140</sup> Vladimir Soloviev, "Three Addresses in Memory of Dostoevsky," in *The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics*, ed. and trans. Vladimir Wozniuk (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 4. All translations of Solov'ev are Vladimir Wozniuk's.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 4.

Solov'ev's mysticism and universal process was an attempt to reconcile tenets of Judeo-Christian and Gnostic theology, a religious and spiritual world view, and scientific naturalism (understanding scientific naturalism to represent a monistic, secular, rationalist, and anti-authoritarian world view that asserts that the universe operates according to determinable, mechanical laws and not according to any form of supernatural intervention). In this, Solov'ev further engaged German transcendental philosophers.

Roy Porter emphasized that “while reviling the flesh as tainted by sin, Christianity also emphasized the sacred immanent therein. This double vision is central to orthodox theology, whose job was to map out a difficult middle ground.”<sup>143</sup> Solov'ev attempted to develop an aesthetic philosophy that could transcend this middle ground. Thus, he redressed a very old myth, or archetype—humankind's dual nature, spirit and flesh, and anticipated redemption—into a new vocabulary with a more naturalistic face. Solov'ev observed the illness of spirit and demonic despair wrought by the Enlightenment's removal of divinity from nature and human purpose. In defense of a cosmic reality, Solov'ev defined beauty as a “product of real natural processes (*proizvedenie real'nykh estestvennykh protsessov*) perfected in the universe”; “we should define beauty as *the transformation of matter through the embodiment in it of another, supra-material principle.*”<sup>144</sup>

The carrier of Solov'ev's vision and the mainstay of his counter-narrative was his projection of Wisdom-Sophia. She was the archetypal principle of feminine completeness and the embodiment of the Idea of love, absolute and free. According to Solov'ev, inorganic nature in repose could be transformed by love and beauty (aesthetics), purified (catharsis), and endowed with spiritual courage.

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<sup>143</sup> Roy Porter, “Religion and Medicine,” 1451.

<sup>144</sup> Solov'ev, “Three Addresses,” 37, 36.

Solov'ev elevated the *artist* to the role of natural scientist and then to spiritual alchemist who could transform the lowly content of the phenomenal realm into something higher and more meaningful, just as lowly coal was perfected in the diamond. Solov'ev elevated the *poet* to the role of priest, for "it is people of faith who *create life*."<sup>145</sup> A poet like Christ, who was invested with Godmanhood or Solov'ev's notion of *syzygy*, could heal the psychic apprehension of the shattered body and mind of modern man and woman. In I Corinthians 12:4, the Apostle Paul stated that "now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit," and in verse 12:9 asserted that healing is a specific gift of the Spirit (KJV). As Porter pointed out, "did not the incarnate Christ Himself, while instructing physicians to heal themselves, give proofs of His own divine power by acts of healing? Some thirty-five such miracles are recorded."<sup>146</sup> The poet, now a priest and healer able to achieve *syzygy*, now assumed a higher, divine role. The ultimate goal of the *fin-de-siècle* principle of transformation was no less than the transmutation and transfiguration of dross into gold, of matter into spirit.

Solov'ev's counter-narrative and "call" to restore psychic wholeness at the end of the nineteenth century affected Andrei Belyi and, for a time, Valerii Briusov. Between the years 1904 and 1905 the two of them attempted an experiment in the application of Solov'ev's philosophy about life and art and the cosmic principles of change they believed life and art could master. In the immediate years that followed, Briusov and Belyi engaged in heated polemics about the success or failure of their experiment in Solov'ev's *Idea*. Belyi remained hopeful and ambivalent; it was Briusov, however, who explicitly diagnosed this perceived divine "foolishness of true belief," mysticism, and eschatological confidence as nothing more than

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>146</sup> Porter, "Religion and Medicine," 1452.

deception, delusion, and a genuine disease. The record of that diagnosis is his novel, *The Fiery Angel*.

## CHAPTER 2

### Life

“Beauty will save the world,” Dostoevskii concluded, and it was with this assertion that Vladimir Solov’ev (1853–1900) repeatedly engaged in his philosophical essays.<sup>147</sup> Dostoevskii’s words stimulated Solov’ev to speculate about the role art and the independent act of creation played in the master narrative of transformation. He debated the extent to which art and the pursuit of beauty were effective measures against the “real” threat of degeneration, decay, and despair at the *fin de siècle*. He asserted, as cited in Chapter One, that “we should define beauty as the *transformation of matter through the embodiment in it of another supra-natural principle*.”<sup>148</sup>

Solov’ev’s notion of beauty reflected the innovation and discoveries of secular scientific naturalism throughout the nineteenth century. His definition of beauty extended the new natural

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<sup>147</sup> “Beauty will save the world” are the prophetic words of redemption stated by the Christ-like character Prince Myshkin in Dostoevskii’s novel *The Idiot* (1868). This is also the quote that Solov’ev chose for the epigraph for his philosophical essay “Beauty in Nature” (1889), with which I engage in my discussion. The significance Dostoevskii plays in the development of Solov’ev’s ideas about life, art, and beauty are further emphasized in his “Three Addresses in Memory of Dostoevskii” (1881–1883).

<sup>148</sup> V. S. Solov’ev, “Beauty in Nature,” in *The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics*, ed. and trans. Vladimir Wozniuk (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 36. All translations of Solov’ev are Vladimir Wozniuk’s.

eschatology and psychopathology of modern men and women into the realm of aesthetics.<sup>149</sup>

“Beauty is indeed a fact,” Solov’ev insisted, “a product of real natural processes perfected in the universe.”<sup>150</sup> To demonstrate this in the terms of materialism, Solov’ev compared a piece of coal to a diamond: made of the same substance, “a diamond, which, although of lowly content, is a perfected and finished expression of its Idea of stone-made-lucid.”<sup>151</sup> He added that “the criterion of aesthetic worthiness is the greatest perfected and multifaceted embodiment of this ideal moment of a given substance.”<sup>152</sup> The story Solov’ev told here is an ancient alchemical one of the transmutation and transfiguration of material dross into spiritual gold. Solov’ev proposed that the artist facilitates this process of transformation, and, thus, through the realization of true beauty, the artist could indeed “save the world.” “The aesthetically beautiful,” Solov’ev surmised, “should lead to an actual improvement of reality.”<sup>153</sup>

During the initial years of the twentieth century, Solov’ev’s ideas affected an elite and sophisticated set of Russian artists and philosophers who called themselves Symbolists. They wanted to re-poeticize the phenomenal world and write a counter-narrative to the *fin-de-siècle* master pathology and dire narrative of degeneration. The Russian Symbolists felt a “call” to rehabilitate the pervasive illness of spirit at the end of the nineteenth century—or what Jean Pierrat elegantly described as the “disharmony between self and world” that had been wrought by “the baleful influence of science, which simultaneously depoeticizes reality and destroys the

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<sup>149</sup> Mircea Eliade asserted the concept of a modern “natural eschatology” (as mentioned in Chapter One). He conjectured that throughout the nineteenth century, the process of industrialization and the accomplishments of scientific laboratories had revealed the extent to which humans could control and master “nature” in a way that permitted them to control their destiny and “supplant time.” In a similar fashion, Henri Ellenberger identified a new psychopathology for *fin-de-siècle* men and women, who could now, through advancements in medicine, better treat, cure, and prevent illness and disease; ultimately, people could live longer. He believed this led to a new psychopathology about death and the meaning and purpose of human existence.

<sup>150</sup> Solov’ev, “Beauty in Nature,” 37.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 30.

consoling certainties of religious belief.”<sup>154</sup> In many ways, the elegance, simplicity, and profundity of Dostoevskii’s words inspired Solov’ev and thereby his intellectual heirs to ponder, seek, and attempt an *aesthetic eschatology* by which to resolve the crisis of culture and consciousness that characterized Russia and Western Europe at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Symbolist movement’s “official” leader Valerii Briusov asserted that the aesthetic school of Symbolism was necessary to convey the *fin-de-siècle* mind-set and experience. He pointed out: “What if I tried to write a treatise on spectral analysis couched in the language of Homer? I wouldn’t have the words or expressions. The same thing if I try to express *fin-de-siècle* sensations in Pushkin’s language. Yes, Symbolism is necessary!”<sup>155</sup> The issue was to find the language and vocabulary that would allow Symbolism to express itself, its world view, and its historical time appropriately.

To express and rehabilitate the modern psychopathology of turn-of-the-twentieth-century society, Russian Symbolists developed a theory of analogy rooted in the occult.<sup>156</sup> Occult ideas, symbols, and vocabularies were recycled and reinterpreted in the thematics, aesthetics, and philosophies of the Russian Symbolists. They were drawn to the idea of correspondences found in the occult doctrine. They embraced the foundational assertion, “As above, so below, and as below, so above, to accomplish the miracle of the one thing.” These famous words from an early medieval mystical text, the *Tabula Smaragdina* of Hermes Trismegistus, express the implicit identity of the microcosm and the macrocosm, the ancient belief that the living human being embodies the principles of the universe, and the conviction that the great world was itself a

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<sup>154</sup> Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination: 1880–1900*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 14.

<sup>155</sup> Joan Delaney Grossman, *The Diary of Valery Bryusov (1893–1905)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 4.

<sup>156</sup> *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

system of symbols or signs enclosing humankind.<sup>157</sup> The Symbolists believed that the phenomenal earthly realm is a mirror reflection of the supra-natural or higher noumenal spiritual realm. Symbolists set out to decode the correspondences and eternal verities that meaningfully connected the divine to the human and the past to the present, prophesying the future. To varying degrees they believed that the Word (*Logos*) and realized Beauty had transformational Power—divine, demonic, magic, theurgic. In other words, the Russian Symbolists accepted Solov’ev’s assertion that “actual art be a *matter of importance*” and upheld “its capacity to act profoundly and powerfully upon the real world.”<sup>158</sup>

Theirs was an attempt to fill the spiritual void created by nineteenth-century materialism and positivist science. A number of the Russian Symbolists, at times naively, invested their lives in the belief that, by re-poeticizing life through art, they could provide a remedy for the pervasive illness of spirit at the turn of the twentieth century. Symbolist artists engaged the languages of occultism, spiritualism, practical and spiritual alchemy, and pagan and Christian mystical theology in their quest to revitalize existence, restore a sense of “wholeness,” and thereby, so they hoped, redeem spirit, or the divine spark, in matter.

In the case of Briusov, he excelled, often through the aura of the demonic, to capture and aestheticize the despair, malaise, and sense of loss that characterized the culmination of the late nineteenth century. In fact, Briusov actively imported and translated the ideas and works of the (primarily French) *fin-de-siècle* decadent imagination. Briusov suggested to his fellow Russian peers that they esteem and emulate a “pantheon” of Western predecessors, such as Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Emile Verhaeren, Henrik Ibsen, Knut Hamsun, and especially Edgar Allan Poe. From among Russian artists, in addition to Solov’ev, Briusov

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>158</sup> Solov’ev, “Beauty in Nature,” 29.

and his peers celebrated Aleksandr Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, Fedor Tiutchev, and Afanasii Fet. Briusov's choice of translations demonstrates the extent to which he and his colleagues also admired Virgil and Byron. His admiration was on point with current European trends. Sigmund Freud, for example, chose a line from Virgil's *Aeneid* as an epigraph to his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), which appears to underscore how he both understood this medieval world view and drew upon it in his approach to the study of unconscious processes: "If I cannot blend the Higher Powers, I will move the infernal regions" (*Aeneid* 7:312).

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) and Novalis (1772–1801; pseudonym of Georg Philipp Friedrich, Freiherr von Hardenberg) were also celebrated predecessors in the *fin-de-siècle* pantheon as a whole. Goethe's *Faust*, for example, is the story of a scholar who exchanges his soul for knowledge. The appeal of *Faust* is that it functions as a warning narrative that speaks less to the demonological and more to the destructive forces of desire, much like Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. In his explication of witchcraft and the sticking power of occultism and the image of the witch, Malcom Gaskill states: "Today, Faustianism is associated with the pact between man and modernism that has resulted in war, economic crisis, and ecological catastrophe."<sup>159</sup> Freud's choice of Virgil's words as his epigraph to his scientific study, for example, exposed both this "Faustianism" at the turn of the twentieth century and at least two other tendencies. First is the tendency, in the collective consciousness of a culture, to allow fiction to trump history, and second is the tendency, as Gaskill points out, for occultism to fill the gap in the negotiation of power that defines "revolutions," when the "*Gesellschaft* [society] [makes] concessions to the ethos of the *Gemeinschaft* [community]."<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Malcom Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Kindle edition.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

The word occult, *occultus* or “secret” in Latin, refers to a body of ancient hidden wisdom. Occult wisdom is esoteric in essence, because it is reserved for an apprenticed, learned, and initiated few. The occult is a system of knowledge with practical and theoretical dimensions and a world view concerned with the perception of reality. Leonid Heller defines occultism as “practical ways to impact the world, using the complicity of supernatural forces.”<sup>161</sup> The occult functions as a secret science that investigates and seeks to uncover and teach, if not master, nature’s mysteries. The occult is relevant to the act of artistic creation because it promises to do such things as: erode the boundaries between the seen and unseen, heighten the senses of an artist, and organize (mystical) experience into concrete words, images, and objects. In its practical dimension occultism “focuses on the techniques and procedures used to manipulate and control the supernatural and unknown, whether by magic, incantation, study, or disciplined will,” and in its theoretical dimension occultism “is a broad, synthetic (and frequently syncretic) philosophical system, a world view that seeks to understand the supernatural and the unknown by penetrating to a hidden mystery wisdom that purports to explain man and the universe.”<sup>162</sup>

Both the practical and theoretical dimensions of occult thinking represent a quest to broaden one’s consciousness. Gnosis, broadly defined as a form of mystical enlightenment, is a category of occultism and was applied in practical (mythic) and religious ways in magic, astrology, and alchemy as established by the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, attributed to one Hermes Trismegistus and dating to the second century. Allison Coudert established that there were two sides to alchemy that attracted different kinds of men:

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<sup>161</sup> Cited in N. A. Bogomolov, *Ruskaia literatura nachala XX veka i okkul'tizm* (Moscow: Literaturnoe obozrenie, 1999), 6: “практические способы воздействия на мир, использующие соучастие сверхъестественных сил.”

<sup>162</sup> Maria Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth: A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875–1922* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 10.

The “tough-minded,” to use William James’s graphic phrase, were anxious to ensure the good life here and now. They were attracted to alchemy through the intoxicating notion of inexhaustible wealth and eternal youth. More often than not they dissipated their wealth and embittered their lives fruitlessly seeking to transmute base metal into gold and old flesh into youthful suppleness. There were also the “tender-minded” souls, tormented by the cruel brevity of life and thirsting after the still waters and deeper meaning of it all.<sup>163</sup>

These tender-minded “joined the ranks of spiritual alchemists, who actually did find the elusive stone in their search for spiritual riches in the world to come.”<sup>164</sup> Coudert emphasized that both kinds of men (and women) were fueled “by the same all too human longing to achieve stability and permanence in a world which offers neither.”<sup>165</sup> Not surprisingly, this narrative of both practical and theoretical (or spiritual) alchemy struck a chord in the hearts and minds of modern men and women who sought to re-enchant the world, a world, sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) asserted, which had lost its mystery at the hands of modernity. Thus, there is a certain psychology to how one approaches reality and applies the idea of alchemy (as C.G. Jung’s extensive researches into alchemy demonstrate).

What the popularity and pervasiveness of occultism (to include spiritualism) at the *fin de siècle* reveal is the extent to which many intellectuals—whether consciously, unconsciously, or ambiguously—resisted strict binary oppositions between matter and spirit, outer and inner worlds, and visible and invisible realms. Despite all its mystical dressings, occultism provided modern men and women a means by which they could approach the liminality of nature’s mysteries with reason and rationality. Many people defended the occult as a valid science that deserved a place in academia. Briusov upheld the veracity of the phenomena he witnessed at séances, recorded them, and was quick to encapsulate them in and apply them to his art.

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<sup>163</sup> Allison Coudert, *Alchemy: The Philosopher’s Stone* (Boulder: Shambhala Publication, Inc., 1980), 13.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

Russian Symbolists used the language of the occult to structure three things: a world view, or philosophical principle about life; a myth of the genuine artist; and an aesthetic method for the act of creation. They developed a philosophical principle about the relationship between life and art called life creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*): “[s]ymbolism was a method of living as well as writing.”<sup>166</sup> Russian Symbolists extracted this principle from spiritual alchemy and transmuted literature into a creative practice to be mastered, an “aesthetic organization of behavior” whereby life became art and art became life.<sup>167</sup> Out of their philosophical principle and alchemical practice of life creation a “Symbolist myth of the artist” emerged; Irene Masing-Delic describes it as “the artist as Pygmalion”—“the classical Greek story of a metamorphosis of art into life.”<sup>168</sup>

I submit that the concept of Russian Symbolist life creation was an attempt to write a mythopoetic counter-narrative to degeneration theory and the negative consequences of the nineteenth century’s secular “biologization of the social.” The Symbolist counter-narrative was a retelling of the master narrative of transformation invested in the ancient concept of (spiritual) alchemy and also Solov’ev’s notion of Beauty and belief in the redemptive efficacy of art, Beauty, and the (priestly) artist. The Symbolist mythopoetic counter-narrative to degeneracy enacted Solov’ev’s cosmic principle of unity, *syzygy*, a message of completeness that united two ideas: 1) *the masculine idea of perfection*, or mastery of technique and “matter” in the image of such figures as Poet, priest, (Christ-like) savior, or mage, and 2) *the feminine idea of restored divinity*, or the Gnostic resolution of corrupt matter and pure spirit in the image of the Wisdom-Sophia.

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<sup>166</sup> Grossman, *The Diary of Valery Bryusov*, 15.

<sup>167</sup> Irina Paperno, “Introduction,” in *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 2; Bogomolov, *Russkaia literatura*, 5.

<sup>168</sup> Irene Masing-Delic, “Creating the Living Work of Art: The Symbolist Pygmalion and His Antecedents,” in *Creating Life*, 51-82.

Symbolists drew many of their images, analogies, and themes from established narratives about transformation, transmutation, and transfiguration that had percolated in the Western mind for centuries. They were inspired by the seemingly congruent notions of death and resurrection, ascent and descent, and fragmentation and restoration of wholeness contained within such narratives as: the Christ narrative, the myths of Apollo and Dionysos, Wisdom-Sophia, the story of practical and theoretical occultism, and the philosophy of spiritual alchemy.

Allison Coudert described spiritual alchemy, which reached its peak in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as a “more rational and experimentally oriented craft” rooted in the vocabulary of craftsmen, artisans, and early chemists that “filled the religious needs of an age adrift on a sea of conflicting ideologies.”<sup>169</sup> Not surprisingly, Solov’ev’s story about coal’s transmutation into a diamond and his aesthetic and philosophical application of “Beauty” to *fin-de siècle* natural eschatology reiterate the language of medieval spiritual alchemists, such as Rosinus, whom Coudert cites:

And as man is composed of four elements, so also is the stone, and so it is [dug] out of man, and you are its ore, namely by working; and from you it is extracted, namely by division—and in you it remains inseparably, namely through science.<sup>170</sup>

Rosinus applied the language of “science” and engineering to describe a mystical process. In alchemy, “science” has two senses: the hard sciences one associates with physical mining and also “scientia.” Alchemy was laboratory chemistry, but at its root it was “a philosophy of life

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<sup>169</sup> Coudert, *Alchemy*, 82, 83.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

expressed in terms of chemical reactions” and the continuous refinement of matter that was “based on the belief that everything in the world is alive and striving for perfection.”<sup>171</sup>

Founded upon Solov’ev’s reworking of the principle of unity, transformation, and the mystical act of creation that lies at the core of spiritual alchemy, Russian Symbolists developed an aesthetic eschatology of their own: in the image of God (Word made Flesh), the true artist could turn his/her life into a textual world (myth) and thereby transfigure himself/herself and—above/so below—transfigure the world. Both Briusov and Belyi, for a time, valued this counter-narrative to degeneracy as a valid science.

The Russian Symbolist Andrei Belyi actively developed and articulated this notion that life is a complex of signs, symbols, and omens to be perceived, cognized, interpreted, mythopoeticized—that is, aestheticized, rewritten, and enacted—and then transmitted to other seekers through the life and art of a true poet. Echoing Solov’ev, Belyi asserted: “Life is individual [personal] creation.”<sup>172</sup> He determined that the act of cognition is an act of creating, followed by naming that which has been cognized; it is the moment when a Poet “speaks the Word” and gives form and existence to what has been created. Belyi stated: “The goal of art is rooted in the creation of the objects of cognition themselves; we must either transmute life into art or endow art with life : at that moment the meaning of art is revealed and sanctified.”<sup>173</sup> Belyi believed that a poet’s process of cognition (i.e., the process of creation and naming) is a form-giving and life-regenerating religious and magical act he called theurgy, or god-working.

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>172</sup> Andrei Belyi, “Iskusstvo,” in *Arabeski. Kniga statei* (Moscow: Musaget, 1911), 43: “Жизнь есть личное творчество.”

<sup>173</sup> Andrei Belyi, “Magiia slov” (1909), in *Simvolizm. Kniga statei* (Moscow: Musaget, 1910), 437: “Цель искусства коренится в творчестве самих объектов познания; нужно или жизнь превратить в искусство, или искусство сделать жизненным: тогда открывается и освящается смысл искусства.”

“Creativity,” he wrote, “carried to its end, crosses without mediation into religious creativity, into theurgy.”<sup>174</sup> But how was theurgy to be achieved?

We must forget the present: we must recreate everything anew: to achieve this, we must [first] create ourselves.

At the summit, our own “I” awaits us.

The answer for the poet is: if he wants to remain an artist without ceasing to be a man, he should become his very own art form.

Only this form of creativity still promises us salvation.

And in this lies the future of art.<sup>175</sup>

According to Belyi, the process of creation as an act of cognition and the subsequent act of naming what has been cognized was the alchemical process by which a poet emulated God and transformed reality, his/her individual life, and the world. Thus, the artist was the “instrument”—facilitator, savior, priest, or mage—in this sacred and religious act of transmuting matter into spirit. Or, analogously, as Solov’ev had asserted, the gifted and chosen artist transformed the text of life according to the same natural eschatology and “science” that transformed the *Idea* of coal into the realization of true beauty and perfection embodied in a diamond. As a concept theurgy is equally Promethean, scientific, and magical. Symbolists like Belyi believed the act of theurgy could redeem humankind, nature, and history. This aesthetic eschatology was a retelling of the ancient narrative of spiritual alchemy, and it was the substance, process, and means by which an artist constructed his/her own myth.

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<sup>174</sup> Andrei Belyi, “Apokalipsis v russkoi poezii,” (1905) in *Lug zelenyi* (Moscow: Al’tsiona, 1910), 230: “Творчество, проведенное до конца, непосредственно переходит в религиозное творчество – теургию.”

<sup>175</sup> Andrei Belyi, “Budushchee iskusstvo” (1907), in *Simvolizm. Kniga statei* (Moscow: Musaget, 1910), 453: “Мы должны забыть настоящее: мы должны все снова пересоздать: для этого мы должны создать самих себя.

На вершине нас ждет наше я.

Вот ответ для художника: если он хочет остаться художником, не переставая быть человеком, он должен стать своей собственной художественной формой.

Только эта форма творчества еще сулит нам спасение.

Тут и лежит путь будущего искусства.”

Russian artists developed two applications for this metaphor of incarnation and transfiguration. Briusov and Belyi emerged as figureheads in the debate over exactly how an artist was to create the text of the artist's own life. The doctrine of alchemy shaped both Briusov and Belyi's ideas about life creation and the myth of the Symbolist artist. They disagreed, however, in their approach and application of alchemy in the life and art of an artist.

Most keenly between the years 1904 and 1905, Briusov and Belyi developed different philosophies, objectives, and methodologies for the pursuit of life creation. Briusov applied this alchemical philosophy in the practical dimension of the occult as *the praxis of an idea*. He defined it as ritual (ceremonial) magic, that is, as the demonic and/or Promethean manipulation of the natural world through words and symbols, which required discipline and esoteric training analogous to an apprenticeship in sorcery and witchcraft. In his brochure *On Art* (1899), Briusov pointed to the willed-action art and science can have upon the world:

Inwardly we observe that which we have not noticed before; here are phenomena [such as] the disintegration of the soul, double vision, suggestions; here are the resurrected secret doctrines of the Middle Ages (magic) and attempts at relations with invisible beings (spiritism). Consciousness, evidently, is preparing to celebrate yet another victory. At the moment arise a new art and a new science, more perfectly achieving their purposes.<sup>176</sup>

Under the influence of Solov'ev, Briusov and Belyi both engaged the *fin-de-siècle* master narrative of transformation and reflected modern society's new psychopathology. In other words, both applications of life creation identified and sought to resolve the illness of spirit that

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<sup>176</sup> Valerii Briusov, *O iskusstve*. Moscow, 1899. [http://dugward.ru/library/brusov/brusov\\_o\\_iskusstve.html](http://dugward.ru/library/brusov/brusov_o_iskusstve.html): “В душе своей мы усматриваем, чего не замечали прежде: вот явления распада души, двойного зрения, внушения; вот воскрешающие сокровенные учения средневековья (магия) и попытки сношений с невидимыми (спиритизм). Сознание, видимо, готовится торжествовать еще одну победу. Тогда возникнут новое искусство и новая наука, более совершенно достигающие своих целей.”

characterized the Russian mind-set at the turn of the twentieth century. What interests us is the extent to which Briusov and Belyi attempted to construct, apply, or, in the capacity of alchemists, *experiment* with their own respective aesthetic eschatology in pursuit of higher truths. The main difference remains that Briusov focused on the artist's efficacy in the phenomenal realm, whereas Belyi focused on increasing the artist's efficacy in the noumenal. As Briusov and Belyi composed and "performed" their respective myths in their own lives, Briusov found himself attracted to demonic, demoniac, and Dionysian analogies and Belyi toward saintly, priestly, and Apollonian ones—a tendency Belyi's peers often aestheticized as "angelic," if not "Christ-like."

In their competitive pursuit of life creation, Briusov and Belyi composed and performed myths about their lives as artists that counterpoised one another aesthetically, philosophically, and thematically. Two such constructs or assumed roles were the black mage versus the white mage and, drawn from Norse mythology, the story of the dark trickster Loki and the light and pure Balder. As we shall see, significant real-life experiences informed these constructs.

In the years 1904–1905 Briusov and Belyi engaged in one of the most famous "duels" of Russian Symbolism. This duel was fought on the battlegrounds of both life and art, and its psychological and ideological aspects form the biographical subtext of Briusov's novel *Fierce Angel*. On the surface, Briusov and Belyi challenged one another for the love of Nina Petrovskaja. Both men attempted to construct and employ her as a muse, and both believed that she had mediumistic abilities.<sup>177</sup> On a deeper level, Briusov and Belyi dueled over the ideological nature and purpose of the Symbolist notion of life creation and whether or not art had the theurgic potential to transfigure the phenomenal and material world into spirit. This

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<sup>177</sup> Briusov was also identified as a powerful medium in Russian spiritualist circles.

ideological duel was invested in occult philosophy and manifested on a psychological plane in their personal relationship and on the aesthetic level in their poetry and prose.

The real-life triangle of Briusov-Belyi-Petrovskaia can be described as *ultra-decadent* because its three participants all took the goal of “symbolism,” as Ronald Peterson defined it, to its most extreme expression in life and in art: “a symbol connotes a sign that needs to be deciphered and therefore invites the participation of a reader or a viewer to penetrate the mystery.”<sup>178</sup> This goal may be compared to the process by which a physician “reads” a patient’s signs and symptoms of illness and, through diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis, translates the “mystery” or contagion into a narrative of restoration and/or resolution. The term “ultra-decadent” is apt here, decadence being both a sign and symptom of degeneration. Used as an adjective, it indicates states of decay, decline, and deterioration—the tipping point at which a condition of vitality becomes too great, too elaborate, and too ripe. All three artists, Briusov, Petrovskaia, and Belyi, desired to revive themselves, their reality, and their reader by transforming the overripe fruits of their age of degeneracy and decline—the accomplishments of the nineteenth century—into a curative, if not medicinal, counter-narrative.

First, they cleverly encoded their own signs and symptoms of degeneration in symbols and self-constructed myths and then engaged the reader as an active participant in the decoding of those very symbols. By stimulating processes of cognition and naming, within themselves and their readers, the life-giving force of “speaking the Word,” they intended, to cure the modern illness of spirit and restore psychic wholeness again. Though applied and pursued differently (and with different degrees of self-consciousness) among all three Symbolists, Briusov, Belyi,

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<sup>178</sup> Ronald Peterson, *History of Russian Symbolism* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1993), xi.

and Petrovskaja at one point each believed this spiritual alchemy to be a valid and objective “scientia.”

Briusov and Belyi’s two fundamentally different interpretations of life creation generated divergent images, or identities, of the Symbolist poet among Russian artists. Briusov assumed the aura of the dark mage and black priest of art. Belyi did, in fact, call him this. Briusov’s version of Symbolism represented a physical fall and/or psychological “illness” in the form of the madness and guilt wrought by the defiant Promethean act of creation. Belyi assumed the aura of a white theurg, an angelic and Platonic winged soul. His version of Symbolism represented a “spiritual malady” in the form of religious hysteria wrought by the utopian quest for immortality and metaphysical unity with the Gnostic principle of the eternal feminine, Sophia, the Wisdom of God. Belyi and his “second” generation of Russian Symbolists, against the backdrop of Briusov’s “praxis of an idea,” approached the notion of life creation in this manner. The following chapter will demonstrate the extent to which Briusov, in his novel *Fiery Angel*, diagnosed and encoded both Symbolist “afflictions” as manifestations of *demonomania*, a medieval medical and spiritual condition suffered by saints and witches alike.

In addition to the roles of black mage and white mage, Briusov and Belyi developed a second aesthetic, philosophical, and thematic construct to delineate their divergent ideas about the nature and role of Symbolist life creation. At the end of 1904, Briusov composed “Balder and Loki,” a poem in which he compared his competition with Belyi for the affection of Nina Petrovskaja (and also her powerful mediumistic abilities and sexual vitality) to the Norse myth about the two gods. The myth tells the story of how the crafty, often malicious god Loki brought about the murder of Balder, a god of innocence, purity, and light. Briusov, naturally, identified himself with Loki and Belyi with Balder. What must be emphasized is that these aesthetic

constructions were not mere intellectual play between professional and romantic rivals. Rather, both men truly believed, at least at that moment, in the myth they were actively writing about themselves and about one another; both Briusov and Belyi believed in the eschatological efficacy their words and art had upon reality.

Unsettled by Briusov's poem, Belyi genuinely feared that Briusov intended to kill him. In a letter to Blok of 18–19 December 1904, Belyi revealed his paranoia: "Briusov removed his mask. He declared, that for the past year he has been 'creating a mirage.'" Belyi stated that "[Briusov] is a powerful hypnotizer," insisting that "[t]here have been mediumistic phenomena: the lamp in our apartment suddenly went out, even when no one extinguished it, and it was full of kerosene; we heard knocks." Belyi continued, reasoning that Briusov's black magic had released dark and demonic supra-natural beings that haunted him: "Not being able to attack openly, he [Briusov] troubled me with spurious attacks that gave me no rest." Exposing his hysteria and apocalyptic monism, Belyi resolved: "Before me stands a choice: either to kill him, or to be killed myself, or to take upon myself the passion of Christ."<sup>179</sup> In the course of this aesthetic, philosophical, and psychological duel, no one had to physically die. Belyi had already responded to Briusov in kind with his poem "To an Old Enemy" (*Starinnomu vragu*, Dec. 9, 1904). In it Belyi depicted a scene in which he shot Briusov, "the mountain demon," who then fell from great heights into the depths of Hell. Briusov, who claimed to have dreamed it all, felt the wound. Belyi believed light had conquered the darkness.

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<sup>179</sup> Cited by Vasilii Molodiakov, *Valerii Briusov: biografiia* (SPb: Vita Nova, 2010), 311: "Брюсов снял маску. Он объявил, что уже год 'творит марево' [...] Гипнотизер он сильный. [...] Были медиумические явления: у нас в квартире мгновенно тухла лампа, когда ее никто тушил, полная керозину, раздавались стуки. [...] Не будучи в состоянии напасть открыто, он стал тревожить ложными вылазками, не давая отдыху. [...] Мне предстоит выбор: или убить его, или самому быть убиту, или принять на себя подвиг крестных мук."

The “hysterical” nature of the ultra-decadent triangle among Briusov, Belyi, and Nina Petrovskaiia revealed the extent to which the boundaries between life and art became porous for Russian Symbolists. Words and actions in the material world assumed cosmic proportions because they mirrored—and sought to spiritually “enact,” perform, or at least name—the myths and (religious) archetypes of the noumenal realm. Briusov’s, Belyi’s, and Petrovskaiia’s psychological states and presuppositions about the meaning of life and art, which they had laid bare before their peers, was a full *aesthetic* expression of the eschatological efficacy Russian Symbolists (certainly Briusov and Belyi) assumed for themselves, their behavior, and their compositions.

Vladislav Khodasevich (1886–1939), a friend to Nina Petrovskaiia in her later life and her best-known biographer, explained the meaning of life creation for Symbolists. Khodasevich described the aesthetic eschatological *mantle* Russian Symbolists had assumed in the vocabulary and philosophy of spiritual alchemy:

Symbolism did not want to be merely an artistic school, a literary movement. It continually strove to become a life-creating method, and in this was its most profound, perhaps unembodiable truth. Its entire history was in essence spent in a constant yearning after this truth. The entire course of its history, essentially, passed in striving toward this truth. It [Symbolism] was a series of attempts, at times truly heroic, to find the fusion of life and art, to find, so to speak, the philosopher’s stone of art.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Vladislav Khodasevich, “Konets Renaty,” in *Nekropol’, Vladislav Khodasevich: sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, t. 4 (Moscow: “Soglasie”: 1997), 7: “Символизм не хотел быть только художественной школой, литературным течением. Все время он порывался стать жизненно-творческим методом, и в том была его глубочайшая, быть может, невоплотимая правда, но в постоянном стремлении к этой правде протекла, в сущности, вся его история. Это был ряд попыток, порой истинно героических, — найти сплав жизни и творчества, своего рода философский камень искусства.”

The search for the *lapis philosophorum* was at the heart of mystical alchemy’s “Great Work.” The Stone, a piece of the *prima materia* that existed before creation, had the power not only to turn base metals into gold but also to rejuvenate the human body and spirit, even to the point of granting immortality.

With these words, Khodasevich romanticized the Symbolists' alchemical world view and exposed their sincere, if naïve, eschatological hopes and dreams.

In contrast, the philosopher Vasilii Rozanov (1856–1919), himself a controversial figure, did not view the Symbolist pursuit of life creation in the same light:

Symbolism and decadence are not a *distinct, new* school, appearing in France and spreading across all Europe; they are the conclusion, the acme, the head of a certain other school, the links of which are very long and the roots of which reach beyond the limits of our own age [...] [Symbolism and decadence] emerged out of [...] *ultra-realism*, as the antithesis of an *ultra-idealism* that evolved earlier (romanticism and “renewed” classicism [i.e., neo-classicism]). It was precisely this element of ultra, once it had been mixed into literature and never later displaced, it was the result of ultra in life itself—in its morals, its ideas, its tendencies, its desires—which has finally expressed itself in such an ugly phenomenon, as decadence and symbolism.”<sup>181</sup>

Rozanov's “ultra” element and the ugliness that often accompanied it in both its aesthetic and medical expressions—drug abuse, perversion, suicide, pornography, the construction of perceived (often threatening) “others,” for example—were pervasive features of the *fin-de-siècle* crisis of culture and consciousness. The period's master narrative about degeneration expressed this notion of “ultra” and ugliness at the intersection between medicine and literature, philosophy and “religion,” life and art. The following chapters will demonstrate the extent to which the ultra-decadent triangle among Briusov, Nina Petrovskaia, and Belyi, and the literary works it

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<sup>181</sup> Vasilii Rozanov, *Dekadenty Russkii vestnik. 1896. No. 4, S. 271-282 v kachestve retsenzii na sborniki – Russkie simvolisty. SPb.: 1894–1895. Vyp. 1-3.* [http://dugward.ru/library/rozanov/rozanov\\_dekadenty.html](http://dugward.ru/library/rozanov/rozanov_dekadenty.html): “символизм и декадентство не есть особая новая школа, появившаяся во Франции и распространившаяся на всю Европу: это есть окончание, вершина, голова некоторой другой школы, звенья которой были очень длинные и корни уходят за начальную грань нашего века. [...] он выводится [...] из ультрареализма, как антитезы ранее развившемуся ультраидеализму (романтизм и “возрожденный” классицизм). Именно этот элемент ultra, раз замешавшийся в литературу и никогда потом из нее не вытесненный, как результат ultra в самой жизни, в ее нравах, в ее идеях, ее влечениях, ее позывах, и сказался в конце концов таким уродливым явлением, как декадентство и символизм.”

inspired, were poignant dramatizations and poetizations of this iatric discourse in Russia on the eve of revolution.

For a brief interlude at the beginning of the twentieth century, Russian Symbolists, in the image of ancient alchemists, assumed an eschatological mantle and attempted to synthesize a new *aesthetic* “managing mechanism” to resolve the crisis of culture and consciousness of their age: life creation. The counter-narrative they composed promised Beauty in the face of despair, but in the end, it was ineffectual in its restoration of psychic wholeness for Russian society on a macrocosmic level. What we shall see, however, is that at least on an individual, microcosmic, and phenomenal plane, the creative act of composing their counter-narrative provided Russian Symbolists with the possibility to use narrative as a therapeutic treatment to revitalize their identities and sense of moral agency in the face of principles of change.

### **The Construction of the Symbolist Muse-Psychopomp**

Briusov was first and foremost an occultist in the practical dimension. He assumed the attitude and posture of an apprentice through his calculated study of occult doctrines, the history of magic, and the biographies and treatises of famous medieval mages. “I consider myself a specialist,” Briusov wrote; “working on my ‘Fiery Angel,’ I studied the sixteenth century as well as that which is called the ‘secret sciences’; I know magic, I know occultism, I know spiritism, I am conversant with alchemy, astrology, and theosophy.”<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Valerii Briusov, *Iz moei zhizni: Avtobiograficheskaia i memuarnaia proza*, ed. Vasilii Molodiakov (Moscow: TERRA, 1994), 198: “я считаю себя специалистом”; “Работая над своим ‘Огненным ангелом,’ я изучил XVI век, а также то, что именуется ‘тайными науками,’ знаю магию, знаю оккультизм, знаю спиритизм, осведомлен в алхимии, астрологии, теософии.”

Briusov had confidence in the occult doctrine of spiritualism, and it played an important role in his ideas about the purpose of art and the identity of an artist. At its most basic, spiritualism is the belief that a medium or sensitive has the ability to communicate with the dead. Adherents purport that after death the individual continues to exist in the spiritual world and may have supernatural efficacy in the physical world. At the *fin de siècle*, spiritualism played a significant role both in European and American literary culture and in the new medical science of psychiatry because it challenged the boundaries and limits of human communication and invoked scientific vocabularies and narratives while doing so. In 1886, for example, psychical researcher F.W.H. Myers (1843–1901), co-founder of the Society for Psychical Research, attempted “to attack the great problems of our being not by metaphysical argument,” but rather “by a study, as detailed and exact as any other natural science, of all such phenomena of life as have both a psychical and a physical aspect.”<sup>183</sup> For the average person at the turn of the twentieth century, spiritualism, as Gaskill asserts, “appealed to middle-class intelligentsia and nonconformist artisans alike: Spiritualism brought together the salon, the laboratory, and the chapel.”<sup>184</sup>

Within this larger discourse, Briusov and his Symbolist peers defended spiritualism as a convincing and valid form of science that offered an explanatory model for the relationship between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds, the microcosm and macrocosm. Spiritualism accounted for things unseen but understood and intuited. Such “things” were of equal concern to numerous dynamic psychiatrists at the turn of the twentieth century, who identified and investigated latent “texts” in the individual and the collective mind, such as the unconscious and archetypes. At the same time the spiritualist movement provided psychological reprieve from *fin-*

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<sup>183</sup> Cited by Jenny Bourne Taylor in “Psychology at the *Fin de Siècle*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17.

<sup>184</sup> Gaskill, *Witchcraft*.

*de-siècle* fears and anxieties by infusing a sense of life after death or possible reincarnation in the face of the “sterile” limitations of secular scientific naturalism, Darwinian biology, and the master pathology of degeneration.

Spiritualism offered Symbolists practical and theoretical tools to decode correspondences, construct and manipulate symbols, and access the higher truths they sought in Beauty and in Wisdom-Sophia, for example. Briusov was an occultist and spiritualist, but he was *not* a mystic. This was an important distinction within the Symbolist milieu. This distinction affected how a Symbolist understood the experience and role of being an artist, and it affected how an artist and poet conceptualized his/her muse. Occultism is concealed wisdom (in the sense of secret knowledge), whereas mysticism is secret experience: “the difference between occultism and mysticism is not *what* is sought, but in *how* it is sought.”<sup>185</sup> Mystics seek union with God or a higher supreme being—the Divine essence, the in-dwelling Power, the ultimate reality of things—through revelatory experience and intuition. At its fundamental level occultism seeks unity and blessed consciousness, but through the study and mastery of secret knowledge rather than through non-rational, intuitive means. Briusov preferred to dabble in this practical dimension.

In a diary entry from October 1900, Briusov wrote: “At the spiritualist séances, I experienced the sensation of trance and clairvoyance. I am a man who is rational to such a degree that these few instances which tear me away from life are so precious.”<sup>186</sup> Briusov admitted that in real life he bordered on being obsessively rational and controlling. Briusov also admitted that moments of trance and clairvoyance provided a form of relief and release from the stress of rational, everyday life. Thus, spiritualist séances were more than a curious form of esoteric

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<sup>185</sup> Carlson, *No Religion*, 11.

<sup>186</sup> Grossman, *The Diary of Valery Briusov*, 104.

experimentation for him. Rather, they served as a form of mental therapy and psychic escape. Significantly, in this entry Briusov did not suggest any mystical revelation. Briusov presented himself as a spiritualist believer and alchemical apprentice in his attempt to master the skills of clairvoyance and trance; he sought to broaden his consciousness and to find answers to life's questions, but he did not seek mystical revelation. On this, and not on any mystical basis, did Briusov construct for himself his ideal poetic muse.

In his essay "The Method of Mediumism" (1900), Briusov defended mediumism as a valuable method of scientific investigation and further revealed himself to be an occultist exploring the practical dimension of the microcosm. He asserted that mediumism has a rich history of documentation that confirms the "replicability of similar phenomena" and "may be studied scientifically."<sup>187</sup> He defended the position that mediumism is a field of science as valuable and "objective" as the newly established fields of physics and psychology, two academic disciplines that investigate unseen phenomena: "mediumistic phenomena most closely approximate the facts studied by physics and psychology."<sup>188</sup>

The growth of physics and psychology as fields of study at the *fin de siècle* played a part in the revival of occult interests. Contemporaries often regarded physics and psychology as sciences that explored uncharted territories in living nature, the human mind, the great "beyond," or mysterious (often feminine) "otherness." Psychiatrists, like Freud, Jung, Janet, and Adler, for example, used the scientific method to decode correspondences between the conscious and unconscious mind. They often regarded Decadent and Symbolist artists and their literary characters as intriguing "patients" and subjects for psychological analysis. Briusov believed that the school of Symbolist poetry, already invested in the occult doctrine of microcosm/macrocosm,

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<sup>187</sup> Bogomolov, *Russkaia literatura*, 299: "повторность сходных явлений;" "они могут быть изучаемы научно."

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.: "медиумические явления ближе всего подходят к фактам, изучаемым физикой и психологией."

could join in this experiment to test the boundaries and limitations of human communication through the practical dimension of spiritualist science in the “laboratory” of séance and the crucible of life and art.

In the practical dimension of Briusov’s spiritualist world view, a séance—a “sitting” or meeting to investigate or exhibit spiritualistic phenomena—was an opportunity to experiment, study, and master the skills of clairvoyance and trance, allowing participants to become more sophisticated communicators and/or artists. In the context of a séance, Briusov had access to a medium who could facilitate what was, in his opinion, a poet’s highest aim: the opportunity to access and then translate hidden wisdom and noumenal truths into concrete expressions. A medium, serving as a psychopomp or psychic guide, he believed, could help incarnate “spirit” into the physical material of written words. If the Symbolist mystics used the language of spiritual alchemy, then Briusov the Symbolist occultist used the language of spiritualism to define the act of artistic creation, the purpose of art, and his role as a Symbolist artist.

In his recent biography of Briusov, Vasilii Molodiakov outlines the progression of Briusov’s relationship with his fiancée Elena Andreevna Kraskova, who died early and tragically, and the significant part she played in his development as a Symbolist. From the very beginning Briusov constructed an image of her as his muse because of what he perceived were her mediumistic abilities. On 4 January 1893, at the age of twenty, Briusov admitted how attached he had become to Elena Andreevna: “I told her that the best memories of her would be [kept] in the sanctuary of my heart.”<sup>189</sup> With youthful enthusiasm and vigor, on 4 March Briusov confessed:

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<sup>189</sup> Molodiakov, *Valerii Briusov*, 76: “говорил ей о том, что воспоминание о ней было лучшей святыней моего сердца.”

Talent, even genius, honestly grants only slow success, if it grants it [at all]. This is not enough! Not enough for me. It is necessary to choose some other way. Without dogmas it is possible to sail anywhere <?>. To find a *guiding star* in the fog. And I see them: it is *decadence and spiritism*. Yes! Whatever one may say, that they are false, that they are absurd, but they lead forward, they evolve, and the future will belong to them, especially if they find a worthy leader. And I will be this leader! Yes, I!<sup>190</sup> [*italics mine*]

This early diary entry revealed the extent to which Briusov self-consciously assumed the posture of the magician-apprentice as an artist. Briusov invested his genius in what he understood were the alchemical *methodologies* of decadence and spiritualism.

Briusov elevated Elena Andreevna as an essential facilitator in this endeavor, his “guiding star.” After he wrote in his diary, “And I will be this leader! Yes, I!,” Briusov continued: “And if only I will have as my helpmate Elena Andreevna. If only! We will subjugate the world.”<sup>191</sup> Briusov then described how he arrived at the conclusion that a medium, and specifically his fiancée Elena Andreevna Kraskova, was an essential companion in his apprenticeship to become a master of alchemy, a true artist:

By the way: Yesterday there was a séance. I had to endure a difficult struggle, and this victory—is one of my best victories. E[lena] A[ndreevna] did not want to talk to me, yes, she would not answer me directly. Step by step I struggled, I behaved correctly, I did not pay attention to Verochka (E[lena] A[ndreevna]), imagined that I was thinking of flirting with her [Verochka]), I did not lose courage and...and at the end of the séance we [Elena Andreevna and I] embraced.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Valerii Briusov, *Dnevnik 1891–1910* (Moscow: Izd. Sabashnikovykh, 1972), 12.: “Талант, даже гений, честно дадут только медленный успех, если дадут его. Это мало! Мне мало. Надо выбрать иное. Без догматов можно плыть всюду <?>. Найти путеводную звезду в тумане. И я вижу их: это декадентство и спиритизм. Да! Что ни говорить, ложны ли они, смешны ли, но они идут вперед, развиваются, и будущее будет принадлежать им, особенно если они найдут достойного вождя. А этим вождем буду я! Да, Я!).”

<sup>191</sup> Bogomolov, *Russkaia literatura*, 281: “И если у меня будет помощником Елена Андреевна. Если! Мы покорим мир.)”

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.: “Кстати. Вчера был сеанс. Мне пришлось выдержать трудную борьбу, и эта победа – одна из лучших моих побед. Е<лена> А<ндреевна> не хотела говорить со мной, да, прямо не отвечала. Шаг за шагом боролся я, поступал верно, не обращал внимания на Верочку (Е<лена> А<ндреевна> воображала, что буду мечтать <об> ухаживаниях за этой), не терял бодрости и...и в конце сеанса мы обнимались.”

In his analysis of Briusov's diary, Nikolai Bogomolov demonstrates how Briusov correlated decadence, spiritualism, and the idea of love, whereby Elena Andreevna could serve as his "ally in the successful test of the spiritual sphere by spiritualist (or mediumistic) experiences and inspirer [muse] of a purely decadent poetry."<sup>193</sup> Bogomolov argues that Briusov grounded his idea of love in eroticism. Briusov's diary removes any question of this. "The best time," Briusov described in an entry on 1 February 1893, "was when I sat down with El<ena> Andr<eevna> at the window and we kissed each other there (There was even an erection)."<sup>194</sup> The young Briusov derived his conceptualization of the relationship between love and spiritualism from the sexual excitement he often experienced during séances: discrete physical foreplay and secretive embraces in darkened rooms. He feared that this sexual energy was a form of madness, an illness that embodied a generative and creative force in the physical and material realm. Whatever actual thoughts he may have had about sex is irrelevant because, regardless, Briusov was playing with the usual male Victorian fascination with and fear of sex, reflected and depicted, for example, in Krafft-Ebing's book *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886).

The "embrace" Briusov and Elena Andreevna shared, however, was to be short-lived. Elena Andreevna soon became deathly ill. On 9 May 1893, Briusov recorded that she was already ailing. On 12 May he documented his anxieties:

If she dies...what can [I] say? Sorry, I'll be very sorry. I still love her in some measure, [but] in the end, we had so little time together. 5 visits! How many more unknown delights and how many untouched strings of the heart! But if she dies, the entangled knot of our relationship will be severed, it will unravel beautifully, theatrically, and with honor for me. Oh! What my despair will be. I will cry, I will seek an opportunity to kill myself, I will sit motionlessly for days! ... And how many elegies there will be! Marvellous

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.: "соратница в деле успешного испытания духовной сферы путем спиритических (или медиумических) опытов и вдохновительница сугубо декадентской поэзии."

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 280: "Лучшее время—когда сидел внизу с Ел<еной> Андр<еевной> на окне и целовались там (Даже была эрекция)."

elegies! Damning cries and ruin, the moans of tormented souls... Oh! How this will be beautiful, *how effective!*<sup>195</sup> [italics mine]

In this citation, we observe how constantly Briusov looked for sources of inspiration in life for his art. We also intuit degrees of insincerity and narcissism.

Elena Andreevna died on 18 May 1893. Her death occurred a mere two months after Briusov's inspired diary entry above on 4 March in which he had correlated eroticism, spiritualism, and his artistic aspirations. Briusov described what significance Elena Andreevna's death represented for him:

She took with her everything. She was the only one who knew me, knew all my secrets. How hard to play a mere role before everyone. Always to be solitary. [...] Terrible to think! When dying she was convinced that she caught cold coming to meet me... Dying, she was convinced that she was dying because of me.<sup>196</sup>

Briusov was quick to put into words his pain and loss. On 14 June 1893, Briusov recorded his thoughts: "I'm thinking (among thousands of plans) about describing my love in a novella. My narrative poem on her death is going rather poorly."<sup>197</sup> His idea for such a novel persisted and would finally be realized in *Fiery Angel* in 1907. The novel revealed the extent to

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<sup>195</sup> Molodiakov, *Valerii Briusov*, 76-77: "Если она умрет... как сказать? Жаль, очень жаль будет. Я все же отчасти люблю ее, наконец, мы так мало времени были с ней. 5 свиданий! Сколько еще неизведанных наслаждений и сколько нетронутых струн сердца! Но если она умрет, разрубится запутывающийся узел наших отношений, распутается красиво, театрально и с честью для меня. О! Каково будет мое отчаяние. Я буду плакать, я буду искать случая самоубийства, буду сидеть неподвижно целые дни! ...А сколько элегий! Дивных элегий! Вопли проклятий и гибели, стоны истерзанной души... О! Как это красиво, как это эффектно!"

<sup>196</sup> Grossman, *The Diary of Valery Briusov*, 37. Grossman cites this as an unpublished diary entry and does not provide a date. The entry was made on 28 May 1893 (see N.A. Bogomolov, ed., "Iz dnevnika Valerii Briusova 1892-1893 godov," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 2004, № 65). Accessed on 11 January 2017 <<http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2004/65/br12.html>>.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

which Briusov's ideas about love, illness, death, and art in many ways determined the course of his literary career.

However sincere Briusov's initial feelings for Elena Andreevna may have been, he was admittedly quick to capitalize on the aesthetic, thematic, and theatrical grandeur of her tragic death in the name of his art. In fact, he seemed to celebrate it as a necessary stage in his development as a Promethean poet. For Briusov, real-life experiences such as these point to his awareness that he needed a female medium to guide him through the noumenal realm of concealed wisdom, if for no other reason than it functioned as a standard Romantic trope. Briusov had determined that a spirit medium could serve as his "guardian of the threshold" between flesh and spirit, the physical and the non-material world, and his conscious and unconscious. In fact, in the year 1916 in his cycle "Fateful Series" (*Rokovoi riad*), Briusov memorialized, in a few stanzas, Elena Andreevna (here addressed as Lēlia) as his "teacher," the first among fourteen "sacred names" (*sviatykh imen*) who touched his life:

I remember youth; the blue dusk of the garden;  
The lilacs clinging, drunk, on every side...  
I am a boy, a poet, and I am in love,  
And you are with me, sovereign Dryad!

My passion you accepted with a smile,  
Caressed me, nurtured in this youth a poet,  
Gave me delight, then modestly, you left...

A presage of life, my teacher Lēlia!  
You I designate the first among other  
Names beloved, memorable, and living.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>198</sup>

“Я помню юность; синий сумрак сада;  
Сирени льнут, пьяня, со всех сторон...  
Я – мальчик, я – поэт, и я – влюблен,  
И ты со мной, державная Дриада!

Ты страсть мою с улыбкой приняла,  
Ласкала, в отроче поэта холя,

Briusov's real-life experiences, aesthetic behavior, and *oeuvre* all point, in varying degrees, to his quest for a female spiritual guide. Briusov invested himself in the real-life search for and aesthetic construction of a mediumistic and spiritualist muse. Thus, it followed that his theories, application, and experiments in Symbolist life creation revolved around women, sexuality, ideas about love and lust, death, and his interpretation of the concept of feminine completeness so valued by his peers. Briusov identified two authors who "spoke" to his conceptualization of Elena Andreevna as psychopomp and her place in his consciousness, establishing the "anxiety of influence" he had toward them. The first was Lermontov. On 17 June 1893, Briusov wrote:

I am painstakingly writing a novel from my life with Lëlia. It has begun to resemble *A Hero of Our Time*, but this is to the good. Today a dream (the dying Lëlia) and this novel again stirred up the pain in my heart."<sup>199</sup>

In this passage Briusov acknowledges Elena Andreevna as his psychopomp, his active advocate in the noumenal realm of "dream."

In addition to identifying with Lermontov's disenchanting hero Pechorin, Briusov also identified with Edgar Allan Poe. He drew upon the American writer's biography and art to codify Elena Andreevna as his spiritual guide and describe (and aestheticize) how she would fill this role. Poe had also lost his real-life muse, Virginia Clemm, to an early death. On 22 June 1893, Briusov recorded:

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Дала восторг и, скромная, ушла...

Предвестье жизни, мой учитель Леля!  
Тебя я назвал первой меж других  
Имен любимых, памятных, живых.

<sup>199</sup> Molodiakov, *Valerii Briusov*, 79: "Старательно пишу роман из моей жизни с Лелей. Начинает он сбиваться на 'Герой нашего времени,' но это только хорошо. Сегодня сон (умирающая Леля) и этот роман опять разбудили боль на сердце."

I have written the whole novel through to the end. I have written several successful lyrical verses, but about what? always about the same thing. Lélia reigns everywhere—in dreams, on sheets of paper, in conversations. I take up Poe and remember, that I read him to her. I talk about ideals and remember, that this was [the substance] of our last argument.<sup>200</sup>

Briusov constructed the image of his mediumistic muse in accord with a specific mythological construct: the psychopomp. A psychopomp is a mythical conductor or guide of souls to the place of the dead. The Roman god Mercury (Hermes in the Greek pantheon), for example, embodies the classical idea of a psychopomp; he leads departed souls into Hades. Mercury is associated with notions of transformation, transition, and mourning. He maintains the boundaries between our world and the underworld, but, as the keeper of this “gate,” or threshold, he is also a messenger and *bridge* between them.

Our modern understanding of a psychopomp has been extended into analytical psychology through Jung’s theories about anima and animus. A psychopomp, who, in Jung’s opinion, can assume masculine or feminine attributes (the opposite of the sexual identity of the subject), is the link between the ego and the unconscious mind. A psychopomp can travel between and bridge such things as emotion and reason, love and hate, insanity and creative genius, and, most importantly, the individual and the collective unconscious. Thus, a psychopomp is a supra-natural image, spirit, intention, and idea, or, as Jung determined, a psychopomp functions as a counter-sexual archetype present in the development of the personality. A psychopomp acts as a guide on a person’s journey of transformation as he/she comes to terms with his/her shadow (the dark side).

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid.: “Написал весь роман до конца. Написал несколько удачных лирических стихотворений, но о чем? все о том же. Леля царит везде во сне, в листах, в разговорах. Беру По и вспоминаю, что читал его ей. Говорю об идеале и вспоминаю, это был наш последний спор.”

Briusov projected his poetic muse in the guise of a mediumistic woman who could serve as his psychopomp. In doing so, he invoked and then applied to his muse the aesthetics of both the dark side of the underworld and/or unconscious and the light side of consciousness and reason. This could also be described in terms of other counterpoints: black and white magic, male and female, matter and spirit, leaden dross and refined gold, demonic possession and divine madness, the phenomenal and the noumenal. All of these things are very much examples of the ancient narratives about which Nietzsche and numerous others theorized at the *fin de siècle*. Within these counterpoints, we also recognize that the narrative of feminine completeness, Wisdom-Sophia, who represents the entrapment of the divine spark in corrupt matter, also resonates here in Briusov's quest for a specifically female psychopomp.

Briusov determined that he needed a psychopomp to show him how to bridge decadence and spiritualism in his creation of the "new" literary movement he himself named Russian Symbolism. He wanted a psychopomp to help him write his counter-narrative—his own aesthetic eschatology—to the *fin-de-siècle* master narrative of degeneration and decay. In the citations above, Briusov admitted that he found in his fiancée Elena Andreevna a person equipped with mediumistic gifts who could psychically guide him between the phenomenal and noumenal realms, and, most importantly, safely lead him through the maelstrom of madness he experienced in the Promethean world of artistic creation. Briusov elevated Elena Andreevna to the role of the psychopomp who would lead him through life's transitions, such as the one he was then experiencing: his new identity as a Symbolist and his "rebirth" as a poet-magus. Briusov looked to a female lover as the gatekeeper of the mysteries on this important journey of self-discovery, self-mythologization, and Symbolist life creation.

For Briusov, Elena Andreevna's notion—"she was convinced that she was dying because of me"—would have triggered other formative memories about illness and death, memories closely related to feelings of guilt and transgression. We recognize these emotions as characteristics of demonic despair, a theme that characterized much of the French decadent imagination. In his memoirs, Briusov revealed his severe bouts of depression as a child: "In general, I had earlier often thought about suicide."<sup>201</sup>

Briusov also wrote about his brother Nikolai's terminal illness, a brain tumor, which resulted in his early death. Briusov admitted that he regularly inflicted physical pain on Nikolai, a "living corpse" (*zhivoi mērtvets*).<sup>202</sup> Briusov the adult felt ashamed of the transgression and confessed that his brother's death haunted him. He also confessed that his brother's death hardened him to the suffering of others.<sup>203</sup> Briusov revealed that these early life experiences made him both knowledgeable of and, by choice, detached from illness and death. In his adult years, Briusov's wife Ioanna Matveevna would frequently be ill and suffer miscarriages. Despite his detachment, illness and death remained vividly present.

Transgression, such the pain he had caused his brother and the transgressions committed with numerous female lovers in the name of art, was an essential component of Briusov's Symbolist "illness." He needed transgressions to construct his image of a Romantic poet weighed down by cosmic pain and authorial guilt. True to his French Decadent mentors, Briusov constructed two reasons to generate this guilt for his poetic persona: 1) guilt was a consequence of his act of rebellion against the divine creative power in writing poetry, and 2) the Decadent

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<sup>201</sup> Briusov, *Iz moei zhizni*, 110: "Вообще о самоубийстве я и раньше нередко подумывал."

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 131: "глупая и грубая шалость вышла с моей стороны геройством, и я сам в него верил."

<sup>203</sup> Briusov described how Nikolai "slowly died in bed, going blind and losing his reason. My heart contracted out of pity for him. But I was rationally convinced that pity, like all sentimentality, was stupid. I resolutely overcame that feeling in myself" ["медленно умирал на постели, ослепший и потерявший рассудок. Сердце мое сжималось от жалости к нему. Но я рассудочно был убежден, что жалость, как и всякая сантиментальность, - глупость. Я решительно преодолел в себе это чувство"]: Ibid., 130.

idea that “love and sexuality must be lived and experienced as guilt, that they must be regarded as the foremost expression of Satanism, of that fundamental self-abasement constituted by perversion.”<sup>204</sup>

Briusov’s autobiographical writing, private correspondence, and memoirs indicate that he repeatedly manipulated women psychologically in the name of life creation. After Briusov’s formative experience with the alchemy of eroticism, spiritualism, poetry, and death as manifested in his erotic relationship with the mediumistic Elena Andreevna, he sought, and thought he had found, a new muse and psychic guide in a fellow Symbolist writer, Nina Petrovskaia. Briusov eventually used the “raw material” of his real-life experiences with Petrovskaia and Belyi to achieve “Elena’s novella” at last—in the excellent embodiment of pathography and life creation about his Symbolist “illness,” *Fiery Angel*.

At the beginning of the year 1893, Briusov was putting the finishing touches on his forthcoming publication, his treatise and call for a new literary movement in Russia: *The Russian Symbolists (Russkie simvolisty)*. Joan Grossman asserts:

[Briusov] strove tirelessly to expand the limits of experience beyond the rational. This drive provided a kind of divine fire of its own. By one means and another he sought to escape into the beyond: poetry, passion, spiritualism, magic, delirium, and later, morphine. Of these, the first two were closely blended.<sup>205</sup>

Briusov continued to seek a mediumistic helpmeet who could bridge the gaps between his disciplined will (perfected technique) in the practical dimension of the microcosm and the great, as-of-yet-unformed or unnamed mysteries of the macrocosm. This was embodied for him in a still-developing feminine principle of completeness.

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<sup>204</sup> Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination*, 124.

<sup>205</sup> Grossman, *The Diary of Valery Briusov*, 16.

Briusov asserted that from its very beginning the novel was conceived in the language of spiritualism. During Briusov's first visit to Cologne, Germany, in 1897—four years after Elena Andreevna's death and Briusov's debut as a Russian Symbolist and seven years before he involved himself with Nina Petrovskaja—the images for the novel were revealed to him in a moment of mediumistic clarity: “Cologne and Aachen blinded me with the striking, golden splendor of their medieval cathedrals. First, ‘through a magic crystal,’ the images of ‘Fiery Angel’ appeared to me.”<sup>206</sup>

Briusov's *Fiery Angel* is steeped in the language and imagery of occultism and spiritualism. In this *roman à clef* he encoded the specific alchemical formula that he had determined, already in 1893, would reward him with immortality as an artist. He built it around four primary elements: eros, illness, death, and the Promethean hubris that informs artistic creation. Thus, it followed that Briusov assumed the aura, aesthetic pose, and philosophical posture of a demonic, Mephistophelian, and ominous mage of the black arts. *Fiery Angel* stands as his fullest expression and confession of his spiritualist mind-set, the “demonomania” of the Russian Symbolist experience, and his occult experiment in life creation with Nina Petrovskaja.

In his correspondence with Nina Petrovskaja between 1904 and 1913, Briusov meticulously constructed the “science” of his practical approach to the practice of Symbolism. Through his letters to her, he developed and proposed his personal methodology to bring about an aesthetic eschatology, that is, his notion of Symbolist art as the praxis of an idea. Briusov manipulated his emotional, intellectual, physical, and mythopoetic relationship with Nina Petrovskaja as a real-life and artistic experiment in his personal theories about the nature and role of the alchemy of life creation.

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<sup>206</sup> Briusov, *Iz moei zhizni*, 170: “Кельн и Ахен ослепили меня яркой, золоченой пышностью своих средневековых храмов. Впервые, 'сквозь магический кристалл,' предстали мне образы 'Огненного ангела!'.”

Blasphemously, Briusov declared his willingness to worship such a spiritual guide. In a letter dated 1 September 1905, Briusov offered these words to Petrovskaia:

And there, where I see fatal ruin, is revealed salvation, but the bridge, along which I hurry, running from horrors, suddenly collapses, and I am again in the depths at the bottom of the rocky abyss...

But I love You! I love! I love!

De profundis clamavi [I cried from the depths]!<sup>207</sup>

Briusov called upon Petrovskaia to help him overcome the esoteric gap between the natural and the supra-natural realms. He needed her to filter noumenal truths into a language of physical love and creation he could understand and act upon as a craftsman of the Word. Briusov asked Petrovskaia to offer her love as the *bridge* between not only the phenomenal realm of decadence and the noumenal realm of spiritualism, but, increasingly, as a bridge over the widening abyss of insecurity in his apprenticeship as a (black, demonic, and Promethean) poet-magus.

### **Nina Petrovskaia as Briusov's Psychopomp**

Briusov's correspondence with Petrovskaia reveals the extent to which he actively constructed a spiritualist relationship with her and then manipulated their love in the name of his ideas about the complex of eros, illness, death, and art. The "construction" Petrovskaia as

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<sup>207</sup> Valerii Briusov and Nina Petrovskaia, *Valerii Briusov i Nina Petrovskaia. Perepiska 1904–1913*, eds. N.A. Bogomolov and A. V. Lavrov (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2004), 131: "И там, где я вижу погибель, открывается спасение, но мост, по которому я спешу, бегу от ужасов, вдруг рушится, и я опять на дне каменистой бездны..."

Но я люблю Тебя! люблю! люблю!

De profundis clamavi."

The Latin phrase is a citation from Psalm 130 (KJV) and Psalm 129 in the Russian Bible, a supplication for redemption from one's iniquities: "From the depths I have cried out to you, O Lord."

Hereafter for the remainder of the dissertation, when citing Briusov and Petrovskaia's correspondence, I will use the abbreviated *Perepiska*.

Briusov's medium began in June 1905, when the two of them spent a month together at Lake Saima in Finland. Their affair was passionate and highly emotional for them both. Briusov was under the influence of this heady experience for several months, during which time he wrote ardent letters to Petrovskaiia, attempting to locate her and their affair in his aesthetic system. The words Briusov used to describe and discuss his experience with Petrovskaiia were similar to the inspired words he used to describe his aspirations as an artist back in 1893. From this starting point and over the course of the next nine years, Briusov and Petrovskaiia debated her capacity to function as his psychopomp in his quest for artistic genius and the terms of this performance.

In the second of two letters written to Petrovskaiia on 1 July 1905, Briusov invoked two symbols. The first was water and its associated imagery—lakes, oceans, and seafaring explorers. The second was the image of a mysterious and sensual psychopomp. He presented these two aesthetic constructions explicitly to Petrovskaiia and implicitly to his anticipated future reader as the quintessential spiritualist symbols of his transformative experience with her at Lake Saima. Throughout their years together, Briusov repeatedly returned to these two symbol complexes and encoded them into the texts of their lives, their correspondence, and his art. The 1 July 1905, letter to Petrovskaiia established this pattern.

My little girl, my little spark, my little guiding light! could anything ever take from me this month, the best month of my life, this month, in which I was not ashamed to say the word "happy." I went to Finland to experience "new torments," but instead the heavens brightened above me, a rainbow appeared as a pledge that there would be no more torture; a lake revealed itself, henceforth my favorite, idolized by me; a lake of sky-blue, and pale-yellow, and gold, and purple... This bright and vivid lake is a symbol of all my experiences [*perezhivaniia*] this month. All the wonder that there is in heavenly light, in the colors of the sunset, in their reflections on earth was repeated in my own life. For me this month was made of marvellous days; I breathed the atmosphere of the marvellous; the marvellous became for me a daily occurrence.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> *Perepiska*, 68: "Девочка, огонечек мой, маяк мой! но разве что может отнять у меня этот месяц, этот лучший месяц моей жизни, этот месяц, в которой мне не стыдно было говорить слово 'счастлив!' Я ехал в

Briusov implied that Petrovskaja had the knowing mind of a sensitive and confessed that he felt intoxicated and transported by her words, whose magic he preserved forever in his memory:

Was it not a marvel that I saw You, You—the real You [...] But how much more marvellous it was that I heard those words of yours, enunciated slowly and hurriedly, recalling them I become intoxicated and want once again to fall before You on my knees, to kiss Your hands, to weep, –words, meaningless to all others, but for me the ultimate happiness, words, which I cannot entrust even to this letter, which I will treasure only in memories.<sup>209</sup>

To represent their perfect and inspired month together, Briusov “encoded” Petrovskaja herself as the ultimate symbol of his transformation as an artist during the magical month in Finland. But Briusov did not construct this image in the present. He constructed this image as a still life captured in the *past*. His idealized symbol “Nina” was not living; it was the image, frozen above time, of a divinely/demonically inspired woman with the abilities of a sensitive:

As a symbol of these days, Your image became for me an *object of worship*. Earlier, having had only an obscure presentiment, I believed in Your coming—but now I want to offer *prayers to You as You were*. I do not know if I was necessary to You, to Your fate—but You gave me the key to my entire life; with the happiness of the days we experienced You explained all the torments of the past.<sup>210</sup> [*italics mine*]

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Финляндию на 'новые пытки,' а надо мной просияло небо, встала радуга – залогом, что казни больше не будет, – открылось озеро, отныне любимое, боготворимое мною, озеро голубое, и палевое, и солотое, и пурпурное... Это ясное и яркое озеро – символ всех переживаний за месяц. Все то чудо, которое есть в небесном свете, в закатных красках, в их отражениях на земле, – повторилось и в моей жизни. Для меня этот месяц был днями чудес, я дышал атмосферой чудес, чудесное стало для меня повседневным.” This excerpt is taken from Briusov’s second letter written on 1 July 1905. He did not mail the first “drafted” letter to Petrovskaja.

<sup>209</sup> *Perepiska*, 68-69: “Разве не чудо, что я увидел Тебя, Тебя настоящую [...] Но насколько же большее чудо, что я слышал те Твои слова, произносимые замедленно и поспешно, вспоминая которые я пьянею и хочу опять упасть перед Тобой на колени, целовать Твои руки, плакать, – слова, бессмысленные для всех, но бывшие для меня последним счастьем, слова, которые я не доверю даже этому письму, которые сберегу только в воспоминании.”

<sup>210</sup> *Perepiska*, 69: “Как символ этих дней, Твой образ стал для меня святыней. Раньше, смутно предчувствуя, я верил в Тебя грядущую, – ныне мне хочется молиться Тебе бывшей. Не знаю, был ли я нужен Тебе, Твоей судьбе, – но Ты дала мне ключ ко всей моей жизни, счастьем пережитых дней объяснила все мучительства прошлого.”

In this way, Briusov recast Petrovskaia the woman as a psychopomp who functioned as an inanimate—although physically present and tangible—object of worship invested with magical and supra-natural powers. In this letter, Briusov had begun to transform his image of Petrovskaia from a *living* medium and psychic guide into a ghostly apparition. This aesthetic transition, however, did not interrupt but rather shifted the nature of its spiritualist orientation.

In this same 1 July 1905 letter, Briusov also characterized their month in Finland as a demarcation line in his artistic career between his youth and his anticipated future success. By marking June 1905 as the threshold between his past and future identity as an artist, Briusov refined the significance of his month in Finland with Petrovskaia; he seemed to suggest that their time together represented a moment of alchemical apprenticeship. Under her guidance, Briusov believed he had gained a new understanding of other worlds to conquer: a coming of age as an artist. Once more he elevated water imagery as the symbol to aesthetically organize this significant moment in his journey as a Symbolist.

As I have said many times,—yes, it was the summit of my life, its highest peak, from which I saw revealed before me, as Pizarro once saw, two oceans—my past and my future lives. You elevated me to the zenith of my heaven. And You revealed to me the ultimate depths, the last mysteries of my soul. Perhaps it was for the sake of this month that I lived through all the wearisome thirty years of my life, and my next thirty years will be lit by the memories of this month.<sup>211</sup>

Throughout his correspondence with Petrovskaia and in his novel *Fierly Angel*, Briusov crafted a literary character of himself as a sailor who explored the uncharted waters of

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<sup>211</sup> *Perepiska*, 69: “Как много раз я говорил, – да, то была вершина моей жизни, ее высший пик, с которого, как некогда Пизарро, открылись мне оба океана – моей прошлой и моей будущей жизни. Ты вознесла меня к зениту моего неба. И Ты дала мне увидеть последние глубины, последние тайны моей души. Может быть, ради этого месяца прожил я все томительных тридцать лет моей жизни, и воспоминаниями об этом месяце будут озарены все следующие тридцать лет.”

divine/demonic madness, female “otherness,” love, and art. In a letter dated 8 July 1905, for example, he called upon Petrovskaia to function as a symbolic beacon: an erotic psychopomp between the conscious and unconscious realms of dream and reality.

So that I may write *Your* novel, it is enough for me to remember You, to believe in You, to love You. In this, too, be my guide, my beacon, my light in the night, as in the world of Love. Love and creativity in prose are for me two new worlds. In the first you carried me far away, to fairytale lands, to imaginary worlds, into which others rarely penetrate. May the same happen in this second world. Let me fall to my knees. Let me kiss Your hands.<sup>212</sup>

In these terms, Briusov’s idealized medium also offered him a psychological displacement of his own artistic demonic despair and demonomania. In the terms of Jungian psychology, Briusov’s image of his psychopomp functioned as a projection of his anima, a contrasexual projection of the psyche, or soul-image. Briusov wrote to Petrovskaia on 5 July 1905:

With every day you more and more become for me a symbol and *not the living person*, not the one to whom I said in life: “Little girl, dear, good, small one...”—but the one for whom I have long waited, whom I saw in an momentary vision and should not see again.<sup>213</sup> [*italics mine*]

In this excerpt Briusov explicitly separates Petrovskaia—the real-life woman—from a symbolic, noumenal, and eternal vision of woman. We even recognize in his words an echo of his lost love,

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<sup>212</sup> *Perepiska*, 80: “Чтобы написать *Твой* роман, довольно помнить Тебя, довольно верить Тебе, любить Тебя. Будь моим руководителем и здесь, моим маяком, моим ночным огонечком, как в мире Любви. Любовь и творчество в прозе – это для меня два новых мира. В одном Ты увлекла меня далеко, в сказочные страны, в небывалые земли, куда проникают редко. Да будет то же и в этом другом мире. Дай мне стать на колени. Дай поцеловать Твои руки.”

<sup>213</sup> *Perepiska*, 76-77: “С каждым днем все более и более Ты становишься для меня символом, а не живой, не той, кому я в жизни говорил: ‘Девочка, милая, хорошая, маленькая...’ – но той, кого я ждал долго, увидал в мгновенном видении и не должен увидеть вновь.”

Elena Andreevna Kraskova. Briusov wanted his psychopomp to function as his conduit between creative genius, the romanticized demonic despair and demonomania of artistic inspiration, and the experience of eroticism, an example of physical creation. He believed the alchemical reaction of these elements would generate poetry; it would lead to the incarnation of an idea, but specifically as the praxis of that idea. He believed that this might be a viable scientific methodology for life creation. The theme of death continued to inform this discourse. One's psychopomp oversees the journey from the "old" to the "new": death, descent, disintegration, and destruction transformed into birth, ascent, (re)integration, and wholeness.

Briusov met and got to know Petrovskaia within the spiritualist circles they both frequented. Their relationship formed during the séances that she and her husband, the publisher Sergei Sokolov-Krechetov, held in their home. From the very beginning, Briusov associated Petrovskaia, her personality, and her literary and romantic interests with the supra-natural and the liminal. She assumed the performative posture of a woman who could cross the borderline between the "here" and the "beyond."

Years later in her memoirs, Petrovskaia asserted that Briusov saw in her the quintessential model for the psychopomp he sought. She was, in this sense, the projection of his own anima.

He [Briusov] divined in me my soul's organic affinity with one half of his own, with that—*mystery*, which those around us did not know, with that which he loved in himself—and more often fiercely hated, with that which he himself thoughtlessly betrayed, along with me, to his and my enemies.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Nina Petrovskaia, "Iz 'Vosponimanii,'" in *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, t. 85 (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), 782: "Он угадал во мне органическую родственность моей души с одной половиной своей, с той —*тайной*, которую не знали окружающие, с той, которую он в себе и любил, —и, чаще, люто ненавидел, с той, которую сам же предавал, не задумываясь, вместе со мной своим и моим врагам."

Briusov's dedication at the beginning of *Fiery Angel* reiterated his personal ideas about and life experience with the alchemy of love, madness, and art, because it is an acknowledgement of his psychopomp:

Not to someone from among the famous, the illustrious in art or science, but to you, bright, mad, and unhappy woman, who loved much and from love died, the author, your obedient servant and faithful lover, dedicates this true narrative as a token of eternal memory.<sup>215</sup>

Briusov's fellow Symbolists, who knew them both well, easily recognized in "Ruprecht's" dedication of his manuscript to "Renata" Briusov's reference to his relationship with Petrovskaia.

Briusov's correspondence with Petrovskaia reveals the extent to which he actively constructed a spiritualist relationship with her and then manipulated their love in the name of his ideas about eros, illness, death, and art. No doubt anticipating his future reader, he self-consciously crafted the content of his letters in order to emerge as a literary character in his real life.<sup>216</sup> Petrovskaia was probably not aware of this, and her genuine emotions fueled her responses to Briusov. She did, however, develop a "literariness" (*literaturnost'*) of her own in their correspondence and in her public and private life. Their dynamic affords a unique opportunity for analysis as we outline the thematic, aesthetic, philosophical, and psychological patterns in Briusov and Petrovskaia's communication. Briusov's letters use occult imagery and vocabulary in a manner that closely corresponds to his novel *Fiery Angel*.

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<sup>215</sup> Valerii Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, v. 4 (Moscow: Khud. lit., 1974), 13: "Не кому-либо из знаменитый людей, прославленных в искусствах или науках, но тебе, женщина светлая, безумая, несчастная, которая возлюбила много и от любви погибла, правдивое это повествование, как покорный служитель и верный любовник, в знак вечной памяти посвящает автор."

<sup>216</sup> *Perepiska*, 5-7.

In her memoirs, published immediately after Briusov's death in 1924 and seventeen years after the novel's publication, Nina Petrovskaia stated that she had been cognizant of Briusov's "alchemical" designs for her and that Briusov found in her everything he needed to construct his spiritualist and mediumistic *object of worship* and psychopomp: his fictional character Renata.

He needed authentic earthly likenesses for these images [of Ruprecht, Renata, and Heinrich], and in me he found much of what was required for the romantic figure of Renata: despair, a lifeless yearning for a fantastically beautiful past, a readiness to throw one's depreciated existence into the nearest bonfire, one's religious ideas and expectations (the Eleusinian Mysteries! . . .) turned inside out and poisoned by demonic temptations, isolation from life and people, almost a hatred for the objective world, an organic spiritual homelessness, a thirst for destruction and death—in a word, all of my favorite poetic hyperboles and emotions, concentrated in one being—in a small, novice journalist.<sup>217</sup>

Nina Petrovskaia understood that Briusov had drawn from her personality, disposition, behavior, and psychological condition in his development and construction of Renata in *Fiery Angel*.

Though her description of what attracted Briusov to her was colored by the novel itself, a close look at their correspondence reveals that, already in 1905, Briusov had identified and aestheticized these aspects of Nina Petrovskaia's persona. We also recognize the extent to which he self-consciously encouraged Petrovskaia to perform them both publically and privately, all while writing *and living* "Elena's novella."

Consider how manipulative—thematically, aesthetically, and philosophically—Briusov was in introducing demonic imagery and spiritual and physical death into the conclusion of his

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<sup>217</sup> Petrovskaia, "Iz 'Vosponimaniï,'" 782: "Ему были нужны подлинные земные подобия этих образов, и во мне он нашел многое из того, что требовалось для романтического облика Ренаты: отчаяние, мертвую тоску по фантастически прекрасному прошлому, готовность швырнуть свое обесцененное существование в какой угодно костер, вывернутые наизнанку, отравленные демоническими соблазнами религиозные идеи и чаяния (Элевзинские мистерии!...), оторванность от быта и людей, почти что ненависть к предметному миру, органическую душевную бездомность, жажду гибели и смерти, – словом, все свои любимые поэтические гиперболы и чувства, сконцентрированные в одном существе – в маленькой начинающей журналистке."

important second letter of 1 July 1905, to Nina Petrovskaia. Clearly under the influence of Poe he wrote:

It is essential that I must at least superficially, at least fragmentarily relive all that I experienced, to parade before my eyes the fiery countenances of the fleetingly-glimpsed hours, seemingly passing slowly, but now coming together into a single, sudden flash of lightning... These hours are now my temple. Forgive me that I am as yet unable to do otherwise than tarry in them, to pray to those icons, to peer into the darkness while the candles You lit still glimmer. They will be extinguished. Shadows are already laughing at the windows. They will reach through the latticework, crawl in through the door. Grimacing and laughing, they will surround me. They will entwine their fingers above my head. And I will fall into their black round dance, into the gloom, into that night, which did not exist for me under the pale glow of the northern midnight sun. Farewell.<sup>218</sup>

In Briusov's deliberate construction of this letter from 1905, we read the words of Briusov the spiritualist, but we also read the "blueprint" of Briusov the poet-magus. He exposes himself by his use of the religious and medieval imagery typical of French Decadence as he transforms the "saintly" image of Nina Petrovskaia into the image of a woman associated with transgression, the eternal beyond, demonic forces, personified, mocking shadows, and his demise. The scene Briusov depicted here in his letter closely resembles scenes in his partially written and—as of yet—unpublished novel *Fiery Angel*.<sup>219</sup> This continuity between the images in Briusov's 1905 letter to Petrovskaia and the plot and imagery in *Fiery Angel* published two

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<sup>218</sup> *Perepiska*, 70: "Мне непобедимо надо хоть бегло <?>, хоть в отрывках повторить все пережитое, провести перед глазами огненные лики мелькнувших часов, казавшихся медленными, но слившихся теперь в одну мгновенную вспышку молинии... Эти часы – отныне мой храм. Прости, что я не могу еще ничего иного, как медлить в нем, молиться у тех же икон, вглядываться во тьму, пока еще тепляться зажженные Тобою свечи. Они погаснут. Тени уже смеются в окна. Они протянутся сквозь решетки, вползут в двери. Кривляясь и хохоча, они обступят меня. Сомкнут пальцы над моей головой. И я упаду в их черный хоровод, во мрак, в ту ночь, которой не было для меня при бледном сиянии северного полнощного солнца. Прощай."

<sup>219</sup> In a letter to Georgii Chulkov of 28 October 1905, Briusov wrote that his work on the novel that eventually became *Fiery Angel* was progressing well, and he wondered where he should place "my child of three years' labor." It was eventually published in *Весы* 1907, №№. 1-3, 5-12, 1908, №№. 2, 3, 5-8. (Cited in E. Chudetskaia, "Ognennyi angel: istoriia sodaniia i pečati," in Valerii Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, v. 4 [Moscow: Khud. lit., 1974], 344).

years later, reveals the extent to which Briusov from the very beginning of his relationship and correspondence with Petrovskaia was actively writing and performing a *text* of which he had conceived immediately after the death of Elena Andreevna Kraskova.

In her written reply to Briusov's important letter of 1 July 1905, Petrovskaia refused to accept that her love in the present moment was no longer a living agent in his pursuit of Symbolist life creation. She refused to accept that Briusov had reduced their sexual relationship into the reenactment and ritualization of their past "ascension" in Finland. Nina Petrovskaia promised to reveal to him still more mysteries.

My dear, sweet little beast, don't go feral without me, return as you were. Nothing dies, and behind the doors that opened so slowly are new doors, more and more of them. Believe in the marvelous, believe! We *did not know* and waited for each other. To whom will we go? Where will we go? I did not hear you, but the voice of love cannot be inaudible, it penetrated into the most distant depths, and I answered you then for the first time unconsciously, I don't know why, it was as if someone else [responded] from my soul—dear Valerii, I love you very much.<sup>220</sup>

In this letter, Nina Petrovskaia also revealed that Briusov had attracted something in her unconscious; a half of herself she did not even know had answered him. If Briusov had successfully projected his anima onto her, Nina Petrovskaia now responded by projecting *her* animus *onto him*.

In her next letter to Briusov, written on 3 July 1905, Petrovskaia agreed to serve as a psychopomp on Briusov's journey to artistic immortality. Apparent, however, is that she did not know exactly what she was signing up for.

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<sup>220</sup> *Perepiska*, 71: "Милый, хороший зверечек, не дичай без меня, вернись прежним. Ничто не умирает, а за дверями, которые открывались так медленно – новые двери, еще, еще. Верь в чудо, верь! Мы *не знали* и ждали друг друга. К кому мы уйдем? Куда мы уйдем? Я не слыхала тебя, но голос любви не может быть неслышным, он проник в самые далекие глубины, и я ответила тебе тогда в первый раз бессознательно, не знаю почему, точно кто-то другой из души, – милый Валерий, я тебя очень люблю."

I still don't really understand any of this. After an excruciating, horrible funeral I am climbing out of the sarcophagus. And if it wasn't given to me to die right there and then, pressed against the cold stone, it means then, that I have further to go on my path. Maybe a short, few steps, but [my path] is *with you*, only you. Whither? I don't know. [...] I will save my soul *through yours*. We will no longer meet as strangers. [...] My dear, loved one, believe in love, do not rush so quickly to look at the last pages. You still do not know, do not know, and out of ignorance, because you are in an unknown country, you mistake a highland slope for the sharpest, highest summit. There, where you are, there is still no fog, no black shadows, no night, no grief. If you are going to talk like that you will summon ghosts; they have always been on the watch for us. They are evil, they cover the sun with their dark wings, and in the *daytime* you will be in the [darkness of] night.<sup>221</sup>

In her letter of 3 July, Nina Petrovskaia exposed the magical efficacy that she believed her love, words of passion, and physical caresses had upon Briusov, the Symbolist artist in his pursuit of life creation. Her month with Briusov in Finland reanimated Petrovskaia after the insulting blow of Belyi's rejection of her as *his* priestess of the “new Eleusinian mysteries,” and she now committed herself to serving as Briusov's psychopomp. Nina Petrovskaia concluded this thought with a reminder of the present, the tangible, real, and phenomenal aspect of their love and her *animate* role in his *present* artistic life.

Here I am alone *and with you*, nothing, nothing has been lost. I kiss you now as I kissed you for 30 days, 30 eternities, when we looked only into each others' eyes. And Saima, and the pale sky, and the nights, the nights—they are not in Finland, they are in my soul, sacred and inviolable, forever dear. And this is *not a memory*, but life, present and *future*.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> *Perepiska*, 72. First of two letters dated 3 July 1905: “Я еще ничего не поняла по-настоящему. После мучительных, ужасных похорон я отхожу от саркофага. И если не дано мне было умереть тут же, припав на холодной камень, значит, у меня еще путь впереди. Может быть, краткий, несколько шагов, но он с *тобой*, лишь с тобой. Куда, – я не знаю. [...] Я сохраню мою душу *твоей*. Мы больше не встретимся чужими. [...] Милый, дорогой, верь в любовь, не стремись так быстро заглядывать в последние страницы. Ты еще не знаешь, не знаешь, и от незнания, оттого, что идешь в незнакомой стране, только горный уступ принимаешь за самую острую, высокую вершину. Там, где ты, еще нет ни тумана, ни черных теней, нет ночи, нет горя. Если ты будешь так говорить, ты скликнешь призраков, они всегда нас сторожили. Они злые, закроют солнце своими черными крыльями, и *днем* ты будешь в ночи.”

<sup>222</sup> *Perepiska*, 72: First letter of 3 July 1905: “Вот я одна *и с тобой*, ничего, ничего не утратилось. Вот целую тебя так, как целовала 30 дней, 30 вечностей, когда мы только друг другу смотрели в глаза. И Сайма,

In the conclusion of her letter, it is apparent that Petrovskaja sincerely believed that she and Briusov were true soul mates. In his consideration of the collective unconscious and the heritage of mythological motifs and primordial images, Jung explained: “The animus corresponds to the paternal Logos just as the anima corresponds to the maternal Eros.”<sup>223</sup> Jung’s assertion here serves as a concise formula of Briusov’s “alchemy” of eros, madness, death, and creation. Jung was only a year and a half younger than Briusov; they were contemporaries who emerged from the same European culture and were interested in similar things. So even if Briusov did not yet have Jungian formulations or psychoanalytic vocabulary available to him, Briusov could have, in all his study and research of the occult, mythology, and Romantic and Decadent literature, intuited the archetypal relationship between the anima and animus and its rich history as a meaningful cultural narrative. Briusov self-consciously invested himself into this formulation. Petrovskaja, on the other hand, lived passionately, emotionally, and in the moment. Her own experiments in life creation with Konstantin Bal’mont and Andrei Belyi had not succeeded, but she intuitively felt that she could achieve the perfect alchemy with Briusov.

Briusov’s subsequent correspondence with Petrovskaja removes any doubts about whether or not he was actively constructing an image and/or persona he wanted her to enact. In his letters, Briusov repeatedly referred to works by Edgar Allan Poe. He directed Petrovskaja to study Poe’s poetization of his deceased wife Virginia Clemm. A young woman who died early and tragically from tuberculosis. Poe struggled to overcome his loss through his art. Thus, in his pursuit of “Elena’s novella,” Briusov encouraged Petrovskaja to perform the function of a

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и бледное небо, и ночи, и ночи, – они не в Финляндии, они в душе, неприкосновенные, дорогие навсегда. *И не воспоминание, а жизнь, настоящее и будущее.*”

<sup>223</sup> Carl Jung, “The Syzygy: Anima and Animus,” in *Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Vol. 9 (Part 2): Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 28.

psychopomp, following a specific model presented by one of the Symbolists' most celebrated predecessors.

Briusov cited Poe's "Lenore" among other texts and asked Petrovskaja if this was not what he himself was doing with their "love" in a letter dated 3 September 1905:

Your truest image is the one that inspired Edgar [Allan Poe] to write "Lenore." Reread those verses. "And when she fell in feeble health, / Ye blessed her — that she died!"<sup>224</sup> When Edgar's wife died, that girl of eighteen, whom he loved so much that he wrote for her "The Raven," and "Ulalume," and "Ligeia," and "Morella" and everything! Everything! when she died, "enemies" (i.e., the whole world) blamed him for hastening her death on purpose, so that he could write these touching verses. "Slander!" the "friends" now say. But I know, and You will understand, that in this slander there *may* be truth! Oh, how often we ourselves precipitate, hurry, evoke precisely that which we fear! "The Imp of the Perverse," whose poet Edgar was because he was its slave, entices us to utter spells that will turn back upon ourselves. There is an excruciating sweetness in preparing one's own execution block and coffin. And You whisper incantatorily "Die, die more quickly!" over our love, which has become dear to you, precisely because it has become dear to you. You whisper and weep, but you whisper all the same. Or have You forgotten the power of spells? And here I involuntarily obey Your voice, I follow your hypnotic suggestion, and write some sort of mad verses. And suddenly, coming to myself with horror, I ask myself, what am I doing? what am I saying? This is false! And this is not me!<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Briusov quotes this line in Russian from the second stanza of Konstantin Bal'mont's translation of "Lenore" (1901): "И над больной ваш дух ночной шепнул: Умри скорей!"

<sup>225</sup> *Perepiska*, 135-136: "Твой самый верный образ - тот, от имени которого написано Эдгаром 'Линор.' Перечти эти стихи. 'И над больной ваш дух ночной шептал: умри скорей!' Когда умерла жена Эдгара, эта девочка восемнадцати лет [Virginia Clemm was actually 24 when she died], которую он любил так, что ей написан и 'Ворон,' и 'Улалюм,' и 'Лигейя,' и 'Морэлла,' и все! И все! - когда она умерла, "враги" (т.е. весь свет) обвиняли, что он нарочно ускорил ее смерть, чтобы написать трогательные стихи. 'Клевета!' кричат теперь 'друзья.' Но я знаю, и Ты поймешь, что в этой клевете *может* быть правда! Ах, как часто мы ускоряем, приближаем, вызываем сами то именно, чего больше всего боимся! 'Демон извращенности,' поэтом которого был Эдгар, потому что был и его рабом, увлекает нас произносить заклятия, которые должны обрушиться на нас самих. *Есть мучительная сладость самому готовить себе плаху и гроб.* И Ты над нашей любовью, которая стала Тебе дорога, и именно потому, что она стала Тебе дорога, шепчешь теперь заклинательно: 'Умри, умри скорей!' Шепчешь, и плачешь, и все-таки шепчешь. Или Ты забыла силу заклятий? И вот я невольно подчиняюсь Твоему голосу, следуя Твоему внушению, пишу какие-то безумные стихи. И вдруг, с ужасом опомнившись, спрашиваю себя, что делаю, говорю, что это неправда! что это не я!"

Briusov's manipulation of Petrovskaiia and her love for him in the name of his artistic vision are blatant in this letter. Briusov invoked the tragic performance of love, illness as madness and passion, death, and art in the life creation between Poe and his wife Virginia, who died young, but who lived forever in his poetry. Briusov thought that the historical precedent of Poe's and Virginia's love story would reassure Nina Petrovskaiia that their mutual suffering in life would serve a timeless and influential purpose in literary culture: the microcosm that mirrors the macrocosm. Perhaps it is more likely that, through this comparison to Poe, Briusov was in fact actively reassuring himself—and his reader—that he would achieve *his own* artistic immortality.

### **Inspired Words of Love and Madness: The Signs and Symptoms of Artistic Demonomania in Life and in Literature**

Briusov was quick to introduce the theme of madness and the image of a psychopomp into his correspondence with Nina Petrovskaiia; in July 1905, he had already confessed his own madness along with his desire to immortalize it. Awaiting his inevitable fall from the heights of happiness, Briusov believed “all [my] torments will be but a small price for thirty days on those ‘blessed isles’ [...] Perhaps this is madness, perhaps this is my fear—my mania.”<sup>226</sup> He told Petrovskaiia that her letters and her clairvoyant *words* would calm and guide him through this darkness, “like stars above my life, which illuminate and ignite once more my suddenly-dimmed heart.”<sup>227</sup> He concluded his letter with the reassurance that he would immortalize his physical

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<sup>226</sup> *Perepiska*, 78. Letter of 7 July 1905: “все мучения будут лишь малой платой за тридцать дней на тех ‘островах блаженных’ [...] Быть может, это безумие, быть может, мой страх — моя мания.”

<sup>227</sup> *Perepiska*, 78: “как звезды, над моей жизнью, которые теперь озаряют и зажигают вновь мое вдруг потускневшее сердце.”

and psychological descent and resurrection in “your novel”: “I am going to write *your* novel, too, this very day, this very hour, as soon as I arrive home. It should be written *beautifully*, it will be epoch-making in literature. I swear this to you.”<sup>228</sup>

In his next letter Briusov reasserted the psychological importance of such a novel—once again madness, once again mania.<sup>229</sup> On July 10, in his fourth letter in a row, Briusov reiterated the significance of Nina Petrovskaja's words and his intention to capture their image in a novel:

There, on my filled pages, are You, that You whom I know, whom I love, whom I want to preserve for myself and for the world—forever! How wonderful, what happiness it is to search for the exact words, those that—You would utter.<sup>230</sup>

Briusov the spiritualist believed that the madness of divine/demonic inspiration was an essential ingredient in his alchemical life model of Symbolist creation. “Madness is part life, part existence, part soul, and part eternity. A mad love is a part of Love, great Love, embracing both madness and tenderness, both passion and clarity.”<sup>231</sup>

Briusov evoked the image and emotions of a Romantic poet when he expressed the tension between life and art.

It's strange. The less “madness” I have in life, the more there is in my poetry. And, for example, when last year my whole life was madness, my verses were in general very calm and in any case invested with a classically strict form. And even more so there, in

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<sup>228</sup> *Perepiska*, 78: “Буду писать и Твой роман, с сегодняшнего дня, с того часа, как вернусь домой. Он должен быть написан прекрасно, быть эпохой в литературе. Клянусь Тебе в этом.”

<sup>229</sup> *Perepiska*, 80. Letter of 8 July 1905.

<sup>230</sup> *Perepiska*, 82: Letter of 10 July 1905: “Там, на этих исписываемых мною страницах, Ты, та Ты, которую я знаю, которую люблю, которую хочу сохранить себе и миру —навек! Как хорошо, какое счастье искать точных слов, какие Ты могла бы произнести.”

<sup>231</sup> *Perepiska*, 128. Letter of 29 August 1905: “Безумие — часть жизни, часть бытия, часть души, часть вечность. Безумная любовь — часть Любви, великой Любви, обнимающей как безумие, так нежность, как страсть, так просветленность.”

Finland, at 'our' granite heights! God has most likely given me a certain quantity of madness and two cups on a scale: art and life can never arrive at equilibrium.<sup>232</sup>

Briusov expressed the tension between the “emic” and “etic” criteria of capturing a lost love in words—“the integral meaning of things in the past and their representation in the present.”<sup>233</sup> In striving to depict the height of one’s passion and excitement for a deceased person or capture a moment of divine “madness” in an aesthetic image, with the passage of time, the etic, the representation, begins to pull away from the emic. In other words, the original lover and genuine emotion becomes isolated, alienated, and, in time, inaccessible.<sup>234</sup> Briusov expressed this anxiety already in a letter on 7 July 1905: “You ask me to look forward. But I cannot. It seems to me that I see an apparition before me, and it will kill me.”<sup>235</sup>

Briusov recognized that—even in the name of his art—he had neither the stamina nor the desire to maintain the insanity that colored those thirty days with Petrovskaia. “There had been madness, but it is lived out; there is no need for madness.”<sup>236</sup> To capture the emotional intensity of the month, Briusov chose the image of a tumultuous storm. He elevated the intense love Petrovskaia gave him into the symbol of a mediumistic, guiding light through the gale of his psychological darkness. He recognized that it had been too much for him, and although he needed a beacon, he also needed a break. Nina Petrovskaia had indeed transported him into the

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<sup>232</sup> *Perepiska*, 147. Letter of 5 November (?) 1905: “Странно. Чем менее 'безумства' у меня в жизни, тем более его в стихах. И, например, когда в прошлом году вся жизнь моя была безумие – стихи мои в общем были очень спокойны и во всяком случае облечены в классически строгую форму. И еще того более там, в Финляндии, на 'наших' гранитах! Должно быть, мне дано от Бога определенное количество безумия и две чаши весов: искусство и жизнь никогда не могут прийти в равновесие.”

<sup>233</sup> Gaskill, *Witchcraft*.

<sup>234</sup> I agree with Briusov’s self assessment about his novel that it resembles *A Hero of Our Time* (see above, footnote #50). I see at work in *Fiery Angel* what Vladimir Nabokov described was at work in Lermontov’s novel: “The Triple Dream,” the blurring together of fact, fiction, and improbability that enables us to look past “Pechorin” and see the author as himself. See: “Translator’s Foreword” to Nabokov’s translation of *A Hero of Our Time* (Dana Point: Ardis, 1988), v-xix.

<sup>235</sup> *Perepiska*, 78: “Ты зовешь меня посмотреть вперед. Но я не смею. Мне кажется, я увижу видение, которое убьет меня.”

<sup>236</sup> *Perepiska*, 128. Letter of 29 August 1905: “Безумие было; – оно пережито, не надо безумия.”

macrocosm of divine and demonic inspiration, but “love was not always madness and madness was not always love.”<sup>237</sup> Petrovskaia, acting as his psychopomp, had led him through the terror and storm of creative illness and demonomania toward a new state of greater self-awareness and understanding of himself as an artist.

Ah, if You could have seen that clear, bright horizon, which shone over me, this clarity of distance, this tender freshness of the morning air, this vigorous power of the whole body, this desire to breathe, to work, to be, to live! You have led me to this morning, to these distant views, led me through a night of horrors, through the storm of madness, through chaos.<sup>238</sup>

Briusov recognized Nina Petrovskaia’s role in his achievement of the “all-embracing wholeness” (*vseob’emlest’*), “the crystalline quality” of his newfound existence (*kristal’nost’ bytiia*) and his more developed psychological self-awareness as an artist.<sup>239</sup> The source of Briusov’s frustration with Petrovskaia and what he considered her madness was the fact that she refused to share in his new Self, the archetype Jung described as the transcendent “god within.”

To articulate the dysfunction in their relationship, Briusov further refined the symbols he had chosen to capture the essence of his artistic journey and what had been Nina Petrovskaia’s position in it—rivers, oceans, lakes, and “her” guiding, clairvoyant light—and added to them the image of a storm to represent both the madness in life and the madness in art. Briusov grounded their complicated romance and artistic aspirations in the phenomenal realm.

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<sup>237</sup> *Perepiska*, 128: “любовь не всегда безумие и что безумие не всегда любовь.”

<sup>238</sup> *Perepiska*, 128: “Ах, если б Ты увидала тот ясный, светлый кругозор, который теперь просиял надо мной, эту четкость далей, эту нежную свежесть утреннего воздуха, эту бодрящую мощь всего тела, эту жажду дышать, работать, быть, жить! Это Ты привела меня к этому утру, к этим далям, привела сквозь ночь ужасов, сквозь бури безумия, сквозь хаос.”

<sup>239</sup> *Perepiska*, 128.

True, *geographically-speaking*, considered ‘from sea level,’ we have risen higher than we did in Finland, but *psychologically* [italics mine] we ascended to a summit there, and from there we already saw all of the vast expanse, all of the endlessness of the sky and all of the limitlessness of the earth. But now there is a steep descent, precipitous, even if slow.<sup>240</sup>

In this letter we see the extent to which Briusov persisted in his construction of a “bridge” between the phenomenal and noumenal realms that was so necessary for the realization of the Symbolist aesthetic eschatology. In this letter, we also recognize the consistent Symbolist theme of Dionysian descent and Apollonian ascent; the fragmentation and restoration of wholeness so key to the *fin-de-siècle* master narrative of transformation.

Though Petrovskaia frustrated Briusov with her refusal to accept the fact that on his part the creative hysteria was over, he offered her an opportunity to play the complementary spiritual role for him. He once again proposed that she could function as a conduit between his psychological crisis in the phenomenal microcosm and its greater meaning in the noumenal macrocosm. In a letter to Petrovskaia on 5 June 1906, Briusov explicitly asked for the assistance of his psychopomp:

Come to me with a magic staff, opening these new paths—and I will follow You. Ah, it must truly be a magical staff, and those must truly be new words: not the words of madness, which I myself spoke all too often, not the words of tender happiness, which—even if only for a moment—You and I came to know together.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> *Perepiska*, 131. Letter of 1 September 1905: “Правда, *географически*, считая 'от уровня моря,' мы подымались выше, чем в Финляндии, но психологически мы вошли на высь – там, и оттуда уже видели всю даль, всю бесконечность неба и всю беспредельность земли. А теперь спуск, обрывистый, хотя и медленный.”

<sup>241</sup> *Perepiska*, 190. Letter of 5 June 1906: “Приди ко мне с волшебном жезлом, открывающим эти новые пути, – и я пойду за Тобой. Ах, то воистину должен быть волшебный жезл, воистину новые слова: не слова о безумии, которые я сам говорил слишком часто, не слова о нежном счастье, которое - хотя и на миг - мы извели с Тобой вместе.”

In the same letter Briusov called upon Nina Petrovskaia—in fact, *any* medium—to transport him beyond other decadent artists and philosophers toward a higher, as-yet-concealed wisdom.

There are some truths that lie beyond Nietzsche, beyond Przybyszewski, beyond Verhaeren, ahead of contemporary humankind. Whoever can show me the way to those truths, I will be with that person.<sup>242</sup>

Numerous times Petrovskaia expressed her frustration to Briusov about the strict boundaries he kept drawing around her and his insistence that she accept the kind of madness he wanted in his life. On 10 January 1906, she wrote: “You call my love ‘madness,’ you are astonished that it is so troubled and resembles self-immolation,—*there must be another woman.*”<sup>243</sup> The “madness” in their relationship quickly devolved into a rather prosaic one: Petrovskaia wanted Briusov to leave his wife for her (and to stop pursuing other female lovers). He refused and, in his eyes, she had become hysterical.

## Diagnosis

Nina Petrovskaia’s memoirs and letters to Valerii Briusov reveal a woman who had a lifetime struggle with her mental health. Beyond her theoretical discourse with Briusov about the relationship among eros, madness, and art, Petrovskaia frequently described her severe bouts of depression. She expressed feelings of despair, listlessness, loneliness, and anxieties about abandonment. She worried that he was in love with another, but she was unwilling to give up her

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<sup>242</sup> *Perepiska*, 190: “Есть какие-то истины - дальше Ницше, дальше Пшибышевского, дальше Верхарна, впереди современного человечества. Кто может укажет путь к ним, с тем буду я.”

<sup>243</sup> *Perepiska*, 170: “Зовешь мою любовь 'безумием,' удивляешься, что она такая непокойная, похожая на самосжигание, —*точно есть какая-то другая.*”

belief that whatever art she and Briusov created together would “save” her. She repeatedly and obsessively pleaded with Briusov to leave his wife so that they could be together, but to no avail.

Petrovskaia’s letters to Briusov are peppered with a thesaurus of words that articulate an illness of spirit, including but not limited to: “pain” (*bol’*), “illness” (*bolezn’*), “madness” (*bezumie*), “suffering” (*stradan’e*), “sadness” (*pechal’*) “despair” (*toska*), “grief” (*gore*), “emptiness” (*pustota*), “loneliness” (*odinochestvo*), “torments” and spiritual “tribulations” (*muki*), “death” and “ruin” (*gibel’*), and phrases like “mortal anxieties” and alarm (*smertel’nye trevogi*). She often employed infinitives such as “to break or fracture” (*slomat’*), “to kill or murder” (*ubit’*), “to die” (*umeret’*) and “to perish or be lost” (*pogibat’*).

Nina Petrovskaia also admitted to her abuse of morphine as a means to manage her psychological pain and time and again confessed suicidal ideation. For example, her letters to Briusov from the year 1909 onward lay bare her deep depression, with the accusation that Briusov had driven her to it. During this period Petrovskaia indicated her disinterest in anything other than morphine.

I don’t have the strength to get myself up and out the door; I only go out to the apothecary and occasionally to eat [...] [these] strange days without you [Briusov] are spent in despair, and chaos; days, killed for some unknown reason. [...] My only consolation is that you know. But it’s already obvious that the dose [of morphine] that was more than enough for me when I was around you is powerless against the sadness now. I take it up to 5 times. [...] Without it, I cry and my heart falls to pieces [...] Because you aren’t here, I feel almost physical pain; it is impossible to express it with words, but it is a constant and unceasing suffering.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> *Perepiska*, 492: Letter of 20 October/2 November 1909, written from Paris: “Нет сил заставить себя выйти на улицу, выхожу только в аптеку и редко обедать. [...] страшные дни без тебя в тоске, в хаосе, дни, убитые неизвестно зачем. [...] Одно у меня утешение – ты знаешь. Но уже очевидно, -та доза, которой мне была более чем достаточно возле тебя, бессильна против печали сейчас. Беру его до 5-и раз. [...] Без этого я плачу и сердце расстраивается до припадков. [...] Оттого что тебя нет, я чувствую почти физическую боль, ее невозможно рассказать словами, но это постоянное, неутрачиваемое страданье.”

In another letter from the autumn of 1909, Petrovskaia's suicidal ideation strikes a painful chord for us as retrospective readers. She confessed to Briusov:

I feel horrible here [in Paris]. I am completely ill. I'm not just complaining—it's the truth; I inject morphine days on end, not even counting the number of times. As soon as the pain becomes unbearable... And the pain does not subside. *To die so*, in Paris, makes me afraid.<sup>245</sup>

On 23 February 1928, in a lonely Parisian apartment, Petrovskaia did in fact successfully commit suicide by gassing herself. Through her letters to Briusov we realize that she had been building up to this final act for years and, in the end, endured her worst fear: to die alone.

Briusov more than once asserted that he was unable to rescue her or love her in return with the intensity she demanded. In a letter dated 25 July 1907—the same year *Fiery Angel* was first serialized—he introduced the theme of illness and the image of their relationship as a hopeless patient. Briusov demanded that they *equally* acknowledge the dire diagnosis. He wrote to her:

I imagine you as a doctor [medical man] at the bedside of a patient, and this patient is – our relationship (I do not want to say our love!). Tirelessly you put forth one diagnosis after another, pinpointing the illness with ever greater precision. You scrutinize the situation; ponder all the symptoms, and improve your assessments. Meanwhile the patient is dying, he needs medicine, now, without tarrying, and You, afraid to make a mistake, just keep thinking about what to do for him.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> *Perepiska*, 498: Letter of 28 October/10 November 1909, Paris. “Здесь мне ужасно. Я совсем больна, я не “жалоблю” тебя –это правда; вспрыскиваю морфий, целый день, не считая даже, сколько раз. Как только боль становится невыносимой... А боль не стихает. Умереть *так*, в Париже, мне страшно.”

<sup>246</sup> *Perepiska*, 235-236: “Ты представляешься мне медиком у постели больного, а больной этот - наши отношения (не хочу сказать наша любовь!). Неустанно Ты ставишь один диагноз за другим, все более и более точно определяя болезнь. Всмотриваешься, вдумываешься во все симптомы и все поправляешь себя. А больной в это время умирает, ему нужны лекарства, сейчас, немедленно, а Ты, боясь ошибиться, только размышляешь над ним.”

## Therapy

That Nina Petrovskaia had contemplated suicide and abused drugs for a significant portion of her life is tragic. Her years of struggle through real-life depression underscore her “performance” of herself in real life and of “Renata” in “her” novel, *Fiery Angel*. “Renata” became a symbolic vehicle to give voice, aesthetic representation, and, more importantly, artistic and philosophical value to her long history of emotional anguish. Nina Petrovskaia’s identification with Renata was a poetization of her confusion and her pain *in the name of art and Symbolist life creation*.

Yes, in some ways it was a result of Briusov’s manipulation, as Khodasevich so rightly observed. The idea of “Renata,” however, in many ways provided Petrovskaia with an opportunity to express pain, disappointment, rejection, loneliness, and despair. When Petrovskaia signed her letters with the words “your Renata” and pointed to the real-life events behind the screen of fictionalized scenes, such moments were examples of Symbolist life creation at its purest: a seamless conflation of fiction, aesthetics, and biography, but, alas, without transfiguration. Perhaps Petrovskaia had been more invested in the promise of the transmutative potential of the alchemy of eros, illness, and art than even Briusov had been. This is the central core of Petrovskaia’s acceptance of the performance of Renata. In this sense we move beyond Khodasevich’s too-simplistic statement that Briusov was Petrovskaia’s victimizer. Petrovskaia willingly and cognizantly accepted her role as Briusov’s psychopomp (and thus victim).

In her memoirs, Petrovskaia noted that “it is very difficult for a person to become great all at once, and even more difficult to be great forever; but to go through life mediocre—is not

worth a thing.”<sup>247</sup> Petrovskaia admitted that she sought greatness, purpose, and some piece of fame or “immortality” in her life. She claimed, albeit in hindsight, that everything changed for her when she began to read the innovative poetry of Briusov:

Everything the new Russian literature was preaching [...] was known to me from cover to cover. And all that had conditioned the artistic style of a whole generation was organically close to me, but the real-life existence of these great writers seemed like the legend of the ivory tower, to which few were called and chosen. Of those inaccessible beings who held in their hands the keys to authentic life and authentic literature of that Russian age, the first to torment my dreams was Briusov.

His small collections of poetry [...] became for me a symbol of my new faith.<sup>248</sup>

Petrovskaia also admitted in her memoirs the extent to which Briusov seduced her, yes, but that she willingly and *knowingly* accepted his deadly aesthetic designs for her:

During that fall [1904] V. Briusov offered me a goblet of dark, astringent wine, in which, like the pearl of Cleopatra, he had dissolved his soul, and said:

“Drink!”

I drank it and was poisoned for seven years...<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> E. Garetto, “Zhizn’ i smert’ Niny Petrovskoi,” in *Minuvshee: istoricheskii al'manakh*, 8 (Moscow: Otkrytoe Obshchestvo Feniks, 1992), 20: “Очень трудно человеку стать однажды большим, еще больше того быть большим всегда, но прожить жизнь маленьким - ничего не стоить.”

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 19: “Вся новая русская литературная проповедь [...] была мне известна от доски до доски. И все, обусловившее художественный стиль целого поколения, было мне близко органически, но реальное бытие этих больших писателей представлялось легендой о башне из слоновой кости, где мало и званых и избранных. Первым из тех недоступны, державших в пуках ключи подлинной жизни и подлинной литературы той эпохи, томил мою мечту Брюсов.

Маленькие сборники его [...] стали для меня символом моей новой веры.”

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 69: “В эту осень В. Брюсов протянул мне бокал с темным терпким вином, где как жемчужина Клеопатры была растворена его душа, и сказал:

- Пей!

Я выпила и отравилась на семь лет...”

## Prognosis and Death

Briusov's years of correspondence with Petrovskaia represent a long discourse about love, madness, death, and art through which he tried to manipulate her, turning her from a vital lover into an apparition, symbol, and psychopomp along his journey as an aspiring Symbolist "life-creator." Petrovskaia was eventually forced to come to terms with the fact that Briusov's wife Ioanna Matveevna was the woman with whom he established a peaceful, stable home life, and he would never leave her. In the privacy of his home, it was Ioanna Matveevna who provided the asylum of routine, discipline, study, and (despite her illnesses and miscarriages) psychological equilibrium.

Petrovskaia asserted, in the year 1910, that in the construction of his psychopomp, Briusov used her spiritually and physically: an objectified, otherworldly "Nina Petrovskaia/Renata" and "Nina Petrovskaia the lover." She verbalized her awareness:

in your consciousness, she supplements me, and I her, and we both (oh, how bitter it is to say this) merge in one harmonious whole for you. It is possible to trace how, after a relatively long stay with one, you begin yearning for the other. Facts from the past speak to this. From the features of two women, two souls, you create *one*, and for you, basically it is this *one* you need, because the two separated are incomplete. The two sides of your being—the spiritual and physical—need us both. You as much as say so: "Take from me all that is spiritual, and to her I will give everything external."<sup>250</sup>

Petrovskaia was insulted and hurt. Briusov had created the illusion that he sought to transcend materiality (perhaps he believed this himself), but in the end all he sought was sex, a divine

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<sup>250</sup> *Perepiska*, 533. Undated letter of Spring 1910: "в твоём сознании она пополняет меня, а я ее, и обе мы (о, как горько это) сливаемся для тебя в одно гармоническое целое. [...] Из черт двух женщин, двух душ ты творишь *одну*, и тебе, собственно, эта *одна* и нужна, ибо обе порознь *не полны*. Двум сторонам твоего существа – духовной и телесной – нужны *мы обе*. Ты так и говоришь: 'Возьми все духовное, а ей я отдам все внешнее.'"

*mysterium coniunctionis*. Their union did not bring forth Art or Wisdom, but pain, suffering, and “demons”: drug addiction, tears, sorrow, and Renata as victim.

Petrovskaia’s accusation exposed Briusov as the “tough-minded” alchemist Coudert had described: as cited above, “more often than not they dissipated their wealth and embittered their lives fruitlessly seeking to transmute base metal into gold and old flesh into youthful suppleness.” However “necessary” Briusov argued that this “demonic” poetization of Nina Petrovskaia as a hysterical fallen woman was for his aesthetic eschatology—facilitator of the unavoidable fall of the magician-poet into the corrupt world of matter, representation, and Promethean “sin” to be “overcome”—Petrovskaia demanded he take note of how terribly it stung. Petrovskaia admitted that, to get through the rest of her life, this notion of her necessity to his art was a fixed idea that “possessed” her and fueled her mania and depression. In fact, it was all that she had left.

As early as 17 July 1905, Nina Petrovskaia promised not to disturb the perfect work of art Briusov had created for the two of them, regardless of how much it pained her. Petrovskaia wrote:

I am sad and ill, Valerii. You have made me regret a lot of things. But there never any calculations on my part, you knew everything that entered my soul, and if in this was concealed the ruination of everything that existed between us, so be it. Hold on to the specter of [our] thirty days, if you are afraid to shatter this “completed picture,” and I will quietly and pridefully withdraw from you; but I don’t want to change, I don’t want to live and feel according to some advantageous plan. Oh, why do you have such thoughts? Why do you destroy everything so soon?<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> *Perepiska*, 92: “Мне грустно и больно, Валерий, ты заставляешь меня жалеть о многом. Но мной никогда не руководили никакие расчеты, ты знал все, что проходило мне в душу, и елси в этом крылась погибель всего, что между нами, --пусть. Оставайся с призраком 30-и дней, если боишься, что можно нарушить эту “завершенную картину,” а я тихо и гордо отойду от тебя, но не хочу меняться, не хочу жить и чувствовать по выгодному плану. О, зачем у тебя такие мысли? Зачем ты губишь все так рано?”

She concludes the letter with the plaintive question, “What can I do, so that you would once again become intoxicated, joyful, and carefree as you were in Saima?”<sup>252</sup>

With these words Petrovskaia reflected several things we have come to expect from her interpretation of the month she shared with Briusov on the shores of Lake Saima in the summer of 1905: their thirty days together and the alchemy of their love and madness had created a perfect picture, a *work of art*. But Petrovskaia expressed sadness, heartache, and guilt at Briusov’s sudden rejection, less than a month later, of her sincere tenderness, passion, and devotion to him. She recognized that Briusov had already reduced the alchemical agent of her living and vibrant (and erotic) love for him into an aesthetic construction which he intended to manipulate: she was not a lover, she had been turned into a psychopomp. Petrovskaia recognized almost immediately—though she refused to accept—that Briusov had reduced her to an object of worship, some sort of eternalized feminine: not the Wisdom-Sophia of Solov’ev, but the ghost of a lost love. Though she painfully wrestled with the reality of Briusov’s rejection, she noted it and also understood his *aesthetic purpose* in doing so. After all, as Belyi had admitted, Petrovskaia’s intuition and raw sexual energy were traits that repeatedly drew men to her as a muse.

Briusov reiterated, in his response to Petrovskaia on 20 July 1905, that he was actively writing their novel, the novel whose pages were drawn from his codified memory and the work of art they created *in the past*. In his letter, he suggested a rather unconvincing hint of guilt at reducing the real-life Petrovskaia into an aesthetic project.

Everything is already different—my thoughts, and desires, and all my soul, and as it should be, my body. And nothing from the past remains—the flower has fallen—and I almost don’t dare call you, and I don’t know how to resolve to look you in the eye. And the whole world for me—this narrow path from our home at the Oka, along which everyday I slowly paced back and forth, a verst there and a verst back, everyday having

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<sup>252</sup> *Perepiska*, 93: “Что сделать, чтобы опять ты стал опьяненным, радостным, бездумным, как в Сайме?”

considered a new chapter for the novel. The work swallowed me up not like some Maelstrom, carried away, shaken, horrified, but like a black depth of some kind of sea, like some kind of taciturn abyss, in which there are no sounds, no light, no life.<sup>253</sup>

As to be expected, Briusov invoked the images of water and storm to describe the geography of his physical and psychological exploration of emotion, erotic passion, and creative intensity during his time with Petrovskaja in Finland. Such was the geography he walked—“a verst there and a verst back”—between life and art, past and present, eternal river’s edge and the safety of “home,” in the generation of his novel. We are not surprised to find in this letter yet another expression of his self-consciousness as an apprentice in transition, nor are we surprised that despite his creative persistence, he expressed exhaustion and a loss of his “living” enthusiasm for the aesthetic experiment. Furthermore, Briusov admitted to his manipulation of fact and real-life experience to fit the shape and contour of a novel. He continued:

I persisted in filling page after page, transitioning from chapter to chapter (many were needed!), I already *lost the living feeling* for what I’m doing; I am unable to tear myself away, and I do not know how everything I have done will appear to me, when I look at [the novel] with an outsider’s eyes. Will I turn away from [the novel] contemptuously and, laughing, throw my manuscript away, as I have so many others? I, yes, I remember, yes, that I once lived! Now I am in the world of words, sharpened sentences, strung and twisted events.<sup>254</sup> [*italics mine*]

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<sup>253</sup> *Perepiska*, 93-94: “И уже все другое — и мысли, и желания, и вся душа, и, должно быть, все тело. И нет ничего из прежнего — осыпался цветок — и почти не смею назвать Тебя, и не знаю, как решусь посмотреть Тебе в глаза. И весь мир для меня — эта узкая дорожка от нашего дома к Оке, по которой каждый день я медленно брожу взад и вперед, верста — туда, верста — назад, обдумывая каждый день новую главу романа. Работа поглотила меня не как Мальстрем, увлекающий, потрясающий, ужасный, но как черная глубь какого-то моря, как какая-то молчаливая пучина, в которой нет ни звуков, ни светов, ни жизни.”

<sup>254</sup> *Perepiska*, 94: “Упрямо исписывая страницу за страницу, переходя от главы к главе (их много надо!), я уже теряю живое чутье того, что делаю; не могу оторваться, но и не знаю, чем покажется мне все сделанное, когда взгляну на него посторонними глазами. Не отвернусь ли я презрительно и не брошу ли, смеясь, свою рукопись прочь, как столько других? О, да, я помню, да, я был живым когда то! Теперь я в мире слов, отточенных предложений, нанизанных и переплетенных событий.”

Briusov again drew a line of demarcation between his “ascent,” the month in Finland, and his “descent,” the return to Moscow. The otherworldly and inspired experience Briusov had had in Finland represented for him the noumenal realm and the humdrum of Moscow represented for him the phenomenal world. He characterized the phenomenality of his everyday life in Moscow the material “world of words” and an implied judgmental and critical public audience that represented his day-to-day existence as a writer and editor.

In his poetization of Nina Petrovskaia as a deceased and spectral muse in this letter, Briusov persisted in his all but subtle construction of her as a spiritual guide on his quest for the perfect alchemy of Symbolist life creation. This becomes increasingly apparent as Briusov continued to express his “new” attitude toward Nina Petrovskaia in the same letter on 20 July:

You are in them, but it isn't you; I myself am in them, but then this is someone different, other, already strange, already incomprehensible, about whom I need to strain my memory to recollect. Memory! Memory! Yes! She has to work now! And my best treasures, and everything that I hold most precious, are already not in my heart, nor in this moment but in the past, in my memories....<sup>255</sup>

Although Briusov had manipulated Nina Petrovskaia's devotion to him, it was she who was never fully able to come to terms with the fact that he had moved on to other “experiments” and remained in his marriage. “I've given up the struggle to keep living. I live outside of life—living as if dead,” claimed Petrovskaia.<sup>256</sup> Petrovskaia begged Briusov to leave his wife and save her, Petrovskaia, from “this vampire of my soul.”<sup>257</sup> In the end, Nina Petrovskaia was forced to

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<sup>255</sup> *Perepiska*, 94: “В них Ты, но это и не Ты; в них я сам, но это и кто то иной, чужой, уже странный, уже непонятный, о котором надо вспоминать, напрягая память. Память! Память! да! Ей приходится теперь работать! И мои лучшие сокровища, и все, что есть и меня самого драгоценного, уже не в сердце, не в этом миге, а в прошлом, в воспоминании....”

<sup>256</sup> *Perepiska*, 557: Undated letter of Spring 1910. “Я махнула рукой на всю жизнь. Я живу вне ее—живая, как мертвая.”

<sup>257</sup> *Perepiska*, 563. The following undated letter of Spring 1910: “от этого вампира моей души.”

come to terms with the fact that Ioanna Matveevna functioned as Briusov's *living* muse in what Grossman describes as his mystical veneration of art, thus exposing the esoteric classicism of his entire lifetime project of "Briusov the poet."<sup>258</sup> In the end, perhaps Briusov increasingly associated Nina Petrovskaiia with his *first muse* Elena Andreevna, rather than with Ioanna Mateevna, because both Petrovskaiia and Elena Andreevna had functioned as his muse at key moments in time during his apprenticeship as an artist when he was still hypnotized by the optimistic madness of Solov'ev's sophiology.

To describe his indebtedness to Petrovskaiia for his transmutation from apprentice into a master, mage, and true artist, Briusov did two things. He invoked the thematics, aesthetics, and philosophy of spiritual alchemy and then he, having been "duped" into thinking he had perceived the spark of her divinity, re-storied the narrative of feminine completeness embodied in the image of Sophia:

I was frightened and I was blinded, having seen You—"present and real," having found you in the centuries, in worlds, having found You in life. And everything in the crucible of my soul—my unruliness, madness, despair, and passion—fused, as if into a bar of gold, expressed as Love, unified, infinite, eternal.<sup>259</sup>

Petrovskaiia, having acted in the capacity of Briusov's psychopomp in the year 1905, had revealed to him that his aesthetic eschatology, his personal counter-narrative to the *fin-de-siècle* master narrative of degeneration, and his practical application of Symbolist life creation had some serious theoretical and methodological holes. Briusov's "Solov'evian" experiment with

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<sup>258</sup> Joan Delaney Grossman, "Clashing Models of Life in Art," in *Creating Life*, 150.

<sup>259</sup> *Perepiska*, 127-128. Letter dated 29 August 1905: "Я был испуган, я был ослеплен, увидав Тебя, — "настоящую," найдя Тебя в веках, в мирах, обретя Тебя в жизни. И все, что было в горниле моей буйством, безумием, отчаяньем, страстью, перегорело и, словно в золотой слиток, вылилось в Любовь, единую, беспредельную, навеки." Here Briusov reveals his obsession with eros, illness, death, and art.

Petrovskaia to test if indeed “we should define beauty as the *transformation of matter through the embodiment in it of another supra-natural principle*” had failed miserably.<sup>260</sup> Briusov’s experiment with Petrovskaia tested the praxis of his (hypothetical) idea about Symbolist life creation—whether or not “Beauty will save the world” in the context of modern *fin-de-siècle* natural eschatology and scientific “alchemy.” It was not viable and did not successfully restore psychic wholeness. Rather, his experiment resulted in illness and psychological suffering for at least four people: Nina Petrovskaia, Andrei Belyi, Ioanna Matveevna, and himself.

In her own pursuit of Symbolist life creation and self-mythologization, Petrovskaia admitted that her aesthetic project with Belyi, however impactful it had been for him, was, for her, an example of youthful experimentation. In Petrovskaia’s eyes, *her* greatest aesthetic project was her love and dedication to Briusov the man and Briusov the poet-magus. Until the end, she defended her passion and commitment as authentic, rapturous, and most of all, manifest. In this, she was a genuine Symbolist because she fully and openly surrendered her public and private life to a poet and his pen.

Nevertheless, Briusov was honest enough to recognize that Nina Petrovskaia had taught him real-life lessons that had refined him and made him a better artist. He also recognized that her “light,” or what he had perceived to be her divine spark, had guided him through the maelstrom of his Promethean and demoniac illness and creative madness, the closest he ever came to “the numinous.” In the end, despite his rejection of her tangible love, Briusov did bestow upon Petrovskaia the gift he had promised when he offered her a goblet of poisoned wine—his notion of judgement and will in the image of the poet-magus—and demanded of her that she sacrifice her “life” for his art: immortality in his novel *Fiery Angel*, or his genuine myth *about them both*.

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<sup>260</sup> Solov’ev, “Beauty in Nature,” 36.

## CHAPTER 3

### Creation

#### **Renata's Medical Case: The Five Elements of Pathography at Work in the Novel**

Valerii Briusov structured his “dissertation” of a novel as a quasi-medical analysis of and testament to the psychological and spiritual “crises” of Russian intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century and to the “crisis” that characterized his own maturation as an artist. Briusov achieved this by using the literary genre of pathography. His novel *Fiery Angel* poeticizes both Nina Petrovskaiia’s lifetime struggle with manic-depression (microcosmic) and Briusov’s own attempt to “diagnose” the demonomania and “hysteria” that characterized the Russian Symbolist experiment in life creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*) at a critical time in Russia’s history (macrocosmic).

In *Fiery Angel* Briusov’s alter ego and narrator Ruprecht documents Renata’s suffering in detail. His narrative culminates with her unfortunate death, induced by the physical and psychological torture of inquisitor Brother Thomas’s legal and theological investigation into the

accusation that she is a witch. Throughout the novel Ruprecht cannot decide on the specific diagnosis and/or explanatory model that would account for Renata's many ailments, though the signs and symptoms of her psychosis are explicit. James Hicks, M.D., explains that “to be psychotic is to be out of touch with reality,” and to experience psychosis is like a dream.<sup>261</sup> Ruprecht’s interpretation of Renata’s psychosis fluctuates between the diagnosis of demonomania according to the religious and theological world view of sixteenth-century Germany and the diagnosis of hysteria according to the world view of Briusov’s contemporary *fin-de-siècle* school of psychiatry. Ruprecht details his attempts to treat and diminish Renata’s suffering and shares his personal struggle to sympathize with her as he attempts to interpret her physical and psychological pain. He provides a record of the scientific, theological, philosophical, and legal components that shape and orchestrate the various responses and reactions people have to her poor condition. The result is that Ruprecht's sophisticated documentation of Renata’s chaotic life resembles a medical case study.

The story of Renata’s suffering in Briusov’s novel corresponds to the five basic elements of pathography. Briusov’s narrator Ruprecht, who acts as Renata’s self-appointed primary physician and spiritual “captain,” documents the signs and symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, prognosis, and outcome of Renata’s illness: a painful and untimely death. Renata’s illness shapes the plot of *Fiery Angel* and her psychological instability fuels Ruprecht’s philosophical and spiritual self-reflection on the course of what he intended, though never fully realized, to be his journey home to make amends with his father for his failure to complete his medical training.<sup>262</sup>

A close textual analysis reveals the extent to which Briusov’s novel aligns with the “plottedness”

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<sup>261</sup> James Whitney Hicks, M.D., *Fifty Signs of Mental Illness: A Guide to Understanding Mental Health* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 268.

<sup>262</sup> This plot motivator echoes the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). Ruprecht walked away from what his family expected of him and the successful practice he may or may not inherit.

of real life illness and the most essential elements of illness narrative. Because Briusov's story about Renata is explicitly drawn from the psychological suffering of a real woman, Nina Petrovskaia, *Fiery Angel* is more than an exploration and medieval aesthetization of the various "pathologies" of *fin-de-siècle* Russia and the Russian Symbolist milieu. Briusov's novel is an example of pathography.

Andrei Belyi pointed to the centrality of Nina Petrovskaia's madness and illness in Briusov's novel *Fiery Angel*. As a main character in the novel's autobiographical backstory, Belyi's analysis is privileged:

Recall the image of the "witch," Renata, from the novel *Fiery Angel*; it contains a naturalistically painted portrait of her [Nina Petrovskaia]. It was written over two years, during a period of bitter confusion among her, Briusov, and me. The novel's furniture is the way of life in old Cologne, a way of life full of superstitions, whose history Briusov meticulously researched. It is an accurate report of N[ina Petrovskaia]'s delirium—a precise dissertation written on the subject of her nervous illness.<sup>263</sup>

In this citation, Belyi defined *Fiery Angel* as Briusov's "dissertation" about Petrovskaia's mental illness. Belyi's use of the word dissertation hints at more than aesthetic representation of Briusov's life experience with Belyi and Petrovskaia. Dissertation implies disquisition, a learned and elaborate written discourse upon or treatment of a subject. Belyi pointed to Petrovskaia's mental illness, her "madness," as the central subject of Briusov's investigation; an observation, as we have seen, that Petrovskaia herself confirmed.

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<sup>263</sup> Andrei Belyi, *Nachalo veka* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990). [http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj\\_a/text\\_0020.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj_a/text_0020.shtml): "вспомните образ 'ведьмы,' Ренаты, из романа 'Огненный ангел'; там дан натуралистически написанный с нее портрет; он писался два года, в эпоху горестной путаницы между нею, Брюсовым и мною; обстание романа — быт старого Кельна, полный суеверий, быт исторический, скрупулезно изученный Брюсовым, — точно отчет о бредах Н\*\*\*, точно диссертация, написанная на тему об ее нервном заболевании."

Briusov, too, supported this definition of *Fiery Angel* as his dissertation on Petrovskaja's madness relative to his lived experience as an aspiring artist and practical "alchemist." He supported this definition through more than one alter ego. In the novel's preface, Briusov the "editor" scrutinized Ruprecht's text "objectively." He exposed the narrative's subjectivity, anachronism, prejudice, and self-aggrandizement, but also admired Ruprecht's extensive reading and multilingual abilities.<sup>264</sup> Briusov the editor responded to Ruprecht's defensive assertion that he is a genuine accomplished scholar:

One could not call my education brilliant; however now, having had many opportunities to acquire the most diverse knowledge, I do not consider myself beneath those who pride themselves on having a double or triple doctorate.<sup>265</sup>

In the capacity of a historian, Briusov the editor upheld Ruprecht's learning. He exonerated Ruprecht's interest in the occult sciences, because in the sixteenth century, he states, "in his belief in the reality of magical occurrences, the author of [this] 'Story' was only following the best minds of his time," such as Jean Bodin (1530–1596) and Johann Weyer (1515–1588).<sup>266</sup> Briusov asserts that these intellectuals are examples of men who rationalized and/or scientifically studied the phenomena of witchcraft and divination. Briusov presented *Fiery Angel* as his translation of a newly discovered, late medieval German manuscript, but even this "scholarly" introduction was unable to disguise the fact that Ruprecht is an autobiographical

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<sup>264</sup> Valerii Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, t. 4 (Moscow: Khud. lit., 1974), 8-9.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 16: "Образование мое никак не может быть названо блистательным, хотя ныне, имея в жизни много случаев приобрести познания самые разнообразные, не почитаю я себя ничем ниже некоторых, гордящихся двойным и тройным докторатом."

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 9: "Веря в реальность магических явлений, автор 'Повести' только следовал лучшим умам своего времени."

projection of Briusov and the novel is a testimony to his experimentation in spiritism and occultism with Nina Petrovskaja.<sup>267</sup>

In his novel, Briusov presented his alter-ego narrator Ruprecht in several guises. Ruprecht was a *landsknecht* and soldier, an explorer, sailor, conquistador, scholar, poet, author, and an amateur, albeit experienced, physician. Throughout the course of the novel Ruprecht is repeatedly compelled to demonstrate and assert his intellectual acumen and credentials as an enlightened man to other characters and to the reader. In bibliographic detail he documents the long lists of the books he has read and the many apocryphal and occult works he further studies with Renata. He compares scenes and people before him to the early Renaissance paintings and statues he saw in Florence and Rome. He confesses his passion for poetry and defends the free arts. He posits and weighs different scientific theories against each other. He compares himself to and scrutinizes the reasoning and knowledge of his companions, particularly the numerous scientists, physicians, historical figures, and fictional personages whom he meets. Ruprecht perceives himself to be on equal footing with the famous men of science he encounters on his journey, such as Johann Weyer, Agrippa von Nettesheim, and Dr. Faust. To varying degrees these men are leading examples of medieval medical, spiritual, and theological professionals.

Ruprecht's conceit is clear in his preparation to appear before the historical Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535), the famous scholar, physician, theologian, and occultist. In his mind, Ruprecht composed in Latin his ideal introduction to the renowned mage:

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<sup>267</sup> Briusov uses the term “spiritism” to refer to the larger phenomenon of spiritualism, although *spiritism* and *spiritualism* do differ: the former refers to the religiously-colored mystical movement promoted by the French Spiritist Allan Kardec; the latter refers to Anglo-American quasi-“scientific” spiritualism. There was shared territory between the two (i.e., the belief that the living can contact the “other world” of the dead), and that is probably where Briusov's interests lay, rather than on the mystical side. The terms were frequently used interchangeably, and adherents of both trends existed in Russia.

I wanted to believe that I would appear before Agrippa not as some inexperienced disciple, but as a modest young scientist, not devoid of knowledge and experience, seeking direction and instruction in those higher spheres of science, which have yet to be sufficiently elaborated and whither it would not be shameful to ask the way. I imagined to myself how Agrippa would at first listen to my discourses not without disbelief, then with joyful attention, and how finally, affected by my intellect and the rich reserves of my knowledge, with amazement would ask how at my years I had achieved such a rare and many-sided learning, and I would answer him that my finest teachers had been his works.<sup>268</sup>

These are the words of a young man eager to be praised but who is oblivious to his insecurities and shortcomings. The reader is aware that Ruprecht considers himself to be an intellectual genius. In this contradictory tension of self-consciousness and over-confidence we recognize a thinly-veiled poetization of the real-life Briusov, the voice of an “apprentice” confessedly crossing into intellectual maturity.

Briusov’s heavy-handed defense of his narrator’s intellectual abilities and accomplishments renders *Fiery Angel* more than a catalogue of the real-life Briusov’s studies and autobiographical history. As Belyi had suggested, little imagination is required to interpret Briusov’s novel as a dissertation of sorts, even to the point of being equipped with an extensive bibliography. Briusov’s novel explores a theme of great personal interest, the demonic—a subject, he asserted, which stimulated his ambition to become a poet and scholar while still a student.<sup>269</sup> The previous chapter revealed the extent to which Briusov’s first passionate love for the “mediumistic” Elena Andreevna Kraskova in 1893 inspired the idea for the novel.

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 112: “Мне хотелось верить, что явлюсь перед Агриппою не как неопытный ученик, но как скромный молодой ученый, не лишенный знаний и опытности, но ищущий указаний и наставлений в тех высших областях науки, которые еще не достаточно разработаны и где не стыдно спрашивать о дороге. Я воображал себе, как Агриппа будет сначала слушать мои рассуждения не без недоверия, потом с радостным вниманием, и как, наконец, пораженный моим умом и богатым запасом моих сведений, в удивлении спросит, как успел я в мои годы достичь такой редкой и разносторонней учености, а я ему отвечу, что лучшим моим руководителем были его сочинения.”

<sup>269</sup> Valerii Briusov, *Iz moei zhizni: Avtobiograficheskaia i memuarnaia proza*, ed. Vasilii Molodiakov (Moscow: TERRA, 1994), 152.

Petrovskaiia asserted that he labored over it for several years before she provided the missing “real-life” centerpiece.<sup>270</sup>

Thus Briusov forged his novel *Fiery Angel* into a testimony of the Russian Symbolist phenomenon; he used it to depict the unique psychological conditions and aspirations that shaped his intellectual milieu (and ultimately Briusov himself). His novel’s academic rigor and intimacy with real-life experience afforded Briusov a certain credibility in the attempt to detail and diagnose the phenomenon of Russian Symbolism’s first wave. The character Ruprecht repeatedly identified himself as an eyewitness. Briusov used Ruprecht, then, to create an aesthetic (and temporal) distance between himself and the events described, to be not a participant, but an informed and educated observer of events, much as a physician is a privileged witness.

### **Briusov’s Alter Egos: Ruprecht the Physician and Ruprecht the Sailor**

Before readers are introduced to Ruprecht and Renata, they are primed to look for and consider the signs and symptoms of the illness suffered by the novel’s female protagonist. Briusov the “editor and translator” drew attention to the relationship between illness and witchcraft in the sixteenth century and concluded his preface with a reference to the sixteenth-century physician Johann Weyer, a man “who was the first to recognize in witchcraft a special kind of illness.”<sup>271</sup> Although Ruprecht presents himself as a “humble and simple soldier,” the career fields in which Briusov’s autobiographical hero has the most education and experience are

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<sup>270</sup> Elena Garetto, “Zhizn’ i smert’ Niny Petrovskoi,” *Minivshee: istoricheskii al'manakh*, 8 (Moscow: Otkrytoe Obshchestvo Feniks, 1992), 56.

<sup>271</sup> Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, 10.

Dutch physician, occultist, and demonologist Johann Weyer (1515–1588) interpreted bipolar symptoms among women as a form of psychological distress, what he called melancholia in his important treatise *De praestigiis daemonum et incantationibus ac venificiis* (On the Illusions of the Demons and on Spells and Poisons; Basel, 1563).

medicine and seamanship. Ruprecht draws on his training, knowledge, and experience as a lay physician and sailor to care for, navigate, and diagnose Renata's suffering.

Ruprecht's father had anticipated that his son would follow in the family footsteps and become a physician. Ruprecht's grandfather, father, and older brother had also been physicians.

My father dreamed that I would become his successor and that he would give to me, like a rich inheritance, both his practice and the good will [he refers to the esteem in which the profession was held]. No sooner had he taught me reading and writing, the use of an abacus, and the rudiments of Latin, than he began to introduce me to the mysteries of medications, to the aphorisms of Hippocrates and the books of Joannitius the Syrian.<sup>272</sup>

Ruprecht boasts that despite his lack of interest in medicine and his having dropped out of his apprenticeship under the surgeon Gottfried Gerard while at university, he achieved some success in the subjects studied.<sup>273</sup> Ruprecht tells us that when a Spanish lieutenant, Don Miguel de Gamez, hired him into service as a physician, it was because his medical credentials and reputation seem to have been well established.<sup>274</sup>

Ruprecht shows off his medical knowledge in his mention of Joannitius, the western name of Hunayn ibn Ishaq al-'Ibadi (809?–873), who in addition to his own medical writing, translated over one hundred ancient Greek medical texts into Arabic, in particular those of Galen. His work represented a new canon of medical authority and education grounded in textual exegesis, the Galenic humoral tradition, and a more intellectual, empirical, and physiological approach. This new canon became a standard medical textbook, the "Ars medicine" or

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 16: "Отец мой мечтал, что я буду его преемником и что мне передаст он, как богатое наследство, и свое дело и свой почет. Едва обучив меня грамоте, счету на абаке и начаткам латыни, он стал посвящать меня в тайны медикаментов, в афоризмы Гиппократов и в книгу Иоанникия Сирийского."

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 22.

“Articella,” in Western Europe until at least to the end of the Renaissance.<sup>275</sup> In his reference to Hippocrates and Joannitius, Ruprecht emphasizes the humanism, scholasticism, and the Aristotelian teleology, or natural philosophy, of his training, contrasting his application of reason and experience (empiric medical knowledge) to the “superstitions” of common healers and the informal training of secular, medieval doctors who (blindly) relied on tradition.

Ruprecht’s excellent training is apparent when, having sustained a terrible wound in a duel with Count Heinrich, Ruprecht assumed his own medical care. He attributed his swift recovery to his superior expertise over that of the local doctor, whom he called a “pedant and an ignoramus” in a black cloak:

Being not entirely ignorant of the practice of medicine and having seen, in my campaigns, more than a few wounds, I immediately, as soon as I had a chance to think about it rationally, ordered that all oily ointments of various repellent composition confected by this priest of Aesculapius be thrown away, and I began to treat my wound exclusively with warm water, to the dismay of Renata and to the indignation of the black doctor.<sup>276</sup>

In labeling the local doctor a “priest of Aesculapius,” Ruprecht highlighted his (read Briusov’s) knowledge of medical history and its stages of professionalization from sensationalism, mysticism, and tradition to empiricism and scientific research (dissection).<sup>277</sup> Aesculapius was

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<sup>275</sup> Medical care improved as its theory and practice increasingly became a subject of study at the university (Salerno, under the formative leadership of Archbishop Alphanus [d. 1085], and soon Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and Padua). This development of medicine as a professional science was fostered by Greek scholars who migrated northward following the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

<sup>276</sup> Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, 164: “Будучи не совсем несведущим в медицине и видав на практике, в походах, немало ран, тотчас же, как только я получил способность рассуждать разумно, я приказал выбросить все масляные мази из разных отвратительных составов этого жреца Эскулапа и пользовал свою рану исключительно теплой водой, к большой тревоге Ренаты и к негодованию черного доктора.”

The snake-entwined rod of Aesculapius is recognizable today as a symbol of medical knowledge. Aesculapius was a son of Apollo and father to Iaso the goddess of recuperation, Hygieia the goddess of cleanliness, Egle the goddess of beauty, Aceso the goddess of the healing process, and Panacea the goddess of remedy.

<sup>277</sup> See Michael Besser, “The Anatomical Enlightenment,” *Austin Journal of Surgery* 2, no. 1 (2015): 1-6.

the god of medicine, trained by the centaur Chiron, who gained his secret knowledge about the evasion of death from a snake.

With the rise of Christianity, European medicine and surgery became the domain of small charity hospitals in monasteries, where religious values shaped theory and practice. As cities grew, medically-trained monastic practitioners were increasingly called out of the monastery. By the tenth century, medicine had in many ways become secularized. After the Council of Clermont (1130) and the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), higher clergy were forbidden to practice medicine. In this manner, as a secular university student and medical apprentice, Ruprecht removed any possibility of mistaking him, despite his elite education, as a religious man of the cloth.

Thus, in this scene from the novel, Briusov used his alter ego Ruprecht the scholastic physician, trained in Aristotelian “natural philosophy,” to distinguish himself, the empiricist and practical alchemist, from contemporaries like Andrei Belyi and Viacheslav Ivanov: “spiritual alchemists” and “priests” who, for a time, sought the incarnation of Wisdom-Sophia and a new Christ-figure as the cure for cultural crisis at the *fin de siècle* and approached artistic creation as a religious act. In fact, these were the New Eleusinian Mysteries Belyi attempted and failed to realize with Nina Petrovskaja. Briusov had established his alter ego of a physician as early as 1907 in a letter to Nina Petrovskaja, and he expanded upon it in his novel.<sup>278</sup>

The most explicit test of Ruprecht's skill as a physician and man of science is his treatment of Renata. From the outset of their relationship Ruprecht recognizes Renata's poor health and straight away dedicates himself to her care.

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<sup>278</sup> *Perepiska*, 235-236. See Chapter 2, footnote #278.

It was a great joy to me to nurse the ill woman like an attendant in a hospital, to feed her and give her drink like a small child, to protect her exhausted sleep, and to search among my meager medical knowledge to find nostrums to alleviate her pain.<sup>279</sup>

Ruprecht understood Renata to be ailing, helpless, mentally drained, and in need of medical attention. As the novel progresses, the signs and symptoms of Renata's illness continue and she increasingly submits to Ruprecht's care. Though at first resistant to Ruprecht's advances as a caregiver, fearing he may violate her, Renata eventually relented: "Renata submitted to me with the indifference with which the seriously ill, to whom nothing matters, obey."<sup>280</sup>

Ruprecht may have presented himself as an amateur physician, but the vocabulary he used to convey and document significant events in his relationship with Renata, her shifting moods and declining health, and his own emotions toward her pain was that of a sailor. Ruprecht repeats images associated with water and sailing in his story, especially when describing the "geography" of Renata's suffering and his private intellectual and spiritual journey. Ruprecht's credibility as a sailor and campaigner is sound. After all, Ruprecht has sailed to the New World and back: "I am accustomed to the clear and precise world of ships' rigging and military maneuvers."<sup>281</sup> Ruprecht wears a sailor's cape throughout the course of the novel. His sailor's cape, Spanish in style, is his "true companion—a marine cape, battered by the storms of the Atlantic Ocean."<sup>282</sup> Furthermore, at various points in the novel Ruprecht resolves to take Renata to the New World for a new beginning. He believes that once removed from the noumenal

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<sup>279</sup> Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, 65: "Мне было большим счастьем ухаживать за больной как служителю в госпитале, кормить и поить ее, как слабого ребенка, оберегать ее усталый сон и искать для нее, в своих скудных познаниях по медицине, облегчающих боли средств."

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 53: "Рената покорилась мне с тем безразличием, с каким слушаются тяжелобольные, которым все равно."

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 134: "я, привыкший к ясному и отчетливому миру корабельных снастей и военных передвижений."

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 111-112: "мой верный товарищ—морской плащ, выдавший бури Атлантического океана."

“storms” of medieval Germany, the fresh vistas of the Atlantic Ocean and the Americas could cure her anguish and restore her mental health.

As an experienced sailor, Ruprecht uses the vocabulary of navigation and elements to describe and interpret events that direct the plot development of the novel, that is, Renata’s medical case study. On the first day of their journey to Cologne, Renata learns that a famous witch is in the area. She convinces Ruprecht to accompany her for a consultation. Ruprecht identified this moment as a dangerous turning point in his life, because it piqued his interest in magic. To capture the event’s significance in his relationship with Renata and his intellectual development, Ruprecht the sailor spoke, describing the intensity of the moment: “Right in front of me the dam opened and a deluge of beliefs flooded me.”<sup>283</sup> As he listened to an old *medico*, who had once sailed to Fez, brag about his knowledge of numerous occult sciences, such as divination, chiromancy, crystallo-mancy, catoptronomy, geomancy, goety, and necromancy, Ruprecht realized that an as-yet-uncharted world of beliefs, practices, and meaning was opening up for him.<sup>284</sup> He used words associated with water to describe the “otherness” of this new world. Ruprecht realized “how infinite the sea of superstition is.”<sup>285</sup>

Ruprecht’s use of water imagery to describe the new world and mind-set he had discovered echoes imagery often found in esoteric philosophy. In his explication of archetypes, Jung asserted that “water is the commonest symbol for the unconscious.”<sup>286</sup> In psychology, Jung continued, “water means spirit that has become unconscious.”<sup>287</sup> Furthermore, it is strongly associated with the feminine element in many esoteric systems. As the previous chapter

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 39: “тут передо мной разверзлась плотина и затопил меня целый потоп поверий.”

<sup>284</sup> Ibid. Fez, Morocco, is known for its walled medina, a medieval city quarter which was home to numerous religious schools in the Middle Ages.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.: “как беспредельно море предрассуждений.”

<sup>286</sup> Carl Jung, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Vol. 9 (Part 1): Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 18-19.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

demonstrated, throughout his correspondence with Petrovskaja, Briusov manipulated the archetypal meaning of water in his construction of her role as psychopomp. In similar fashion, in the novel, Renata introduces Ruprecht to this watery, noumenal, “Other” world.

Following his fateful encounter with magic and witchcraft, Ruprecht persists in using a sailor’s vocabulary to describe both the psychological and geographical journey he undertook with Renata. In his time spent with Renata, Ruprecht assigned himself the role of her caregiver, but he also assigned himself the role of the captain of their relationship: first, as her physician, he sees himself as the captain of Renata’s quest for physical and emotional relief from her suffering; second, as the captain of their geographical journey, he plots their travels up the Rhine River to Cologne in search of Count Heinrich; and third, he assumes leadership as the captain of their joint spiritual, psychological, and intellectual journey in the realm of the study and application of magic.

Ruprecht notes that their friendly calm lasted only until Cologne’s quay, where “it abruptly snapped like a ship’s rigging at the burst of a storm.”<sup>288</sup> He then establishes the geography of the “eternal” Rhine as the backdrop to the events that unfolded in Cologne: “the mighty, dark waters of the great river, unchanged since the day Caesar forded them, yet changing every minute.”<sup>289</sup> Briusov used the image of the Rhine to underscore the fluidity of time between the past and present. His narrator Ruprecht draws upon this atmosphere when he appoints himself the captain of the relationship and navigator of Renata’s temperament:

However, even with all of Renata’s gentleness and submissiveness, there lived in her a dissatisfied melancholy that did not release her heart from its venomous fangs, so that to the same extent that Renata’s forces strengthened, so revived in her the stubbornness of

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<sup>288</sup> Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, 52: “оборвалась внезапно, как снасть под взрывом бури.”

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 68: “всесильные, темные воды великой реки, неизменные со времен перешедшего их Кесаря, но сменяющиеся каждую минуту.”

her desire, fixed, like the arrow of a compass, all toward one point. I had no other occupation than to monitor the clarity or cloudiness of the horizon of Renata's soul, and soon I noticed that the ominous signs were foretelling a new storm, for I was no longer an inexperienced navigator of those latitudes. Nevertheless, even though I was forewarned, the storm rushed in again so swiftly that I did not have time to reef in my sails, and the galleass of my life once more whirled like a child's top.<sup>290</sup>

Ruprecht employs similar metaphors to capture Renata's despair. After sharing the many troubling details of her life story, Renata "suddenly lost all strength and will and burst into tears: as if the wind that drove her ship was sleeping, and her sails began to snap pitifully against the rigging."<sup>291</sup>

Ruprecht also assumes the role of captain of Renata and their study of black magic. He attempts to locate Count Heinrich through occult and demonic channels. For Ruprecht, study and experimentation in magic opened new vistas, dangers, and the unknown. He fears that as captain he had subjected them to the tumult of symbolic storms and forces beyond their means of control.

It remains only to comprehend these laws, and then we [Ruprecht and Renata] will have the power to control demons, in the way that now we use the power of the wind for the movement of ships. There is no doubt that the wind is immeasurably stronger than man, and at times a storm smashes vessels into splinters, but usually the captain brings his cargo to the pier. I know that I expose our ship, and you upon it, to great danger by increasing sail under storm, but we have no other means.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 69: "Однако, при всей кротости и покорности Ренаты, в ней жила неудовлетворимая тоска, не выпускавшая из своих ядовитых зубов ее сердца, так что, по мере того как крепили силы Ренаты, возрождалось в ней и упорство ее желания, устремленного, как стрелка компаса, все в одной точке. У меня не было иного занятия, как следить за ясностью или облачностью на небосклоне души Ренаты, и скоро подметил я, что зловещие признаки предвещают новый шторм, так как уже не был неопытным плователем под теми широтами. Тем не менее, хотя и был я предупрежден, гроза налетела опять так стремительно, что я не успел взять рифов у парусов, и галеас моей жизни опять закрутился, как детский волчок."

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 137: "она вдруг сразу потеряла силы и волю и залилась слезами: словно бы спал ветер, гнавший корабль ее души, и паруса жалостно захлопали по снастям."

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 90: "Остается только познать эти законы, и мы будем в силах управлять демонами, как ныне пользуемся силами ветров для движения кораблей. Нет сомнения, что ветер безмерно сильнее человека, и порою буря разбивает суда в щепы, но обычно капитан приводит свой груз к пристани. Знаю, что я подвергаю наш корабль, и тебя на нем, большой опасности, увеличивая парусность под штормом, но иного

Ruprecht recalls how he “was gradually caught, like a pearl diver, in the waves of books” written by famous magi, astrologers, and theurgists, all of which the wind carries (*vetrom zanosit*) into Glock’s bookshop.<sup>293</sup>

“Sailing” the uncharted waters of the noumenal realm with Renata as helpmate (and psychopomp) invigorates Ruprecht:

I was humbled by the majesty of the vistas that opened before me—[the vistas of] the world of demons, into which our world of humans is thrust like a small island in the midst of the ocean; for a time it was as if I had forgotten about Count Heinrich and the oath I had given Renata. I so enjoyed being borne, with her at my side, upon the waves of books, manuscripts, drawings, and calculations, that, having finally caught sight, behind the rising waves, of that shore toward which I was steering the ship, somehow I could not rejoice and I did not hasten to make port.<sup>294</sup>

Throughout his narrative Ruprecht describes Renata’s spiritual and psychological states of being and captures the dramatic shifts in her emotional states, shifts which often direct the plot’s progression, in seafaring terms. Ruprecht characterizes their first five days together as “reminiscent of an unceasing maelstrom among rocks.”<sup>295</sup> Preceding Renata’s trial, he repeated this image to summarize their relationship: “Thus our life, like the winding, narrowing rings of a maelstrom, had finally closed in a very tight circle that which it had previously enfolded in a broad embrace.”<sup>296</sup>

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средства у нас нет.”

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 92: “как ловец жемчуга, в волны книг, выловил я постепенно.”

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 100: “Покоренный величием тех далей, которые открывались передо мною—мира демонов, в который наш мир человеков вброшен как малый остров среди океана, я временно как бы забыл о графе Генрихе и о клятве, данной мною Ренате. Мне так хорошо было носиться, с нею вместе, по волнам книг, рукописей, чертежей, вычислений, что, завидев наконец, за гребнями волн, тот берег, к которому сам держал курс корабля, как-то не мог я обрадоваться и не спешил войти в гавань.”

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 65: “напоминавших неутихающий водоворот между скал.”

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 186: “Так наша жизнь, словно завиваясь суживающимися кольцами водоворота, замкнула наконец в очень тесный круг то, что прежде она обнимала широком обхватом.”

At one point Ruprecht, confused by Renata's demands, feels as if he "drifted downward by the minute, as a boat with no one navigating it quickly floats downstream."<sup>297</sup> In yet another example, Ruprecht utilizes this imagery to capture their exhaustion after a failed experiment:

But we both, prostrate on the floor near the crucifix, resembled those who had been shipwrecked at sea, who, having reached some rocks, had lost everything and were certain that the next wave of water would wash them away and swallow them completely.<sup>298</sup>

Waterways also play a prominent role as significant thresholds in the novel. Renata first identifies and then later approaches Count Heinrich on Cologne's city quay. Later, following Renata's torture and sentencing as a witch and heretic, Ruprecht stands separated by a stream from the convent where Renata sits behind its gates in a prison cell. From the "safe" side of the waterway, Ruprecht contemplates what action he should or should not take to rescue her. Years later, after Renata's death, when Ruprecht once again encounters Count Heinrich, it is at the threshold of a river crossing: a raging mountain torrent, across which was built a temporary bridge.

At the novel's end Ruprecht the sailor and explorer returns across the Atlantic to the New World, a journey no other main character completes. All the others, most pointedly Belyi's fictional character Count Heinrich, remain in the Old World. They do not sail the exciting, uncharted expanses of the phenomenal world, but remain caught in the analogical web of medieval Germany's "noumenal crisis" shaped by the Protestant Reformation, the Inquisition,

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 62: "плыл по минутам вниз, как по быстрому потоку лодка, которой не управляет никто."

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 107: "Но мы оба, простертые на полу, около распятия, напоминали потерпевших крушение в море, достигших какой-то малой скалы, все потерявших и уверенных, что следующий водный вал смочит их и поглотит окончательно."

and the coming Age of Enlightenment, of which, not surprisingly, Ruprecht's many ruminations foretell.

Most important for *this* investigation, however, is that Ruprecht appoints himself the medical and spiritual "captain," that is doctor and caregiver, of Renata's mental, physical, and spiritual "journey" (the progression of illness). His curious dedication to her well-being unites them and motivates their journey in, on, and across the waterways, seas, and oceans of the phenomenal and noumenal realms depicted throughout the novel.

### **The Signs and Symptoms of Renata's Illness**

As the plot of *Fiery Angel* unfolds, numerous signs and symptoms indicate that Renata, Nina Petrovskaia's fictional projection, is unwell. She suffers from such things as seizures, visual and auditory hallucinations, depression, mania, anger, delusions, suicidal ideation, and self-harm. Within the semiotics of illness the basic definition of a symptom is a departure from normal functioning or feeling observed and reported by the patient. A symptom is by nature subjective and relative to the patient's knowledge and capacity to express it. Fatigue and pain are examples of symptoms because they cannot be directly measured. In medical semiotics, a sign of illness, as opposed to a symptom, is defined as an objective observation of abnormality witnessed by someone almost exclusively other than the patient himself/herself.<sup>299</sup> A physician regards signs of illness, such as a rash, nausea, bleeding and visible injury, a measured fever, self-starvation, outward aggression, and incoherence, as events and tropes in a medical narrative. A physician

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<sup>299</sup> A trained medical professional, however, may be a privileged "reader" of the "text" of the patient's ailment, when it is he or she who is sick. A non-fictional example of this is Dr. Norman Cousins's pathography *Anatomy of an Illness: As Perceived by the Patient* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979). A fictional example is Anton Chekhov's narrator in his story "Ward No. 6" (1892).

uses such signs and symptoms to generate a diagnosis and prognosis and then to develop a specific treatment plan. Medical signs of illness may have no meaning to the patient or they may have gone unnoticed until the examination. In his story, Ruprecht provides a record of the many signs and symptoms of Renata's abnormal mental and physical functioning. Ruprecht documents Renata's voiced ailments and self-diagnoses, the opinions of medical professionals, scientists, and spiritual and legal authorities, and notes the various responses of Renata's community to the signs of her affliction.

### **Depression and Mania**

As her primary caregiver, Ruprecht is attentive to any slight adjustment in Renata's mood, facial expressions, activities, social interactions, appetite, and sleep patterns. He tells us what she ate. He records what she read and the effects that specific texts or trajectories of study and conversation had upon her; he tells us which mental stimuli triggered manic states. Ruprecht captures her facial (physical) and emotional responses to words, music, light and dark, and other people. He relates where and how she slept. Ruprecht studies her posture and pose, likening her in detail to various early Renaissance paintings.

In his account of Renata's mental condition Ruprecht documents a total of **four** severe episodes of depression. According to *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*, features, or the signs and symptoms, of depressive episodes include a sad, hopeless disposition, near-delusional guilt, disinterest, lack of appetite, somatic complaints, excessive insomnia or over-sleeping, and observable psychomotor agitation or

retardation.<sup>300</sup> Religious preoccupations often accompany depression, leading to distressing if illusory feelings of guilt and nihilism.<sup>301</sup> In extreme cases of depression, a person may obsess and ruminate about perceived failures and sins, which can result in compulsive confession and suicidal thoughts.<sup>302</sup> Such signs of depression are recognizable in Ruprecht’s description of what he perceives as Renata’s most intense bout with depression.

As Ruprecht tries to engage her interest in normal activities, Renata scolds him: “Do you not understand that I *want* to suffer exhausting agonies! What do I need life for, if I do not have and will never have the most important thing?”<sup>303</sup> She would rather sit in near stupor and sulk about her past life with Count Heinrich than seek new joys apart from him. Ruprecht documents that

this reclusive, immobile life, during which Renata almost completely refused food, quickly affected her so that her eyes became sunken, like those of one dead, and encircled with a blackish wreath, her face turned gray, and her fingers became transparent, like dull mica, so that I, trembling, felt that she was definitely nearing her final hour.<sup>304</sup>

Renata’s words and, in this context, inaction function as both symptom of her subjective misery and a sign of recurring suicidal contemplation. Ruprecht identifies grief as the dominant emotion weighing her down:

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<sup>300</sup> *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (Arlington: American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2013). It is the American Psychiatric Association’s (APA’s) primary authority for the classification of psychiatric disorders. Hereafter I will use the abbreviation *DSM-5*.

<sup>301</sup> Hicks, *Fifty Signs of Mental Illness*, 281.

<sup>302</sup> Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, 282.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 109: “Разве ты не понимаешь, что я *хочу* замучиться! На что мне жизнь, если у меня нет и уже не будет никогда самого главного?”

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*: “Эта затворническая, неподвижная жизнь, причём Рената почти не принимала пищи, быстро сделала то, что глаза её впали, как у мёртвой, и обвились черноватым венцом, лицо посерело, а пальцы стали прозрачными, как тусклая слюда, так что я с содроганием сознавал, что она определённо близится к своему последнему часу.”

Grief tirelessly dug in Renata's soul a black well [the well is an important piece of water imagery; springs, etc.] constantly plunging the shovel deeper and deeper, constantly letting down its bucket lower and lower, so that it was not hard to foresee the day when the strike of [grief's] spade would cut in two the very thread of [her] life.<sup>305</sup>

Renata shares with Ruprecht the information that her sorrow and self-destructive thoughts began in adolescence. When she relates her life story, Renata states that her emotional struggles started at the age of eight, after a fiery angel named Madiel began to visit her. She confesses that their relationship became more intimate emotionally and, in time, physically. After Madiel rejected *her* sexual advances, the adolescent Renata blamed herself, experienced extreme guilt, and retreated into a terrible state of mind:

Days and nights she spent in tears, astonishing all those around her by her inconsolable despair; she lay for long hours as if dead, beat her head against the walls, and even sought voluntary death, thinking, if only for a single moment in the next life, thus to see her beloved [Madiel].<sup>306</sup>

Despite the fact that the details of Renata's story are filtered through the sieve of her memory and, more often than not, unstable psychological perceptions, Ruprecht several times observed how Renata persisted in such behavior and thought processes as an adult.

At once she sat down heavily upon the floor; because despair always drew her down to the ground, her face bent over, and she began to weep and beat about, helplessly repeating the same words, without listening to either my tender consolations or my inquisitive questions.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid.: "Скорбь без устали рыла в душе Ренаты чёрный колодезь, всё глубже и глубже вонзая лопаты, всё ниже и ниже опуская свою бадью, и нетрудно было предвидеть день, когда удар заступа должен был перерубить самую нить жизни."

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 31: "Дни и ночи проводила она в слезах, всех окружающих изумляя своим неутешным отчаяньем, лежала долгими часами как мертвая, билась головой о стены и даже искала добровольной смерти, думая хотя на единый миг в другой жизни увидеть своего возлюбленного."

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 137: "И тотчас тяжело опустилась она на пол, так как отчаяние всегда влекло ее к земле, и,

Renata often became lethargic and antisocial. Motionless and expressionless, she would ruminate for hours. At one point, Ruprecht explicitly calls her despair and physical suffering “a long and complicated illness” (*dolguiu i slozhnuiu bolezni*).<sup>308</sup> Renata confesses her desire to die and reveals more than one instance of suicidal ideation. “Dear Ruprecht! You can well see that I cannot go on living this way any longer,” Renata bemoans, adding: “One must choose one of two courses: either life, and then occupy oneself with its cares, or death, and then honestly offer it one’s hand.”<sup>309</sup>

Ruprecht remains uncertain as to whether to attribute Renata’s gloom and despair to the Devil embodied in the sixteenth-century religious and theological world view or (anachronistically) to the turn-of-the-twentieth-century psychological concept of hysteria and madness: “Yesterday she mocked, depicting the machinations of the Devil, but today she feigns the madness of sorrow.”<sup>310</sup>

Ruprecht also witnesses Renata's bouts of severe mania, which are often accompanied by delusions, angry outbursts, and self-harm. Renata’s severe manic episodes typically culminate in epileptic seizures. A manic episode is described as an expansive and euphoric mood that is marked by grandiosity and over-confidence, haphazard enthusiasm for social, sexual, and occupational interactions, theatricality, and rapid speech. The *DSM-5* states that such inflated self-esteem can quickly escalate into irritability and sudden outbursts of anger if a patient is contradicted. When Renata experiences moments of extreme elation and mania, the episode is typically expressed in several forms, often occurring simultaneously:

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клонясь ничком, начала рыдать и биться, повторяя беспомощно одни и те же слова, не слушая ни моих ласковых утешений, ни моих пытливых вопросов.”

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 73: “Милый Рупрехт! Ты хорошо видишь, так я жить больше не могу”; “Надо выбрать что-нибудь одно: или жизнь—и тогда заботиться о жизни, или смерть—и тогда честно подать ей руку.”

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 46: “Вчера издевалась она, изображая козни Дьявола, а сегодня, прикидываясь безумной от печали.”

- 1) Her speech becomes accelerated, pressured, expansive, and theatrical,
- 2) She acts impulsively upon intense passion, physical and emotional, for Ruprecht and/or Heinrich,
- 3) She immerses herself in goal-oriented activities, such as voracious study and intellectual stimulation,
- 4) She alters her behavior with a grandiosity of delusional proportions, becoming overly pious through prayer and fasting or overly “sinful” through the practice of dark arts or sexual relations with Ruprecht, alternately anticipating sainthood and/or the tortures of Hell.

James Hicks explains that “religion and sex are common grandiose themes in mania.”<sup>311</sup>

He further elaborates that

even the most modest, shy, and secular people may become extremely religious and sexually preoccupied as part of their euphoria. Love and spiritual communion can inspire a sense of euphoria for most of us. But when you are manic you may mistakenly believe that you are sexually irresistible, that others are in love with you, and that you have a unique and special understanding of God.<sup>312</sup>

Hicks emphasizes that when mania induces preoccupation with religious salvation and increases virility or sexual desire, the manic episode leads to delusions, hallucinations, and even paranoia: a patient may begin to hear the voice of God on the radio or perceive he or she is being persecuted.<sup>313</sup> A person may also experience identity confusion and believe that his or her “body

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<sup>311</sup> Hicks, *Fifty Signs of Mental Illness*, 130; *DSM-5*.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-114.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, 130-131.

or mind has been taken over by some outside force.”<sup>314</sup> Jung addressed this phenomenon in one of his lectures:

It is not a matter of indifference whether one calls something a “mania” or a “god.” To serve a mania is detestable and undignified, but to serve a god is full of meaning and promise because it is an act of submission to a higher, invisible, and spiritual being.<sup>315</sup>

Not surprisingly, cultures and historical periods have interpreted the hallucinations, delirium, and religious and sexual grandiosity that accompany mania, depression, and psychosis according to diverse, discursive, and often conflicting and competing paradigms.<sup>316</sup> Mark Micale asserts that hysteria, for example, a psychotic disease marked by sexual grandiosity, is “arguably the oldest and most important category of neurosis in medical history” and its story is “less linear than it is cyclical.”<sup>317</sup> The *DSM-5* emphasizes the elusiveness of an established and concrete cross-cultural definition of hysteria. For example, bipolar 1 disorder was once diagnosed as classic manic-depressive disorder or nineteenth-century affective psychosis. The situation today is that, according to the *DSM-5*,

little information exists on specific cultural differences in the expression of bipolar I disorder. One possible explanation for this may be that diagnostic instruments are often translated and applied in different cultures with no transcultural validation.<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>315</sup> Jung, C.G.. *Essential Jung: Selected and introduced by Anthony Storr* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 238.

<sup>316</sup> See Christine D. Worobec, *Possessed: Women, Witches, and Demons in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003); *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva*, ed. Jennifer Radden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1993).

<sup>317</sup> Mark S. Micale, *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and Its Interpretations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3, 12.

<sup>318</sup> *DSM-5*.

In *Fiery Angel* Ruprecht's documentation and depiction of Renata's mania, depression, and psychosis embody this scientific, spiritual, cultural, and historical intertextuality, alongside the ailment's simultaneous and contradictory archetypal and elusive nature. In this sense, Micale's assertion that hysteria is a timeless and important illness category rings true.

The instances of Renata's mania are frequent. Ruprecht, for example, details Renata's frantic race around the city of Cologne in search of Heinrich. "I felt myself exhausted and on the verge of collapse from tiredness, but," Ruprecht observed, "Renata seemed tireless and unchanged: she was possessed by a madness of seeking, and there was no power to stop her and no arguments to dissuade her."<sup>319</sup> Ruprecht also points to the sudden shifts in Renata's activities. Days of despair and seclusion were often replaced with increased social activity: new friends and visitors, her reception of singing children, her participation in church processions, and her excessive enjoyment of crowded street entertainments. Ruprecht documents Renata's indefatigable study of occult texts and months later her parallel passion for the writings of the Holy Fathers. Renata spent hours bent in prayer and at one point mutilated her body in the image of saints by using a dagger to trace a cross on her breast.<sup>320</sup>

Ruprecht notes Renata's state of happiness and euphoria despite examples of painful self-harm. Such hallucinations and illusions of grandeur, Renata confesses, began in her adolescence. Renata describes how, at night Madiel, the fiery angel, would carry her to distant lands. Even at her young age, they were physically intimate. Renata confessed to Ruprecht that it was she who had seduced and tempted the angel. To repent of her sexual guilt toward Madiel, Renata emulates the actions of the Holy Fathers and saintly women who used mortification of the flesh

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<sup>319</sup> Вриусов, *Ognennyi angel*, 56: "я чувствовал себя обессилевшим и почти валился от усталости, но Рената казалась неутомимой и неизменной: ею владело какое то безумие искания, и не было сил, чтобы остановить ее, и не было доводов, чтобы разубедить ее."

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 177.

as a means of penance. Renata claims that, as a reward for her humility, God gave her the power to heal (*dar chudotvoreniia*), which she used to heal a French prince and many others.<sup>321</sup>

At another point Renata becomes violent toward Ruprecht. In a fit of rage, Renata first stabs herself and then attempts to stab Ruprecht, the last action she takes before she and Ruprecht part ways.<sup>322</sup> Here, in her worst state of mania, Ruprecht releases Renata from responsibility for her behavior. In her distorted face he recognizes that “she no longer ruled herself, that someone else was governing her body and her will.”<sup>323</sup> We are left asking whether this “someone else” was the Devil or personified mental illness.

## Epilepsy

The most severe indication of Renata's dire health is the series of epileptic seizures she suffers. Ruprecht records the signs and symptoms of what he first diagnoses as demonic possession, but, as an increasingly “skeptical” observer, he later notes that they are common indicators of other conditions—grief, deep depression, and overwhelming loss, for example, to include what Briusov's reader would have recognized amounted to *fin-de-siècle* epileptic hysteria. Ruprecht knows that his testimony about Renata requires his audience to suspend belief. “When I think of the thousands and thousands of chance events that were necessary for me that very evening to find myself, while on my way to Neuss, in that poor roadside inn,”

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 30. Renata claimed that her ability to heal with her hands was a gift from *God* as opposed to the Devil.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

Ruprecht ruminates, “I lose all distinction between things ordinary and supernatural, between *miracula* and *natura*.”<sup>324</sup>

Medical professionals today understand that “a seizure occurs when groups of neurons in the brain fire rapidly and uncontrollably, causing abnormal sensations, feelings, movements, and behavior.”<sup>325</sup> Different types of seizures involve varying degrees of cognitive impairment, psychic and sensory symptoms, and motor signs. The International League Against Epilepsy classifies seizures according to two broad categories: partial (focal, local) seizures and generalized (tonic-clonic, convulsive or non-convulsive) seizures. During generalized seizures, the afflicted will lose consciousness, suffer violent convulsions, and fall to the ground. A more common type of seizure is a partial or focal seizure that affects emotion and memory. Partial seizures occur in two forms, simple or complex, and are classified as temporal lobe epilepsy. A simple partial seizure may last only a few seconds or minutes, during which a person experiences strange feelings and sensations: lapses in awareness, nausea, numbness, elation, or various auditory, olfactory, or visual hallucinations. With the onset of a complex focal seizure an individual may see an aura (itself a simple focal seizure), which leads to impaired consciousness, dream or trancelike experiences, or repetitive movement.

The convulsive spasms associated with tonic-clonic seizures led many people throughout history to assume they were the result of various forms of possession. The Epilepsy Foundation informs us that, during the tonic phase, muscles stiffen, consciousness is lost, and the person falls and lets out a groan as air is forced past the vocal cords. The face may turn blue and saliva may be bloody due to a bitten cheek or tongue. The clonic phase follows, characterized by the rapid

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid., 25: “когда думаю о тысячах и тысячах случайностей, которые были необходимы, чтобы в тот вечер оказался я на пути в Нейсс, в бедной придорожной гостинице, -- теряю всякое различие между вещами обычными и сверхъестественными, между *miracula* и *natura*.”

<sup>325</sup> “Epilepsy and Psychiatric Disorders,” *Harvard Mental Health Letter* 22, no. 11 (2006): 4.

and rhythmic jerking motion of arms and legs, which are slightly bent at the elbows, knees, and hips. After one to three minutes, the person will slowly regain consciousness as the body relaxes. However, he or she may be very disoriented, drowsy, confused, depressed, or agitated.

During seizures (and periods of mania), individuals can experience auras and realistic “visions,” as well as olfactory and auditory hallucinations. Both Joan of Arc and Dostoevsky experienced such ecstatic seizures. Epileptics often report that they smell burning rubber or incense during a seizure.<sup>326</sup> This medical fact, when combined with the various hallucinations and delirium commonly experienced during a seizure, no doubt facilitated medieval assumptions that demonic or divine forces and beings were present at the time of convulsion and might be directing it. This particular manifestation of symptoms may also have contributed to the ancient belief that epilepsy is a sacred disease. Within the context of a (medieval) religious world view, it would be a reasonable deduction for an epileptic to conclude that such “burning” indicated the sulphuric fire and brimstone associated with Hell and, consistent with his or her cognition and (mis)perception, to assume the presence of a demon, while the aroma of incense would indicate the presence of angelic forces.

Ruprecht documents a total of **five** seizures in the course of his relationship with Renata, and he learns that she has suffered from them since childhood. Ruprecht observes four firsthand: at the moment of their acquaintance, at the culmination of a séance, in an attempt to conjure a demon, and in the minutes preceding her death. In a manner that only serves to bolster the credibility of Ruprecht’s chronicle, he relates the details of an additional “attack” that the boarding house maid Louisa witnessed while he was away from home. Because Ruprecht represents a semi-trained eyewitness and a confidant for Louisa, his detailed descriptions of Renata's convulsions and sensory impairment during these five episodes carry objectivity, if not

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<sup>326</sup> Hicks, *Fifty Signs of Mental Illness*, 141.

the weight of medical authority. Thus seizures frame the beginning and the end of their time together.

The first of Renata's seizures that Ruprecht witnesses leads to their meeting at the beginning of the novel. Renata's epilepsy initiates their relationship and establishes, from its outset, that Renata is a woman susceptible to physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering. Ruprecht relates that, having already settled for the night at a country inn, a woman's scream from the adjoining room jostled him awake. Coming to her aid, Ruprecht does not find the anticipated male aggressor, but rather a young maiden alone, in psychological distress, pressed against the wall, half-dressed and shaking with fear. Surveying the room, Ruprecht notes:

no other human being was there, because all of the corners were clearly illuminated and the shadows on the floor were sharp and distinct, but she thrust her hands in front of her, protecting herself, as if someone were attacking her. And in this movement there was something terrifying in the extreme, for one could not fail to understand that an invisible apparition threatened her.<sup>327</sup>

In his account, Ruprecht is adamant that he saw no other person in the room. Renata's bodily postures cause him to surmise that a supernatural being is attacking the young woman. Ruprecht is further surprised because the woman immediately recognizes him: "Finally, it is you, Ruprecht! I have no more strength!" Certain that he had never met her before, Ruprecht questions how she knows his name, "but she was in no condition to answer me, first sobbing, then laughing, she merely pointed her shaking hand thither, where my eyes saw nothing except

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<sup>327</sup> Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, 26: "Никакого другого человека здесь не было, потому что все углы были освещены отчётливо и тени, лежащие на полу, резки и ясны; но она, словно кто наступал на нее, простирала вперед руки, закрывая себя. И в этом движении было что то до крайности устрашающее, ибо нельзя было не понять, что ей угрожает невидимый призрак."

moonbeams.”<sup>328</sup> Ruprecht does not see a ghost, but his intuition senses an evil spirit. Signing the cross, he turns toward Renata, the “mad lady” (*bezumnaia dama*), but before he could reach her,

the woman, trembling as if in the throes of death, suddenly fell down. I did not consider it proper or honorable to flee from there, although I immediately understood that an evil demon had taken possession of this unfortunate woman and had begun to torment her terrifyingly from within. Never until that day had I seen such shudders or suspected that the human body could be so incredibly distorted! Before my eyes the woman’s body stretched painfully and defiantly against the laws of nature, so that her neck and breast remained as firm as wood and as straight as a rod; then all of a sudden she bent so far forward that her head and chin approached her toes and the veins in her neck became monstrously taut, and then, reversing, she astonishingly thrust herself backwards, and the back of her head was twisted inside her shoulder, toward her spine, and her thighs were raised high.<sup>329</sup>

Ruprecht draws his sword, recites a prayer in Latin, and sets himself to defend Renata’s honor.<sup>330</sup>

After the convulsions have gradually subsided, Ruprecht carries the exhausted woman to bed, listens to her relate a confused life story, and keeps watch over her through the night.

Having been “rescued” by Ruprecht and safely placed in her bed, Renata immediately shares her life story with him. Though somewhat confused as she recovers from her seizure, Renata outlines numerous hallucinations and/or “real” encounters with spiritual beings she had experienced. She confesses to Ruprecht that she was eight years old “when for the first time there appeared in her room, in a sunbeam, an angel, as if all flaming, and in snow-white clothes.

His face shone, his eyes were blue as the skies, and his hair as of fine gold thread. The angel

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid., 27: “Но она не в силах была отвечать мне, то рыдая, то смеясь, и только указывала дрожащею рукою туда, где для моих глаза не было ничего, кроме лунного луча.”

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.: “Женщина же, затрепетав, словно в предсмертном борении, вдруг упала ниц. Я не почел приличным для своей чести бежать оттуда, хотя и понял скоро, что злой демон овладел этой несчастной и начал страшно пытаться ее изнутри. Никогда до того дня не видел я таких содроганий и не подозревал, что человеческое тело может изгибаться так невероятно! На моих глазах женщина то вытягивалась мучительно и против всех законов природы, так что шея ее и грудь оставались твердыми, как дерево, и прямыми, как трость; то вдруг так сгибалась вперед, что голова и подбородок сближались с пальцами ног, и жилы на шее чудовищно напрягались; то, напротив, она удивительно откидывалась назад, и затылок ее был выворочен внутрь плеч, к спине, а бедра высоко подняты.”

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

called himself—Madiel.”<sup>331</sup> As her jumbled story unfolds, Ruprecht learns that there may have been an actual lover, a Count Heinrich, who took her to his castle. The Count was the member of a knightly order with a vow of chastity. He rejected her sexual advances and found her interests in the dark arts alarming. In the end, Renata claims Heinrich fled and she was cast out onto the street. In what fast becomes a recurring theme, Ruprecht does not know where fact and fiction diverge in Renata’s elaborate stories. Clearly a woman in psychological, physical, spiritual, and financial distress, he is unsure, as he stated from the beginning, how to differentiate “between things ordinary and supernatural, between *miracula* and *natura*” in the life of Renata.

For the informed reader of Briusov’s circle, Renata’s tale is a thinly-veiled and liberally autobiographical retelling of the “angelic” Andrei Belyi’s real-life rejection of Nina Petrovskaja as insufficiently “spiritual” to serve as “high priestess” in his New Eleusinian Mysteries. For the *medically*-informed reader, Ruprecht’s descriptions of Renata’s first seizure and those that follow closely resemble, in vocabulary and image, the *fin-de-siècle* condition French neurologist and internationally known spiritualist Charles Richet (1850–1935) identified as epileptic hysteria, or hystero-epilepsy.<sup>332</sup> “It would be hard to imagine a more terrible spectacle than that of one of these demoniac fits,” Richet asserted.

The body pulsates with tremors and violent shocks. The muscles are contracted, so tense that we might believe them to be on the point of bursting. Great bounds, frightful cries and howlings, confused vociferations, indescribable contortions which we would not

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 29: “Было [ей] лет восемь, когда впервые явился ей в комнате, в солнечном луче, ангел, весь как бы огненный, в белоснежной одежде. Лицо его блистало, глаза были голубые, как небо, а волосы словно из тонких золотых ниток. Ангел назвал себя -- Мадизель.”

<sup>332</sup> Richet was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1913 for his work on anaphylaxis. Richet was also a well known spiritualist and active in numerous societies dedicated to proving the physicality of paranormal phenomena. He performed extensive research into mediumism and proposed the concepts of “sixth sense” and “ectoplasm.” Richet was a close friend of Alexander Aksakov’s (1832–1903). Aksakov led some of the first séances in Russia and promoted spiritualism in that country. As an active spiritualist himself, there is no doubt that Briusov knew of, and very likely at one point met, such famous spiritualists.

have supposed a human creature capable of making—such is the hideous picture which the hysterical patient presents when she is seized with an attack.<sup>333</sup>

Richet's description of an attack and Briusov's description of Renata's first seizure are strikingly similar. Richet also introduced the sixteenth-century work of Johann Weyer on demoniacs and correlated it to contemporary research on the psychology of hysteric epileptics.

Richet explained that despite the seeming violent disorder of an attack of epileptic hysteria, "nothing is haphazard."<sup>334</sup> He cited his colleague, Jean Charcot, who demonstrated that signs and symptoms of epileptic hysteria are predictable and occur with the punctuality of a clock, according to three distinct stages. Richet related that stage one is analogous to "epilepsy proper," whose characteristics resemble a tonic-clonic seizure. Stage two is a period of clownism, a period during which another esteemed colleague stated "the patient goes into a fury against herself" and performs exaggerated and bizarre attitudes and contortions. The third stage is marked by passional poses, total or partial anesthesia, delirium, and diverse hallucinations: "sometimes gay, sometimes sad, sometimes amorous, sometimes religious or ecstatic."<sup>335</sup> Richet elaborated on the nature of these visions:

Fantastic as the delirium of the patients during their attack may appear, it always has a cause and occasion. The hallucinations of a demoniac resemble the real episodes of her

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<sup>333</sup> Charles Richet, "Hysteria and Demonism II: A Study in Morbid Psychology," trans. W. H. Larrabee, *Popular Science Monthly* 17 (June 1880): 159. Originally published in *Revue des Deux Mondes*. It is significant that Richet assumed the patient will be a "she."

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 162.

life, particularly the one which has had the most influence in the development of her malady.<sup>336</sup>

He added that

in the attacks of delirium, the things and persons that were the occasion of the emotion—fright, grief—reappear as hallucinations. This influence of what has happened in the past establishes an important difference between the delirium of the insane and that of persons suffering from hysteria. The visions of the insane, whatever they may be, generally have no immediate relation to anterior events, while the form of delirium in hysteria is nearly always determined by an incident which has formerly played an important part in the life of the patient.<sup>337</sup>

The information Renata provides about Madiel/Count Heinrich through the details of her life story confirm the “dispelled dreams, vanished illusions, [and] unmet marriage expectations”

Richet believed precipitated hystero-epilepsy.<sup>338</sup>

Renata’s second seizure also aligns well with Richet’s sequence. Her attack is a consequence of over-excitement and psychic strain at the promise that she is to be reunited with her lost lover, Count Heinrich. This promise is delivered by a demon named Elimer. For two evenings in a row, Renata and Ruprecht self-direct a séance, communicating with Elimer and his several “spirit” friends through an elaborate system of rappings. They do so in an experimental manner not dissimilar to the regular techniques practiced at turn-of-the-twentieth-century spiritualist séances, which Briusov and Nina Petrovskaia frequented. Upon learning from these petty demons that she will soon be reunited with Heinrich, Renata forgot her weariness and

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Charles Richet, “Hysteria and Demonism I: A Study in Morbid Psychology,” trans. W. H. Larrabee, *Popular Science Monthly* 17 (May 1880): 90.

became increasingly manic, finally, with “a light moan, as if in ecstasy, [Renata] reclined on the pillow, for a moment froze, following the frenzied delight.”<sup>339</sup>

The second night, falsely told by the same demons that Count Heinrich was fast approaching, Renata, her exaggerated expectations dashed and overcome with excessive physical and psychological arousal, experiences her second tonic-clonic seizure:

Suddenly all strength left Renata and she would have fallen to the floor as if felled by a bullet had I not caught her. And I do not know if the demon with whom we had just now spoken in a friendly manner, or her old enemy entered her, but only that once again I alone was witness to the same terrifying torment that I saw at the country inn. Only it seemed to me that this time the spirit did not enter all of Renata’s body, but possessed only a part of it, because she was able to defend herself somewhat, though her whole body twisted horribly, dislocating her limbs to such a degree that it seemed as if her bones should have torn through her muscle and skin.<sup>340</sup>

Next, Ruprecht documents how Renata’s attack quickly transitioned into Richet’s anticipated second phase of strange contortions:

Again I did not have the means to relieve the twisted torture, and I just looked into the face of Renata, completely distorted, as if someone else looked out from her eyes, and at all the monstrous bends of her body, until finally the demon let her go of his own free will and she remained in my hands exhausted, like a weak twig, spun round a whirlpool.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, 60: “она с лёгким стоном, словно в упоении, откидывалась на подушку, на минуту замирала, как после исступленного восторга.”

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 64: “Вдруг все силы покинули Ренату, и она упала бы на пол, как сраженная пулей, если бы я не подхватил ее. И не знаю, вошел ли в нее тот демон, с которым мы только что дружески беседовали, или давний ее враг, но только вновь был я свидетелем того ужасного мучения, как в деревенской гостинице. Только казалось мне, что на этот раз дух находился не во всем теле Ренаты, но одержал лишь часть его, ибо она могла несколько обороняться, хотя все же тело ее извивалось ужасно, вывертывая члены так, словно кости должны были прорвать мускулы и кожу.”

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.: “Опять не было у меня средств помочь подвергнутой пытке, и я только смотрел на лицо Ренаты, совершенно искажённое, словно бы выглядывал из её глаз некто другой, и на все чудовищные изгибы её тела, пока наконец добровольно не отпустил её демон и не осталась она у меня в руках изнеможенной, как слабая веточка, искрученная в водовороте. ”

In accordance with the expected third phase of her epileptic hysteria, Ruprecht carried Renata to bed, where, he explains, “she wept long and helplessly, this time wholly mute, unable to utter a single word.”<sup>342</sup> In the days that followed, Renata fell terribly ill, and Ruprecht dedicated himself to her care and recuperation.

Renata’s third attack follows the same established pattern of tonic-clonic seizure, contorted fury, and delirium. The third fit falls upon Renata in the middle of a magic spell she and Ruprecht perform to conjure a powerful demon. Somehow in the flurry of action, the protective magic circle is broken. In the resulting confusion, panic, and fear, Ruprecht carries Renata out of the dangerous room, but he is too late, and she is already “possessed”:

Renata’s face continued to remain terrifying and absolutely unrecognizable as hers, because it even seemed to me that her eyes had become larger, her chin stretched, her temples far more prominent than usual. Renata writhed furiously in my arms, tore off the linen head-piece and robe, and ceaselessly screamed words in a coarse, almost masculine, voice that was not her own. Listening, I understood that she was speaking in Latin, pronouncing both separate interjections and whole, coherent sentences, even though, as I mentioned, she did not know this language at all, unless perhaps she picked up a few words during our reading together of the books of magic. The import of her words was horrible.

Although I never particularly trusted in the protection of sacred objects, in this unhappy situation, when every minute I expected that all the unchained devils from the room where we did our conjuring would fall upon us, there remained nothing better for me to do than to drag Renata to a small altar in her room and there, rely on God’s help. But Renata in her frenzy did not want to approach the holy crucifix, shouting that she despised and scorned it, raising her clenched fists at the image of Christ, and finally falling to the floor, once again in the same fit of convulsions, to which I had already twice before been witness.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 65: “она рыдала долго и бессильно, на этот раз в полной немоте, в невозможности вымолвить ни одного слова.”

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 106-107: “Но лик Ренаты продолжал оставаться страшным и совершенно на себя непохожим, ибо мне казалось даже, что глаза ее стали больше, подбородок более вытянутым, виски гораздо сильнее выступающими, нежели обыкновенно. Рената билась в моих руках яростно, сорвала с себя и митру, и льняное одеяние и неустанно, грубым, почти мужским, вовсе не своим голосом, выкрикивала какие-то слова. Прислушавшись, я понял, что она говорила по-латыни, произнося вполне правильно и отдельные восклицания, и целые связные предложения, хотя, как я упоминал, она этого языка не знала вовсе и разве только заучила несколько слов во время наших совместных чтений магических книг. Смысл ее речей был ужасен.

Ruprecht is not present during Renata's fourth seizure. The boarding house maid Louisa witnesses it and both she and Renata herself provide an account and interpretation of what they saw and experienced.

[Louisa] rushed to meet me, and not without innocent horror recounted that something unexpected and frightening happened today to Lady Renata and that she, Louisa, was afraid lest this might have been the interference of unclean forces. From the detailed description I soon gathered that Renata had been the victim of another of those *fits of possession*, like those I had already seen when the spirit, entering her body, cruelly tortured and abused her. Here I remembered that in the last few days Renata had been particularly melancholy and restless, to which, all the same, I reacted with unthinking and unworthy neglect.

In that moment I felt as if someone had pierced me to the heart, and in my soul the wellspring of my love for Renata suddenly spurted out in a powerful and full stream. I hurried upstairs, already imagining how I would beg Renata's forgiveness, kiss her hands, and hear her tender words in response. I found Renata in bed, where, as usual after a *seizure*, she lay exhausted almost to death, and her face, weakly illuminated by a candle, was like a white wax mask. Seeing me, she did not smile, did not rejoice, did not make a single movement that revealed emotion.<sup>344</sup> [italics mine]

Ruprecht's interpretation of Renata's fourth seizure is more sophisticated than his previous explanations. He has begun to note patterns. He recalls her emotional disquiet the previous few days, which he admits that he deliberately ignored and no doubt aggravated. Arriving at her side,

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Хотя никогда не доверял я особенно защите святых предметов, в этом моём несчастном положении, когда я каждый миг ожидал, что на нас ринутся все раскованные дьяволы из комнаты заклинаний, мне не оставалось ничего лучшего, как привлечь Ренату к маленькому алтарю, бывшему в её комнате, и там надеяться на помощь Божию. Но Рената, в иступлении, не хотела приближаться к святому распятию, крича, что ненавидит и презирает его, подымая сжатые кулаки на образ Христа, и наконец упала на пол, опять в том же припадке конвульсий, которого я уже дважды был свидетелем.”

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 173-174: “Она мне бросилась навстречу и, не без простодушного ужаса, рассказала, что с госпожою Ренатою приключилось сегодня нечто неожиданное и страшное и что она, Луиза, боится, не было ли здесь вмешательства нечистой силы. Из подробного описания я вскоре понял, что с Ренатою произошел вновь тот припадок одержания, какие мне уже приходилось видеть, когда дух, входя внутрь ее тела, жестоко мучил и оскорблял ее. Тут же припомнил я, что последние дни Рената была особенно грустна и беспокойна, к чему, однако, я отнёсся с небрежением легкомысленным и недостойным.”

В ту минуту чувство моё было такое, словно кто-то уколол меня в сердце, и ключ моей любви к Ренате вдруг брызнул в душе струею сильной и полной. Я поспешил наверх, уже воображая в подробностях, как буду просить у Ренаты прощения, и целовать её руки, и слушать её ответные ласковые слова. Застал я Ренату в постели, где она лежала обессиленная, как всегда, припадком до полусмерти, и лицо её, слабо освещённое свечой, было как белая восковая маска. Увидя меня, она не улыбнулась, не обрадовалась, не сделала ни одного движения, обличающего волнение.”

Ruprecht immediately assesses her physical appearance and psychological well-being. “As usual after a seizure (*pripadok*),” he reflects in the citation above. In his reflection, we recognize that Ruprecht has started to search for an accurate diagnosis for Renata’s suffering. In his thought processes, we also recognize the juxtaposition of two world views, the medieval and the modern. He attributes Renata’s convulsions to both demonic possession and (neurological) seizure.

Following Renata’s fourth seizure, Ruprecht acquires illuminating medical information about her recurrent episodes of delirium. Renata tells him about hallucinations in which she believes she travels to distant lands and interacts with her beloved fiery angel Madiel. In a case of dire illness, the fact that hallucinations are sensory misperceptions is irrelevant, because they are experienced as real by the sufferer. Renata’s hallucinations function as both objective signs (someone else witnesses and records her words and physical condition at the moment of occurrence) and subjective symptoms (which Renata herself expresses) of physical and psychological duress.

Though Ruprecht was not present to witness Renata’s fourth seizure, Ruprecht is able to record the details of the hallucination Renata experienced during it. As he comforts her, Renata admits that, having felt ignored by Ruprecht of late, she has concealed the fact that she had wept for days. When Ruprecht learns of this, he recognizes her depressed state of mind and explains to his reader:

But, when a person is in despair, he becomes defenseless against the attacks of hostile demons, and the long-standing enemy of Renata, who had pursued her ever since she had been in the castle of Count Heinrich, once more overcame her, entered into her, and tried to throw her to the floor.<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 174: “Но, когда человек в тоске, он становится беззащитен пред нападением враждебных демонов, и давний враг Ренаты, преследовавший её ещё в замке графа Генриха, опять поборол её, вошёл в неё и, пытая, поверг на пол.”

Renata describes her experience as a hallucination. She states that her life would never be the same because, during her seizure, she had experienced a transformative vision. First, prostrate and unaware of her surroundings, Renata describes how Madiel, whom she had not seen since her childhood, has once again visited her in the image of a fiery angel. She further relates that she became ecstatic upon seeing him, an ecstasy she compares with the inexpressible one the Apostles must have experienced when they saw the radiance of Christ on Mount Tabor.<sup>346</sup>

As Renata shares her hallucinatory experience with Ruprecht, she reasons that, in the image of Christ and invoking His divine authority, Madiel the fiery angel, during his miraculous visit, had absolved her of her sins committed with “the tempter” (*iskusitelem*) Count Heinrich. Renata told Ruprecht that Madiel had commanded her to transform her unclean life and promised his protection and fortification.<sup>347</sup>

Following his reprimand, Renata states that Madiel became tender and kissed her, which caused her to cry out in joy and try to embrace him: “but in her outstretched arms [she] encountered only Louisa, who had run in *attracted by the noise of her fall and her pitiful moans*” [italics mine]. Regardless of Renata’s own story, Louisa’s more “objective” account indicates medical signs (a fall, groans, moans, disorientation) of a tonic-clonic seizure and a significantly shorter timespan over which the attack occurred. What Renata’s story does reveal is the severe state of delirium she experienced following her convulsions.

The culmination of Renata’s suffering is her fifth and final death-dealing seizure. Ruprecht is present and, in the very last moments, holds Renata in his arms as she takes her last breath. Once again, Ruprecht’s documentation of the attack corresponds to Richet’s three stages:

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 174-175. The reference is to Matthew 17:1-13, the moment when Jesus is transfigured and allows three of His disciples, Peter, James, and John, to witness briefly His divine glory.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 175.

seizure, acrobatics, and delirium. The intensity and vividness of Renata's delirium is of particular interest because yet again Madiel the fiery angel manifests as part of the hallucinatory stage. At the same time, Renata is also cognizant of Ruprecht's attendance at her side. In her psychotic state, she alternates between both "lovers," Ruprecht in the phenomenal realm and Madiel in the noumenal. Thus, Ruprecht is sad witness to the convulsive suffering of Renata as her psyche battles violently between its material and spiritual "realities."

Renata's impassioned words reveal that in her feverish state, she nevertheless looks to Madiel for expiation of her guilt and grief rather than to Ruprecht, her medically-trained caregiver:

Blood, blood! I have seen my blood—how good, how sweet! It has washed away all my sins. Again he [Madiel] will fly to me like a large butterfly and I shall hide him in my tresses. No, no, really, he is just a butterfly, and nothing more.<sup>348</sup>

At the height of her psychosis, Renata's holds on to the fixed idea that physical death will release her from her earthly suffering.

Yes! Yes! I want torture and fire! Just now I saw my Madiel and he told me that by death I shall expiate my whole life. He—is all aflame, his eyes are as blue as the sky, and his hair is of fine gold threads.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid., 287: "Кровь, кровь! я видела свою кровь, как хорошо, как сладко! Она омыла все мои грехи. Он опять прилетит ко мне, как большая бабочка, и я спрячу его в своих волосах. Нет, нет, это право, просто бабочка, и ничего больше."

The butterfly image is a rich symbol uniting myth ancient and modern psychology. Through the vehicle of Renata's delirium, Briusov drew a parallel between the image of Madiel as a butterfly and the image of Psyche, who was winged, like a butterfly or dragonfly. In *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass)*, second century AD), Apuleius told the story of Cupid and Psyche, who overcame obstacles to their love and in the end were united in a sacred marriage. Psyche is also a term for the soul, mind, or spirit. In psychology, psyche is used to describe such things as: persona, subconscious, personality, intellect, identity, etc. Psyche is an anima projection captured in myth; Madiel is an animus projection. Finally, the butterfly is often a symbol of the soul in Russian and European folklore.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 288: "Да! Да! Я хочу пытки и огня! Сейчас я видела моего Мадизеля, и он сказал мне, что смертью я искуплю всю жизнь. Он—весь огненный, глаза у него голубые, как небо, а волосы словно из тонких золотых ниток."

What Ruprecht painfully witnesses in the moment of Renata's delirium and then expresses, as the narrator, is that Madiel has won, in that he, Ruprecht, acting in the capacity of her physical as opposed to spiritual lover, cannot hold onto her. In explicitly Solov'evian terms (to switch briefly to another "language"), Ruprecht cannot pin down and hold prisoner the spark of Wisdom-Sophia within her, even in the very dungeon in which they both find themselves. Though Ruprecht longs to rescue Renata and take her "above ground," Renata's divine spark would nevertheless remain trapped in material dross, subject to a physical geography of phenomenal suffering. Ruprecht's dream of sailing back to the New World with her would guarantee neither salvation nor eternal life. Medical doctor or not, Ruprecht cannot ensure the restoration of wholeness Renata so desperately seeks.

"Renata! Renata! I love you!" Ruprecht proclaims in an effort to call her back to him and the material world he dreams of conquering with her as sailor and explorer.

Renata probably did not hear my last, woeful exclamation because, having whispered her last greeting, she suddenly threw herself flat on her back and trembled horribly, as if in her final battle with death. Thrice she raised herself a little on the bed, shaking and gasping, as if she were either pushing away some terrible apparition or trying to reach someone beloved, and thrice she fell back, and from her chest a death rattle issued, no longer resembling the sounds of life. Having fallen back for the third time, she remained completely immobile, and I, putting my ear to her breast, no longer heard the beating of her heart and understood that from this world, where only persecution and suffering could await her, her soul had gone to the world of spirits, demons, and genii toward which she had always striven.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 290: "Рената, вероятно, уже не слышала моего горестного восклицания, потому что, шепнув свой последний привет, она вдруг откинулась навзничь и страшно затрепетала, словно в последней борьбе со смертью. Три раза приподнималась она на ложе, дрожа и задыхаясь, не то отстраняя какое-то страшное видение, не то устремляясь навстречу кому-то желанному, и три раза она падала обратно, и в груди её слышалось предсмертное хрипение, уже не похожее на звуки жизни. Откинувшись в третий раз, она осталась в полной неподвижности, и я, приложив ухо к её груди, не услышал больше биений сердца и понял, что из этого мира, где могли ожидать её только преследования и страдания, её душа перешла в мир духов, демонов и гениев, к которому всегда она порывалась."

For all the naturalism of Ruprecht's account, he remains suspended between belief and disbelief, as much unable to differentiate between the ordinary and the supernatural, between *miracula* and *natura*, at the end of his relationship with Renata as at its beginning. Ruprecht cannot determine whom or what Renata "sees" in her psychotic fit, whether friend or foe, "real" or "imagined." What Ruprecht does know is that in death, however painful, her soul was finally released from its physical prison of psychological and neurological suffering.

### **Diagnosis**

Briusov's alter ego, Ruprecht, requests that his reader suspend belief and remain open to the possibility of the physicality of supernatural (or at least seemingly supernatural) phenomena. In this, Briusov exposed his personal knowledge and interest in the research of intellectuals such as Richet and the broad community of medical professionals, scientists, and psychiatrists at the *fin-de-siècle* who investigated spiritualism and mediumism. In his novel, Briusov used Ruprecht's search for an accurate diagnosis of Renata's suffering to expose what he believed was the similarity of Russian Symbolism's notion of life creation and the "art" of medicine and psychiatry.

The act of medical diagnosis is an act of *naming*. Naming is an important action in esoteric philosophy, alchemy, folklore, religion, and, as Jung asserted, in psychiatry. A name is the individual designation of how a person or thing is to be known, and one's *true* name is often revealed through initiation rites and/or symbolic rebirth. For the alchemist, naming is an act of creation, or theurgy. Through the process of naming, spiritual being, thought, or reason is organized by sound and the action of speaking aloud. In this act of naming, the potentiality of

being is transformed, through the power of the “Word,” into Being, Existence. Naming makes it real. The divine Word “creates” because it has the power to make cosmos out of chaos and give form to the unformed. This is the idea of *Logos*, the process by which the Divine Principle, or Word, is made Flesh. Esoteric philosophers like Heraclitus (535–475 BC) asserted that the nature of matter and the material world hinge upon this process of naming. Christian theology has interpreted “Word” as a designation of Christ, who is both of God and of man. This interpretation of Christ as the “Word” reflects the occult principle of “As above, so below”—the microcosm mirrors the macrocosm, the phenomenal mirrors the noumenal.

Arthur Frank draws a similar comparison between the act of naming and the act of diagnosis in his discussion of the archetypal narrative patterns of illness stories. As we recognize in the plot of the folktale “Rumpelstiltskin,” for example, “in the naming story, the protagonist has to guess the true name of the antagonist. The guessing counts because the antagonist threatens the protagonist; the antagonist’s power can only be undone by speaking his true name.”<sup>351</sup> In Frank’s opinion “the teller of an illness story seeks to learn the true name of the disease, and perhaps her own true name as well.”<sup>352</sup> Within the plottedness of real-life illness and a medical case study, diagnosis is the determination, identification, and, according to the *OED*, “the opinion *formally stated* resulting from such investigation” [italics mine]. The Latin and Greek etymology of the word *diagnosis* is to distinguish, discern thoroughly, and to learn to know and perceive. In this sense, a medical case study shares features with the process of naming. When we approach *Fiery Angel* as an example of pathography and simultaneously acknowledge its autobiographical backstory, I believe Ruprecht’s (Briusov’s alter ego’s) attempt

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<sup>351</sup> Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013), 75.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-76.

to diagnose Renata's suffering is an act of naming that reflects the theurgic ambition of Russian Symbolism through *Briusov's* very personal microcosmic interpretation.

In his ideas about life creation, Briusov did not pursue the concept of theurgy to its fullest metaphysical conclusion. Theurgy as a foundational principle in esoteric philosophy, however, still informed Briusov's experimentation with the alchemy of love, madness, and art in his real-life relationship with Petrovskaja and his thematic, philosophical, and aesthetic construction of her as a psychopomp. Through the voice of his narrator and alter ego Ruprecht, Briusov is an informed eyewitness—a transformed, yet non-transfigured reporter—an “objective” diagnostician and *namer*. In his polemical story “Karl V: Dialogue about Realism in Art,” for example, one of Briusov's characters, an author, states:

According to Finnic belief, to name the object by its real name means to enchant it, to acquire over it complete power. The mission of art is to seek the real names of objects and phenomena of the world. An artist can do nothing greater than to truly reproduce reality, even if it be in new, fantastic combinations of its elements. Whoever is dissatisfied with this, let him put aside art and seek something new in science, in philosophy, in theurgy, wherever [he] wants. Strive to be true in your creativity—such is the poet's eternal and only covenant: to be true in the concept of the work, in its individual parts, and in every image and in every expression. Seek only for this, and ask of your soul only this: where is truth.<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Valerii Briusov, “Karl V: Dialog o realizme v iskusstve,” *Zolotoe runo*, no. 4 (1906). [http://az.lib.ru/b/brjusow\\_w\\_j/text\\_1906\\_karl\\_v.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/b/brjusow_w_j/text_1906_karl_v.shtml): “По финскому поверию, назвать предмет его настоящим именем - значит заколдовать его, приобрести над ним полную власть. Задача искусства - искать настоящие имена для предметов и явлений мира. Художник не может сделать большего, как верно воспроизвести действительность, хотя бы и в новых, фантастических сочетаниях ее элементов. Кому не довольно этого, пусть оставит искусство и ищет иного в науке, в философии, в теургии, где хочет. Старайся быть правдивым в своем творчестве - вот вечный и единый завет поэту: правдивым и в замысле своего произведения, и в его отдельных частях, и в каждом образе, и в каждом выражении. Ищи лишь этого, пытай у души своей лишь одного: где правда.”

## Reading “Vocabularies of Discomfort”: The Art of Diagnosis

In his autobiographical novel, Briusov named—he diagnosed—Renata’s illness. In doing so, Briusov the *Symbolist*, who upheld that life creates art and art create life, had the opportunity to gain control and mastery over the real-life madness of his relationship with Petrovskaia through the vehicle of his “Word,” his novel and the diagnosis it delivers. In the novel’s preface, Briusov presented several medieval interpretations of the phenomena of possession and demonomania, but he privileged the medical opinions of Johann Weyer. Briusov the editor granted Weyer the final word on the matter in the preface’s concluding sentence. Not surprisingly, the apprentice Hans, Weyer’s character as a youth, delivers a historically accurate explication of his own ideas about the nature of hysteria and melancholy; he confidently asserts that this is indeed the ailment from which Renata suffers.<sup>354</sup> Once again Ruprecht’s credibility as a physician is confirmed; the young Hans determines Renata’s diagnosis based on Ruprecht’s learned and “objectively”-presented list of medical signs and symptoms of illness. Hans articulates *his* diagnosis according to the treatise he has yet to write: women like Renata are ill, they suffer from melancholia, and they are misunderstood to be witches:

Now we know that there exists a specific disease, which cannot be deemed madness, but which is close to it and perhaps should be called by its old name –melancholia. This illness affects women more than men, for their sex is the weaker of the two, as the word *mulier* shows, derived by [Marcus Terentius] Varro from *mollis*, tender. In a melancholy state all the sensations are changed under the pressure of a special fluid that spreads throughout the whole body, so that patients commit deeds that never have a rational purpose, and they are subject to inexplicable and rapid changes of mood. Now they are happy, now sad, now cheerful, now extremely despondent—and all of this without apparent reason. In the same way, they lie without need: they present themselves as other than who they are, or else accuse themselves or others of invented crimes, and they especially like to play the role of the persecuted, of victims. These women sincerely

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<sup>354</sup> As described in Johann Weyer, *De praestigiis daemonum* (Basel, 1563).

believe their stories and genuinely suffer from imaginary troubles: imagining that they are possessed by the Devil, they really do experience agony and writhe in convulsions, and force their bodies to arch in ways they could not do consciously, and, generally, by means of their imagination, they can drive themselves to death. From the number of these unfortunates are filled the ranks of so-called witches, who ought to be treated with soothing potions, but against whom popes issue bulls, while inquisitors erect bonfires. I suggest, therefore, that it is one of these women whom you have met.<sup>355</sup>

Hans's diagnosis of the signs and symptoms of Renata's psychological and physical suffering in the novel, thanks to Ruprecht's detailed explication, is an accurate iteration of the mature Johann Weyer's historical thesis about witches. In his argument, Weyer did not refute the possibility of possession or the efficacy of the Devil in the phenomenal, earthly realm but upheld the Lutheran conclusion that the Devil was powerful, deceptive, and dangerously present in the world: "the Devil loves to insinuate himself into the melancholic humor, as being a material well suited for his mocking deceptions."<sup>356</sup>

Weyer's 1563 treatise *De praestigiis daemonum* is regarded by many as the first textbook of psychology. H. C. Erik Midelfort emphasizes the extent to which Weyer's book represented a

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<sup>355</sup> Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, 121-122: "Теперь мы знаем, что существует особая болезнь, которую нельзя признать помешательством, но которая близка к нему и может быть названа старым именем -- меланхолия. Болезнь эта чаще, чем мужчин, поражает женщин, -- существо более слабое, как показывает самое слово *mulier*, производимое Варроном от *mollis*, нежный. В состоянии меланхолии все чувствования бывают изменены под давлением особого флюида, распространившегося по всему телу, так что больные совершают поступки, которых нельзя объяснить никакой разумной целью, и бывают подвержены самым необъяснимым и самым быстрым сменам настроений. То они веселы, то печальны, то бодры, то безвольны до крайности, -- и всё это безо всякой видимой причины. Точно так же без надобности они лгут: выдают себя не за то, что они есть, возводят сами на себя или на других вымышленные преступления, особенно же любят играть роль преследуемых, жертвы. Эти женщины искренно верят в свои рассказы и искренно страдают от призрачных бед: воображая, что одержимы демонами, они действительно мучатся и бьются в конвульсиях, причём заставляют так изгибаться своё тело, как это им невозможно сделать сознательно, и вообще своим воображением могут довести себя и до смерти. Из числа именно этих несчастных пополняются ряды так называемых ведьм, которых надо бы пользоваться успокоительным питьём, но против которых папы издают буллы, а инквизиторы воздвигают костры. Я полагаю, что и вы повстречались с одной из подобных женщин."

<sup>356</sup> Johann Weyer, "Melancholia, Witches, and Deceiving Demons" [excerpt from *De praestigiis daemonum*, 1563], trans. John Shea, in Jennifer Radden, ed., *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 104.

turning point in psychiatry in two ways.<sup>357</sup> First, Weyer changed legal discourse and contributed to the concept of the insanity defense by combining medicine and law in an innovative manner. Second, and more significant for our purposes, is that Weyer, often humorously, manipulated narratives to challenge “fictions” that had no firsthand evidence. He did so by comparing and contrasting such things as the personal testimonies of peasants, the fables of Merlin, and stories about Faust. Midelfort argues that Weyer used “an artful literary technique and one that deployed the grotesque as a weapon against the monstrous” to establish and defend his thesis.<sup>358</sup>

According to Midelfort, Weyer’s research methodology emphasized eyewitness observation and in doing so, facilitated the expansion of a new form of scientific narrative at the end of the sixteenth century, “the literature of *observationes*.”<sup>359</sup> Weyer upheld that observational evidence outweighed dogmatized fable and theory, stating that “experience could trump the whimsical claims of [faulty] reason.”<sup>360</sup>

Weyer articulated this in *De praestigiis daemonum*, where he described people, ignorant of philosophy and theology, who persuaded themselves that they saw or heard incredible phenomena:

Narratives of this sort were included among historical accounts by many writers. Because of their inexperience and their excessive gullibility they convinced themselves (from “examples” of times past) that whatever is said or discussed by a crowd or whatever is handed down by others not only could have happened but actually did happen. Although these “examples” are wrapped in fable, with these writers they attain to the credibility of history...

Tired of fables, I shall include a true story.<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> H. C. Erik Midelfort, *A History of Madness in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 14.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Weyer, “Melancholia, Witches, and Deceiving Demons,” in *The Nature of Melancholy*, 100.

Midelfort's analysis demonstrates that as early as the sixteenth century the genre of pathography was valued and used by medical and legal professionals. Whether interpreted as fact or fiction, reality or fantasy, physicians like Weyer privileged the stories of eyewitnesses, patient and professional alike, in the process and act of diagnosis.

In his excellent explication of the phenomenon of witchcraft and witch persecution, Stuart Clark considers the function that language and rhetoric performed in the construction of belief and belief systems. In his analysis, before Clark investigates the scientific, historical, religious, and political models that shaped the concept of *maleficium* and facilitated the persecution of witches, he reveals the extent to which language constructions were given priority over reality, or the "priority of the world of signs over the world of objects."<sup>362</sup> He asks what were the "logical relationships of opposition, metaphors of inversion, schemes of classification, taxonomies, rhetorical strategies and the like—that enabled witchcraft to have meaning at all."<sup>363</sup> Clark asserts that our "aim would be to uncover the linguistic circumstances that enabled the utterances and actions associated with witchcraft belief to convey meaning."<sup>364</sup> I believe that Clark's understanding of how sixteenth-century intellectuals often privileged the world of signs over the world of objects is similar to the Russian Symbolist world view that privileged the notions of symbol and theurgy.

Within this polemic about sin, salvation, and witchcraft, the Roman Catholic Church maintained that the acts of ritual, prayer, confession, and recourse to saints on one's behalf could provide protection and relief from the power of the Devil. In a manner that exposed a striking continuation of magical thinking, Catholics were taught to believe in the absolute authority of the

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<sup>362</sup> Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 6.

Church but continued to pursue confession and communion as apotropaic measures that protected them from a world with few if any borderlines between the natural and supernatural realms. The Inquisition combated heresy. The Counter-Reformation movement emphasized the spiritual, devotional, and mystical aspects of salvation. The substance of such theological debates infused many of the discussions Russian Symbolists had about the nature and role of art, artist, and mythopoesis; it was the backbone of their medievalism.

Sixteenth and seventeenth-century theologians increasingly centered the debate about divine permission, or the idea that nothing happens unless God wills or allows it, focused on the idea of witchcraft, or *maleficium*, and possession. For them it became imperative to scientifically prove the reality of the Devil's presence and efficacy in the earthly realm. As Walter Stephens asserts, many educated clergymen put to use the emerging techniques of scientific investigation and increasing acknowledgement of the laws of nature to prove the existence of God.<sup>365</sup>

According to their reasoning, the reality of a witch in sexual communion with demons demonstrated the tangible presence of the Devil on earth, thereby *logically* confirming the opposite: the tangible existence of God and the angels in heaven. The interrogation of a witch was a means of *scientific experimentation*, the process by which such a hypothesis could be tested. Confession, an example of linguistic expression and rhetoric, whether in the courtroom or the safety of a priest's confidence, was valued as "objective" and tangible proof.

The Inquisition and the medical theories of that age reveal that medieval secular and religious intellectuals constructed women as the "Other." In the polemics of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation they often focalized the female body, mind, and soul as the quintessential battleground for a textual analysis of the categories of good and evil, angel and demon. These

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<sup>365</sup> Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

categories were natural projections for celibate male clerics. What is relevant to this study is the extent to which the medical reasoning and psychiatric foundation of Weyer's diagnosis of witches corresponds to the ideas about and construction of hysteria among prominent *fin-de-siècle* psychiatrists. Andrew Scull observes that at the turn of the twentieth century psychiatrists asserted that "madness had meaning—indeed, was produced at the level of meaning, and had to be cured at the level of meaning."<sup>366</sup> Both Freud and Jung are prominent examples of the retrospective orientation among psychiatrists at that time, whose research often re-evaluated and reinterpreted the historical record and identified historical patterns of thought. They developed their theories about the human mind through a process of looking backward in time and constructed the "meaning" of madness in a historical past. Foucault and Umberto Eco, for example, persisted in this practice.<sup>367</sup>

As discussed in the previous chapter, the interstices between literature and medicine at the turn of the twentieth century bore witness to the retrospection and demonic despair of the decadent imagination. Narrative played an important role in *fin-de-siècle* psychiatry as psychiatrists and writers began to approach their research, creative works, and criticism with what Christine Mazzoni calls a "literary-turned-clinical interest."<sup>368</sup>

In her outline of hysteria as an idea in the evolution of French psychiatry, Martha Noel Evans asserts that, "if trauma of some kind precipitated hysteria in a woman predisposed to it by heredity and a dynamic lesion, as far as Charcot was concerned, the *content* of the trauma was

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<sup>366</sup> Andrew Scull, *Madness: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Kindle Edition, chap. 4.

<sup>367</sup> See Umberto Eco et al., *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. J. Khalfa and trans. J. Murphy (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>368</sup> Cristina Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 109. See also Jenny Bourne Taylor, "Psychology at the *Fin de Siècle*" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and *The Fin De Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History c. 1880-1900*, eds. Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

irrelevant to the symptoms it produced.”<sup>369</sup> Thus, at the *fin de siècle*, Charcot actively sought to remove religious interpretations from hysteria as a disease category. He strove to separate physical convulsions (sign and symptom) from possession and saintly ecstasy (content). Charcot was most interested in the spectacle and performance of hysteria and understood hypnosis and art as a means of controlling the raw material of cognitive and neurological signs and symptoms. He enjoyed the role of “master of ceremonies” in his auditorium of 500 seats, where, despite his best intentions, “the ordinary distinctions between reality and fiction became blurred.”<sup>370</sup> Asti Hustvedt claims that “the artist Charcot utilized art [his paintings, photography, and stage performance] as the medium to immobilize a disease for which he found no anatomic cause.”<sup>371</sup>

As the most famous neurologist of his time, Charcot set the precedent for the construction or deconstruction of the ventriloquized, often female “Other,” as the departure point for the theoretical development of psychological ideas about mind, body, spirit, and will. Charcot described one female patient in the following terms:

She undergoes extraordinary contortions which evoke the descriptions of the convulsionaries possessed by the devil. She cries out, she screams, she hurls invectives at imaginary people; she has a furious look; she is terrifying, like an unchained Fury.<sup>372</sup>

He could have been describing Renata.

The Middle Ages were a period of spiritual crisis and “hysteria,” a period in human history that embodied illnesses not wholly dissimilar to the afflictions Charcot’s patients displayed, such as the example of the physical expression of mental illness represented by the

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<sup>369</sup> Martha Noel Evans, *Fits and Starts: A Genealogy of Hysteria in Modern France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 34.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>371</sup> Asti Hustvedt, *Medical Muses: Hysteria in Nineteenth-century Paris* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011), 22.

<sup>372</sup> Cited by Evans in *Fits and Starts*, 23.

late sixteenth-century dancing mania, St. Vitus's dance.<sup>373</sup> Because women were more prone to these ecstatic afflictions than men in both the sixteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century, numerous intellectuals focused their research and experiments on women. In the sixteenth century the boundary between the label "witch" and the label "saint" were surprisingly fluid and structured around a congruently-sexualized "body" as "text." Medical and theological authorities from both centuries established the female body and female psychoses as some sort of curious textual constructions of "Other" to be read.

During a witch trial, investigators would look for a witches' or devil's mark, a permanent sign and seal of obedience to the Devil. They also looked for a witches' teat, which, it was believed, was used to feed familiars. In similar fashion, *dermographism*, or etching on a woman's body with a doctor's fingernail or a sharp object, was a common practice at the Salpêtrière hospital, which Charcot oversaw. Janet Beizer documents the ways in which doctors would use the sensitive and hyper-expressive body of a woman in this manner as if it were "living writing paper."<sup>374</sup> They literally inscribed words and images onto a woman's skin, a practice which Beizer upholds was a violation of an individual and body's right to speak for oneself. The female body becomes a kind of palimpsest:

the body does not speak; it is spoken, ventriloquized by the master text that makes it signify. The woman becomes a text, but she is a text within a text, a text *framed* as signifying source by another, mediating text.<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> H.C. Erik Midelfort defines St. Vitus's dance as an example of epilepsy, a chorea, or a Sydenham's chorea. Suffers danced and hopped in a frenzied and endless manner, at times until the point of broken bones or even death. They often claimed that they could not see the color red, though they were commonly consumed by the thought of St. John the Baptist's severed head and the image of blood. The malady was epidemic in regions of Germany in 1463.

<sup>374</sup> Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1994), 24.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

Beizer includes photographs in her book. These images reveal that doctors wrote words like “satan,” signed their names, drew hieroglyphics, or, in an act of naming, spelled out the diagnosis itself on the surface of women’s bodies.<sup>376</sup>

In contrast to Charcot, his colleague Pierre Janet (1859–1947) decided that a less neurological and more psychological approach to hysteria would help a doctor better understand hysteria’s underlying psychological conditions. Instead of cataloguing and mapping signs and symptoms, he developed the concept of the *idée fixe subconsciente*. Janet asked: “What phenomenon, if not an idea, could determine these bizarre postures of the hand, of the torso, which seem to be the continuation of an action?”<sup>377</sup> He came to understand the hysterical attack “as a repetition, an acting out, of the original disturbing idea.”<sup>378</sup> Janet further asserted that “verbal hallucinations are the reproduction of the kinesthetic sensations one experiences when one talks to oneself. It is simply an interior language.”<sup>379</sup> Thus for Janet, “not only was the body acting out a scene, it was itself already the locus of meaning.”<sup>380</sup>

The extent to which Janet’s *fin-de-siècle* approach to hysteria has much in common with the approach to the question of (and polemics surrounding) demonic possession taken by sixteenth-century medicos and theologians is striking. Midelfort has explored how the manifestation of demonic possession in the sixteenth century may have functioned as “a culturally sanctioned way of experiencing and understanding acute states of mental alienation.”<sup>381</sup> He suggests that instances of possession, demonomania, and demonic despair may

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 21, 23, 25, 27-28.

<sup>377</sup> Evans, *Fits and Starts*, 58-60.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid.

<sup>381</sup> Midelfort, *A History of Madness*, 19.

have been examples of illnesses and afflictions that facilitated “‘vocabularies of discomfort’ developed to take account of a changing world.”<sup>382</sup> Midelfort asserts that

demonic possession provided troubled persons with the means of expressing their often guilty and morally straining conflicts, a vocabulary of gestures, grimaces, words, voices, and feelings with which to experience and describe their sense that they were not fully in charge of their lives or their own thoughts.<sup>383</sup>

In similar fashion, both late nineteenth-century and sixteenth-century intellectuals focused their attention toward the content of the trauma. For Janet the signs and symptoms of hysteria manifested the *idée fixe* relative to the psychology of a particular patient. For sixteenth-century medicos, theologians, jurists, and inquisitors, such signs and symptoms manifested the very real and very tangible *idée fixe* and anxiety of their own: was the Devil the ruler of this world? Is this not the philosophical and spiritual quandary Briusov engaged in *Fiery Angel* through his poetization of Petrovskaia’s mental anguish and the medieval psychoses performed and suffered by Renata?

Briusov engaged two “vocabularies of discomfort”—demonomania and hysteria—to depict his own struggles as a spiritualist and aspiring Symbolist poet to blend and overcome the boundaries between *miracula* and *natura* from 1904–1905. He projected the “madness” wrought by his shortcomings as a medium and Solov’evian spiritual alchemist onto his anima projection: the psychopomp Nina Petrovskaia and “witch” Renata. The success of Briusov’s poetization and novel reside in his choice of vocabularies because they were the same vocabularies of discomfort his contemporary psychiatrists, such as Freud, Jung, Janet, and Richet, also engaged.

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

In a highly influential essay titled “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud compared the condition of mourning to the mental disease of melancholia. What he deduced was that the two states have much in common, even though a clear definition of melancholia proved to be elusive. As psychological responses, both mourning and melancholia result from a similar environmental cause: *loss*. While this is often the loss of a loved one, it can also be the loss of “some abstraction, which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, so on.”<sup>384</sup> In this, Freud summarized ideas similar to those of Richet cited above, which were percolating through psychiatric and medical circles at the time.

Freud determined that melancholia arises when the response to loss takes on an extremely pathological disposition that requires medical attention. Melancholia may manifest itself in a variety of ways, some of which Freud listed:

profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.<sup>385</sup>

While Freud acknowledged that these symptoms of grief often accompany the process of mourning, mourning as a condition differs from melancholia in that we can “explain” it. Melancholia’s pathological nature resides in the fact that an explanation for its symptoms cannot be articulated. The melancholic individual suffers, but to such a degree that a physician is unable to account for the intensity of the reaction to loss. Or for that matter, identify what, in fact, was lost.

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<sup>384</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XIV (1914-1916)*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 243.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

Freud states that a physician's ability to explain a patient's condition of mourning derives from the patient's cognizance that a person, object, or ideal has been lost and recognition of what that person, object, or ideal meant to the patient. This may not hold true for the melancholic patient, however: "even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia," Freud points out, the patient only "knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him."<sup>386</sup> Thus the ego remains unfreed from experience of loss and the process of mourning remains unaccomplished. Freud explains that the patient may hold on to the object "through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis."<sup>387</sup> To further complicate matters, Freud also recognized that the loss that triggers melancholia is often the "ideal" kind: "The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love (e.g. in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted)."<sup>388</sup>

Freud's famous essay, written in 1917, provided a concise summary of the research into hysteria that he had been pursuing since at least 1885 with his peers Charcot and Janet at the Salpêtrière and through his subsequent correspondence, friendship, and eventual break with Jung. We can recognize, for example, the extent to which Janet's notion of the *idée fixe* informs Freud's argument. In that sense, Freud's essay functions as an excellent measure of the medical *Zeitgeist* at the turn of the twentieth century. Scull states that Freud's summary of mourning and melancholia functioned as a threshold between all that came before about hysteria and all that followed after.<sup>389</sup> Briusov constructed his layman's psycho-pathography of Nina Petrovskaja on the eve of Freud's consolidation of hysteria and its meaning.

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>389</sup> Scull, *Madness*, chap. 4.

Noteworthy is that Weyer's sixteenth-century medical treatise, *De praestigiis daemonum*, anticipated both Janet's *idée fixe* and Freud's ideas about lost objects of love. Weyer reasoned:

The sort of person most likely to be attacked is one who possesses such a temperament or who is so moved by external or internal causes [e.g., if he is attacked by a demon-specter or tempted by a demon's suggestions] that as a result of specious inducements he will readily present himself as a suitable instrument of the demon's will. Melancholics are of this sort, as are persons distressed because of loss or for any other reason, as Chrysostom says: "The magnitude of their grief is more potent for harm than all the activities of the Devil because all whom a demon overcomes, he overcomes through grief."<sup>390</sup>

Freud's summary of these ideas, ideas that were already present in the sixteenth century, about the nature of mourning and melancholia resonates in *Fiery Angel*. Renata is unhappy because she has lost her lover, Count Heinrich. This loss is the source of Renata's depression, self-abasement, guilt, suicidal ideation, and self-harm. The restoration of her lost object, or lover, is Renata's *idée fixe*. Count Heinrich may or may not have been the literal "object of love," Madiel, from Renata's early adolescence. Such a fact is irrelevant here, however, because regardless of whom the "first" Madiel may or may not have been, the adult Renata has superimposed and projected the image and psychological equivalent of her lost childhood object of love onto Heinrich. Renata knows *whom* she has lost, her ideal of "Madiel/Heinrich," but she does not know exactly *what* she has lost: a friend? lover? confidant? brother? teacher? or spiritual guide? Renata cannot articulate if what she has lost is of the ideal kind: is it the promise of romantic love, success, salvation, or eternal life? The "Madiel/Heinrich" Renata presents to Ruprecht is all of the above and constantly shifting. In the privileged world of signs prioritized in the Middle Ages, Madiel is Renata's full expression of anguish; he is the image of her grief, regardless of whether it was induced by the Devil or wrought by her psychosis.

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<sup>390</sup> Weyer, "Melancholia, Witches, and Deceiving Demons," in *The Nature of Melancholy*, 97.

What matters is that in the novel the crutch of Renata's "sin" and guilt, whether it be sexual, religious, psychological, and/or possibly imagined, is that Madiel, his image, and his visitations are very real to Renata. What we may interpret as an example of *misperception* is, for Renata, genuine cognition and perception. This intersection between what is objective perception and what is possible misperception is the crux of Clark's assertions about the role language plays in the construction of meaning in systems of belief. Throughout the nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth, positivist scientists founded their "biologization of the social" on the grounds of an (accessible) objective reality and produced new sciences that often blurred fiction and non-fiction.<sup>391</sup> The new schools of psychiatry and anthropology, the widespread popularity of spiritualism, and the demonic despair of the decadent imagination investigated, challenged, and at times rejected the "assumption" of an objective reality.

What these new trends all offered, however, were new, "scientific" vocabularies for voicing and diagnosing the anxieties of a pathological age. In our consideration of developments and trends in late nineteenth-century psychiatry, we find ourselves asking questions similar to those Russian Symbolists posed: what are the boundaries of "naming" reality? That is to ask: is the theurgic potential of a symbol or word (*Logos*) a means of accessing higher truths and opportunities for transfiguration? Briusov's answer was no. He understood the act of creation—the act of naming—as an opportunity for self-revelation. Art was "true" only to the extent that it reflected oneself at the moment of its conception. Briusov did not, however, see this "truth" as something final, eternal, nor universal. From his perspective, modern science confirmed that the material, phenomenal world (the microcosm) is in constant evolution. While there may be flitting

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<sup>391</sup> Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity, 1880–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 7.

moments of insight into the noumenal realm (the macrocosm), Briusov upheld that no one iteration of a personality or the personality's aesthetic creation was stable nor unchanging.

A second question arises: is "naming" reality a means of controlling the dark archetypal side of our unconscious that Jung called the Shadow? Briusov's answer again was no. In his utilization of Weyer's diagnosis of witches as melancholic and distressed women to diagnose Renata in *Fiery Angel*, Briusov asserted that alchemical and Symbolist theurgy and *mythopoesis* led nowhere; they were a form of madness. At the same time, however, Briusov valued the very essence of this madness, this "mania," and this opportunity to transcend, if only briefly, the human condition. Ruprecht ultimately saw Renata's personal "mythopoesis" as a destructive force, coercing her into the depths of despair and suffering; but he also understood that her suffering and despair was the heavy price that she paid for the momentary heights of transcendence. Ruprecht was unwilling (or perhaps unable) to pay the price.

## **Treatment**

In *Fiery Angel*, the novel's various characters interpret the numerous signs and symptoms indicative of Renata's mental instability and epilepsy according to different, though related, illness categories: demonomania, possession, hysteria, and melancholy. The signs and symptoms Ruprecht, as the sixteenth-century narrator, highlights are Renata's episodes of mania and depression, convulsions, and hallucinations. In this section, I will consider Renata's mental illness and diagnosis in twenty-first century terms. Today Renata would receive a diagnosis of bipolar disorder; such a diagnosis provides the most productive departure point for making sense

of Renata's psychosis in the novel. The diagnosis of bipolarity may also offer some insight into the struggles that Petrovskaia endured.

When we consider Briusov's novel and the psychosis Renata suffers through, we are left asking what treatment options were available to Renata in sixteenth-century Germany. Self-medication by way of substance abuse, herbal supplements, and alcohol readily come to mind. Physical activity no doubt would have provided a healthier means by which symptoms could be managed. Fresh air and movement combat low energy just as well as they combat an excess of energy. Constructive mental activity, stimulation, and social interaction can also pull an individual out of the doldrums. Homeopathic treatments through diet, massage, sauna or steam, for example, can aid in managing mood levels. Talismans, be they crosses, saints' medals, or a variety of objects, infused with cultural, religious, or familial significance and authority, often serve to protect and comfort the ill. The simple priest's prescription of rest and contemplation may provide relief. These common treatment options are still pursued today and are by no means comprehensive.

After medication, the most widely used treatment for bipolar disorder symptoms in modern society is verbal therapy. Verbal therapy today takes various forms, often combined: cognitive therapy, behavioral therapy, interpersonal therapy, and social rhythm therapy. Cognitive therapy involves educating patients to recognize and modify patterns of thought and behaviors that accompany significant mood shifts. Behavioral therapy teaches patients how to engage in activities that decrease stress and excessive emotional states. Interpersonal therapy encourages patients with bipolar condition to build positive relationships with others and thereby reduce the social strains the illness places on them and others. The purpose of social rhythm therapy is help patients learn to maintain a daily routine. Therapists and medical professionals

use a combination of these approaches and encourage bipolar individuals to build all of these skills and habits before relying on medications, such as mood stabilizers, atypical antipsychotics, and anti-depressants, which can have serious side effects.<sup>392</sup>

While our twenty-first century conception of verbal therapy in the form of a psychiatrist's office was not available to bipolar patients in the sixteenth-century, other forms of verbal therapy functioned as treatment options with similar aims. Therapy options were often facilitated by a blended mind-set that merged magical thinking, Christian doctrine, occult philosophy, and a Galenic medical model. While such a blended mind-set may strike us as syncretic, even contradictory, today, it did not strike the average medieval patient as such.

Official religion offered the opportunity for meditative prayer, confession, pastoral advice and guidance, penance, and the priestly absolution of sins. The practice of confession resembles cognitive therapy and embodies the formality and authoritative nature of a visit to a psychologist today. Penance in the form of prayer, fasting, and the pursuit of good deeds and saintly conduct would have resonated through all levels of society and echoed the behavioral therapy approach. The reflection upon or incantation of the rosary, biblical verse, or words of a particular saint could elevate a melancholic mind-set, perhaps give meaning to or provide justification for suffering, as well as subdue—through concentration and repetition—the excesses of an expansive or irritable mood. Hymns also offered an outlet, and music and architecture could both sooth and inspire.

Official religion did not provide the only form of verbal therapy. Psychics, cunning people, sages, mages, midwives, healers of all sorts, holy fools, and witches are other examples

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<sup>392</sup> Medical professionals today have observed that numerous mood stabilizers, such as Lamotrigine, for example, are equally effective in the treatment of epilepsy. Though at this time they do not have a scientific explanation to account for this, it reiterates the unique relationship between madness, seizure, and “sacrality” assumed since ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman times; it also echoes many shamanistic practices.

of potential verbal therapists and advisors. Such persons often offered homeopathic solutions as well. Additionally, society granted religious, medical, and lay caregivers an authority that stretched beyond the individual patient. Much like interpersonal therapy, patients, family, and acquaintances received instruction, advice, and reassurance on how to care and treat episodes from religious and untraditional spiritual authorities, as well as medical practitioners. The ill and ailing almost always resided in the home and care rested on the shoulders of family and friends.

Study, too, can be therapeutic. Whether it is the study of scientific or scriptural texts, memorization, or apprenticeship of any sort, learning serves as a form of meditation and relaxation, mental stimulation, and goal orientation. Much like a religious experience, study connects an individual to a “community,” and a (perceived) higher reality, realm, or spiritual power; it offers a sense of worthiness and purpose. Defined in these terms, study is a valued feature, developmental stage, and/or symbolic pursuit in esoteric philosophy and alchemy. All these treatment and habit-forming activities bespeak an attempt at a consistent routine: the aim of social rhythm therapy. In *Fiery Angel*, Renata pursues all of the above treatment options.

Individuals who suffer from bipolar disorder are often hospitalized several times over the course of their lifetime. Cause for these hospitalizations can be either manic or depressive episodes, but such hospitalizations are not necessarily initiated by a medical professional. Both the afflicted and family members can recognize the need for concentrated medical attention, observation, and pharmaceutical treatment. The standard duration of an individual’s hospitalization may be a week to one or two months. In extreme cases where bipolar disorder is accompanied by other medical conditions, such as schizophrenia, PTSD, social phobia, and epilepsy, a bipolar patient may be permanently kept under strict medical care and watch.

Psychiatric facilities as we understand them today were not available to Renata. The most comparable form of hospitalization for Renata was a convent. A convent provided a space for relaxation, solitude, self-reflection, strict routine, and sense of community, purpose, and belonging. Nuns were often experienced in nursing and could offer help. Within the microcosm of a convent a sufferer found religious authority, support, advice, and almost all the verbal therapy opportunities outlined above. Life in a convent allowed for the stability modern hospitals provide. Diet and sleep were managed, one's daily schedule regimented, and mentorship, counsel, and reprimand, if necessary, were at the ready.

At numerous points in the text, Renata asserts that removing to a convent is a treatment option she and others should pursue. Recourse to a convent—the form of hospitalization available to a homeless woman like Renata in sixteenth-century Germany—was the ultimate and final treatment option she chooses. When Renata leaves Ruprecht, she eventually makes her way to the Convent of St. Ulf, where she takes the name Sister Maria and makes her presence felt in the Convent by proving to be a healer. As more and more of the younger sisters begin to believe in the miraculousness of Renata's gift, Renata draws unwanted attention from the community outside the Convent. Rumors soon begin to circulate that Sister Maria's "unnatural" gift of healing is an indication of a pact with the Devil. The Archbishop of Trier, who happens to be passing through the region, called for an inquisition of this local "witch."

### **Prognosis and Death**

As already noted, Ruprecht is an experienced sailor. He repeats images associated with water and navigation to convey and document significant events in his relationship with Renata,

her shifting moods and declining health, and his own emotions toward her psychosis. Briusov maintained this thematic, aesthetic, and philosophical construction in his prognosis of Renata's illness and her death.

Whether approached from a theological or a scientific point of view, the prognosis of Renata's illness is dire from the beginning. Several characters predict Renata's suffering, but it is Renata herself who first intuits the high probability of a negative outcome for her illness. Not surprisingly, she delivers her own prognosis while traversing a waterway. In her angry reprimand of a mariner and religious zealot during their trip up the (eternal) Rhine, Ruprecht recognizes statements that "explained many of her later actions."<sup>393</sup> Like Ruprecht, in Renata's words below, we see foreshadowed her spiritual quandary regarding the nature of true belief; this quandary she projects as a hallucination of Madiel and Mt. Tabor following her fourth seizure.

Renata states:

Only people who have never understood what it means to believe could talk these things that way. Anyone who had just once personally experienced all the happiness that comes when one's soul is absorbed into God would never think it necessary to forge lances or sharpen sickles. All these Davids marching against Belials, these Luthers, Zwinglis, and Johns—they are all the servants and helpers of the Devil. We talk a great deal about the crimes of others, but what if we were to turn our glance upon ourselves, as if in a mirror, and were to see all of our own sins and our shame? In the end, all of us, every one, ought to be horrified and, like a deer from a hunter, should flee to a monastery cell. It isn't the church we need to reform, but our soul, which is no longer capable of praying to the Almighty and believing in His Word, but who constantly wants to argue and prove things. And if you, Ruprecht, believe as this man here does, I can't remain with you a minute longer, but would prefer to throw myself head first into this river rather than share a cabin with a heretic.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, 50: "объясняют они многие из её позднейших поступков."

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 51: "Обо всём таком могут говорить только люди, которые никогда и не понимали, что значит верить. Кто хотя один раз лично испытал, с каким счастьем погружается душа в Бога, -- не подумает никогда, что надо ковать пики или точить серпы. Все эти Давиды, идущие на Велиаров, Лютеры, Цвингли и Иоанны -- слуги Дьявола и его помощники. Сколько говорим мы о преступлениях других, а что если бы обратили мы взор на себя, как в зеркало, и увидели бы свои грехи и свой позор? Ведь всем нам, каждому, надо было бы ужаснуться и, как оленю от охотника, бежать в монастырскую келью. Не церковь нам нужно реформировать, а душу свою, которая не способна больше молиться Всемогущему и верить в его слово, а

As the narrator and author of his experience with Renata, Ruprecht contemplated the accuracy of Renata's self-awareness for, in the end, this is the path she chose for herself. Recognizable in the passage above is Renata's willingness to commit suicide and, strikingly, through a watery-induced death. This passage makes clear that Renata, despite her debilitating psychosis, believes herself to be a pious Catholic woman. She intuits that the source of her malady lies *within* herself and is a spiritual consequence of the choices she has made, not of the Devil's action.

Tragically, the outcome of Renata's illness is death. Her religious hysteria (her psychosis), however, becomes contagious among the sisters at the Convent of St. Ulf. Religious authorities intervene. The hard-hearted inquisitor Brother Thomas interrogates and tortures Renata, as would a "scientist" investigate a hypothesis, and determines that she is indeed a witch, a process Ruprecht watches as a silent and, once again, privileged eyewitness. Ultimately, Brother Thomas delivers the prognosis of Renata's illness: she will be executed as a witch for her communion with demons. Brother Thomas understands her illness as a major sin, not as a medical condition beyond Renata's control. For him, her "witchiness" and "demons" confirm God's existence. Of the two lines of thought, Renata herself accepts Brother Thomas' prognosis; in the context of *her* religious, medieval world view, God has betrayed her. In Renata's eyes, as well as Brother Thomas's, death is the only option. At novel's end, the ailing Renata is condemned as a witch in accordance with the dominant medieval spiritual world view. Ruprecht the self-reflective narrator and enlightened physician, however, walks the line between such a medieval mind-set and the newly emerging scientific world view.

Although sentenced to burning at the stake, Renata's actual death is caused by a seizure (the fifth described). Broken by torture, she dies in Ruprecht's arms in the throes of convulsion

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всё хочет рассуждать и доказывать. И если ты, Рупрехт, мыслишь, как этот человек, я не могу оставаться с тобой ни одной минуты более и предпочту броситься головой вперёд в эту реку, нежели разделять каюту с еретиком."

and hallucination. Again he does not hold Renata responsible. Ruprecht does not know whether to attribute her suffering to mad delirium or demonic possession, but remains steadfast in his belief that she suffered from a genuine malady.

I did not allow myself to yield to impulse and forget that Renata was now not responsible for what she was saying, like an ailing person become delirious, or an unfortunate possessed by an evil spirit.”<sup>395</sup>

Ruprecht’s assertion confirms that Briusov’s novel is not the story of a possessed witch; rather, it is the story of a very ill woman.

## Outcome

In his analysis of disease representation and in a manner strikingly similar to Charcot, the painter and photographer of hysteria, Sander Gilman intuits that science expresses itself through art: “Science often understands and articulates its goals on the basis of literary or aesthetic models, measuring its reality against the form of reality art provides.”<sup>396</sup> In his poetization of his relationship with Petrovskaia in the novel *Fiery Angel* and his experiment in Symbolist life creation, Briusov created for himself the alter ego, a “sailor” and explorer, who descended into a symbolic maelstrom of esoteric philosophy and female otherness. If we now examine Briusov’s novel more closely as a *roman à clef*, we see that it indeed functions as his dissertation: the novel outlines the failed results of his hypothesis that Petrovskaia was a viable psychopomp on his quest for artistic genius. He diagnoses his experiment as an example of madness. The genre of

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<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>396</sup> Sander L. Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), xiii.

pathography, a format of disease representation, provided him with a vehicle to do so. The question arises then, as to whether or not the act of writing this pathography served Briusov as a form of cognitive therapy, as defined above, and was this cognitive therapy additionally informed by the painstaking and careful study of a historical period with which he identified: the late Middle Ages.

Briusov chose the image of a hysteric and witch to symbolize and gain mastery over his anxieties and the anxieties of his peers about the nature and purpose of artistic creation at a historical moment of cultural crisis and change. We recognize this in Briusov's thematic, philosophical, and aesthetic attempts in his novel *Fiery Angel*, his conflicting diagnosis of Renata/Petrovskaia, and also his depiction of himself as a physician and sailor/explorer within the geography of the microcosm and macrocosm. Gilman offers further insight into Briusov's purpose in doing so: "the image of the patient can be a depiction of the Other as diseased, but it can also serve as the alter ego of the observer, an alter ego that is the glorification of difference."<sup>397</sup> In a manner that parallels Clark's discussion of the linguistic construction of the idea of witchcraft and nature of demons in early modern Europe, Gilman adds: "all of these meanings center around our perception in the late twentieth century of the centrality of language in defining the essence of madness."<sup>398</sup>

In Briusov's novel, when Ruprecht presented Renata's ailments to Hans, he sat alone with him around a campfire and emphasized the intimacy of the moment. Ruprecht acknowledged this setting in the terms of a private consultation: "Hans listened to my lengthy and impassioned confession [about Renata] with the attention that a doctor receives the recital of

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 8.  
<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 243.

his patient's symptoms."<sup>399</sup> Ruprecht's session with the young medic was twofold: an attempt to name Renata's suffering and an attempt to articulate *his own journey* in and around her madness and perhaps to judge the level of his own responsibility to her, once he allied himself with her. The result is that Ruprecht's consultation with Hans was as much his own personal therapy session as it was an opportunity to diagnose and name Renata's psychosis.

The quest to name Renata's illness and the clearly delineated five elements of pathography in Ruprecht's account focalize the chaos that characterizes Briusov's autobiographical novel. In his discussion of depression and narrative the sociologist David Karp offers "symbolic interaction theory" as a possible explanation for the opportunity pathography offers the patient to make sense of illness experiences characterized by uncertain origin and outcome:

The meanings attached to objects, events, and situations are not built into them. Instead, they are products of our *responses* to them. In this regard, all human experience is an ongoing exercise in sense-making. Social psychologists allow, however, that some social situations are inherently more ambiguous than others and consequently, require more extensive interpretive efforts.<sup>400</sup>

In a similar manner, Arthur Kleinman calls clinicians "mini-ethnographers."<sup>401</sup> Leigh Turner celebrates the "messiness" of patients' stories about suffering. He acknowledges the "social, historical, and biographical web" of illness experiences and values the more "baroque" style of narration found in novels and short stories.<sup>402</sup> He appreciates how they move away from

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<sup>399</sup> Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, 121: "Ганс выслушал мою длинную и страстную исповедь со вниманием, как врач принимает признания больного."

<sup>400</sup> David Karp, *Speaking of Sadness: Depression, Disconnection, and the Meanings of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>401</sup> Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering and the Human Condition* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

<sup>402</sup> Leigh Turner, "Narrative, Thick Description, and Bioethics: Cases, Stories, and Simone de Beauvoir's *A*

a monochromatic and “sterile” perception of suffering and provide a first-person or multivalent view of illness and death.

When we consider these various approaches to illness, we find that the way in which Briusov poeticized his real-life history with Petrovskaia as Ruprecht’s involvement with the witch Renata points to Renata’s suffering the irrational and idealistic madness of loss according to Freud’s understanding of melancholia, both synchronically and diachronically. By choosing to use Petrovskaia as his model for the witch and epileptic Renata, Briusov drew on two important symbolic complexes: an ancient correlation among madness, genius, and spiritual vision, and a rich archetypal narrative about the risks and rewards of humankind’s attempts at divine, demonic, and Promethean creation. At the same time, Briusov diagnosed the *idée fixe* of life creation among his peers and the “hysteria” of his own pathological age. Such a definition of melancholia emerges as a viable diagnosis of the fictional Renata’s affliction and the real Petrovskaia’s suffering—in life and in art—a diagnosis Briusov offered to his Symbolist contemporaries. Briusov determined that the quest for mystical experiences and successful life creation, or the composition of one’s own transfiguring myth, was akin to demonomania; that is to say, a form of possession.

## CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have endeavored to accomplish three things in their exploration of *Fiery Angel* as both a chronicle of Valerii Briusov's personal experiment in life creation and a chronicle of Russian Silver Age neuroses. First, they have investigated the master narrative of the *fin de siècle*, in which the emerging fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and modern medicine advanced notions of social pathologies, disintegration, and degeneration. This was a natural response to the tremendous shifts in social, political, technological, economic, and psychological forces that generated a "crisis of culture and consciousness" across western Europe and Russia on the eve of the First World War.

Second, these chapters have considered the Russian Symbolist counter-narrative, which rejected modernity and its neuropathological ills and yearned, among other things, to return to a mythic version of the Middle Ages that preceded modernity. In this idealized medieval past, magic and occult knowledge still existed and religion was not yet in open conflict with science. The forces that moved the world, whether divine or demonic, were nevertheless external to man and his psyche. Social pathologies existed, but their cause and resolution were viewed in a very

different way. The Symbolists used their concepts of life creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*) and theurgy as the guiding principles by which they constructed their Symbolist counter-narrative.

Finally, these chapters have described the genre of pathography and its distinctive features as a suitable genre for Briusov's own experiments in life creation. They examined *Fiery Angel* not only as a literary pathography of the character Renata, not only as a personal pathography of Briusov's muse and lover Nina Petrovskaiia, but also as a collective pathography of the Silver Age. Consciously displacing reality from one cultural turning point to another, from early twentieth-century Russia to sixteenth-century Germany, Briusov captured the "demonomania" and hysteria of his own time, place, and compatriots in a novel way.

### **Pathography and the Pursuit of Life Creation**

The genre of pathography is a good fit with the aesthetic eschatology of Russian Symbolist life creation, which was a principle, method, and mythopoetic world view, characterized by a Gnostic teleology, that demanded that life imitate art and art imitate life. The concept of life creation inspired men and women to compose their own personal myths and, at times, expanded that act of creation to cosmic proportions. In that sense, life creation embodied what Anne Hunsaker Hawkins defines as the "myth of narrativity": a "cultural myth—one that privileges narrative and that validates the authority of personal experience."<sup>403</sup> Hawkins asserts that the myth of narrativity defined as such does not engage myth in its archetypal capacity, but looks at myth as "a story that is less than and more than true, a fiction that embodies truths

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<sup>403</sup> Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999), 186.

whose validity does not depend on verifiability or fact.”<sup>404</sup> Thus, the myth of narrativity is a notion remarkably similar to the pursuit of individuation that shaped the ideology of Symbolist life creation. Symbolists invested their personal life stories and life experiences with “a sense of authenticity and of mythic authority.”<sup>405</sup> When this happens, narrative can help make sense of uncertainty and suffering and, in that capacity, heal.

Russian Symbolist life creation offered creative people a practical poetics for making meaningful sense of their personal and communal experience against the backdrop of their historical moment. Life creation provided its own idiosyncratic “myth of narrativity” to express and perhaps resolve the conflicting messages of optimism and pessimism in *fin-de-siècle* Russia and the discomfort, dislocation, suspense, and eager expectation that shaped the psychology of the period. Under the influence of poet and philosopher Vladimir Solov’ev, Russian Symbolists developed an ideology invested in the promise of metamorphosis and a teleology that explored the extent to which aesthetics could reconcile the language of religion and the language of science. Reading Russia’s Silver Age through the lens of pathography, or illness narrative, offers an opportunity to weigh, consider, and better decipher the various vocabularies of anxiety, ambition, and loss that characterized the crisis of culture and consciousness at the turn of the twentieth century.

The *fin de siècle* was an historical moment defined by the scientific discovery of the inevitability of transformation: biological, social, political, cultural. This discovery carried with it psychological consequences, which resulted in a new modern psychopathology—a Promethean and/or demonic despair, sense of loss, and expectancy—as modern men and women were forced to defend the human spirit in the face of the indifference of nature, biology, and science. While

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 188.

some responded enthusiastically and saw opportunities for *progeneration*, or the improvement of human life and society, the prevailing master narrative at the turn of the twentieth century told the story of *degeneration*, despair, and social pathology.

In an attempt to restore the spiritual integrity and moral agency of the self in the face of degeneration, Russian Symbolists composed their own narrative of transformation, which I characterize as a counter-narrative, a more commonly used term for what Hilde Lindemann Nelson calls a counterstory: “a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect.”<sup>406</sup> Symbolists invested their counter-narrative in the medieval alchemic promise of restored wholeness and transcendence of the material realm—even as the modern world rushed toward modernism and technology. They attempted to realize their narrative through the process of poetic life creation, which insisted that Beauty, Love, and Art could improve reality. Russian Symbolists, for a time, proposed life creation as an aesthetic managing mechanism to overcome the eschatological anxieties, delimiting “traditions,” and, for some, psychological and philosophical cleavage between the spiritual and physical that characterized Russian society as it stood on the precipice of revolution.

Between the years 1904 and 1905, Valerii Briusov attempted a psychological experiment in life creation with Nina Petrovskaja; two years later, he characterized this experiment as an encounter with psychosis. In a diary entry dated 21 April 1907, Briusov described the emotional consequences of his experiment in the alchemy of love, (inspired) madness, and art with Petrovskaja:

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<sup>406</sup> Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 6. Nelson defines identity as: “the interaction of a person’s self-conception with how others conceive her” (6). Nelson’s definition of a counterstory does not correspond to Sanja Bahun’s concept of countermourning or countermonument: “a mourning that refuses –to mourn” in Sanja Bahun, *Modernism and Melancholia: Writing as Counter Mourning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 18.

From 1904-1905. For me that was a year of storms, a year of maelstrom. Never have I experienced such passions, such torments, such joys. The greater part of these experiences is embodied in my book of poems *Stephanos*. Some of them went also into the making of the novel *Fiery Angel*. At times I was quite sincerely ready to throw over all my past life and take up a new one, to begin my whole life again.<sup>407</sup>

At the end of his brief annotation for a year he characterized as a psychological whirlwind, Briusov concluded: “with autumn, began something like recovery. I found myself again.”<sup>408</sup> In the same entry Briusov cited a stanza from one of his own poems included in *Stephanos*, inspired by his time spent in Finland with Petrovskaja in June 1905. Briusov’s poem is key to understanding his quest for a creative illness, one he hoped could reveal to him verities that would refine and transform him as a poet. In full, the poem reads:

Me, who sought madness,  
Me, who begged for alarms,  
Me, who trusted in reverie  
To the hum of wheels, in the great city’s noise,  
Fate had abandoned on a quiet shore.

And the rippling’s quiet illimitability  
Wafting coolness over me,  
Calmed the stormy rebellion,  
Gifted me with peace and tenderness  
And sweetly flowed into me.

And amidst the thin-stemmed pines,  
On a background of blue mystery,  
Like a summons from all the longings of the world,  
A pledge of wordless confessions—  
Your image has risen above me!

(1905, Rauha)<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> Joan Delany Grossman, *The Diary of Valery Bryusov (1893–1905)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 143.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 194. Translation is Grossman’s:

Меня, искавшего безумий,  
Меня, просившего тревог,

In his experiment, Briusov sought to transform Petrovskaia, an intense and passionate lover, into a mediumistic muse through a special alchemy of love, madness, and art. Under the influence of his spiritualism and Solov'ev's Sophiology, Briusov desired to craft for himself a spiritual guide, or psychopomp, for his journey to become a great poet and compose his personal myth. Unfortunately, it did not go well. The experiment ended in hurt feelings and drug abuse on both sides, abandonment, depression, and, several years later, Petrovskaia's suicide.

As Briusov himself revealed in his diary, he poeticized this experience in his novel *Fiery Angel*, in which he cast Petrovskaia in the role of "Renata," a tortured and tragic soul who interacts with his alter ego, the rational "Ruprecht." Briusov set his novel in sixteenth-century Germany, a period of change and confusion that resembled the crisis of culture and consciousness Russia faced at the turn of the twentieth century. Briusov drew from this "neurotic" late medieval atmosphere and diagnosed his psychological experiment with Petrovskaia as an encounter with demonomania, a medieval condition indicative of demonic possession, whose signs and symptoms were not dissimilar to the "madness" characteristic of *fin-de-siècle* hysteria and the threat of degeneration.

As the plot of *Fiery Angel* unfolds, Ruprecht the narrator documents his struggle to soothe Renata's unhappiness and mental and physical suffering in such precise detail that the

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Меня, вверявшего думе  
Под гул колес, в столичном шуме,  
На тихий берег бросил Рок.

И зыби синяя безбрежность,  
Меня прохладой осеня,  
Смирила буйную мятежность,  
Мне даровала мир и нежность  
И вкрадчиво влилась в меня.

И между сосен тонкоствольных,  
На фоне тайны голубой,  
Как зов от всех томлений дольных,  
Залог признаний безглагольных, —  
Возник твой облик надо мной!

novel comes to resemble a medical case study. As such, Briusov's novel can be read as a pathography, an extended account of an illness, individual or social, and the dysfunctionalities it introduces into the world of the sufferer and the people around him or her. The genre of pathography gave Briusov the opportunity to explore more than just the emotional consequences of his failed experiment with Petrovskaja as his psychopomp (on a microcosmic level). When read as a pathography, Briusov's novel, superimposing the neuroses of one age over another, provided him with the opportunity (on a macrocosmic level) to ask the question as to whether or not a particular definition of hysteria, at a particular moment in history, can serve as a litmus test for the psychology of an age.

### **The Ideology of Transformation**

Psychiatrist and anthropologist Arthur Kleinman observes that

in the fragmented, pluralistic modern world, anxiety increasingly is free floating and requires personal processes of creating idiosyncratic meaning to supplant the shared moral and religious significance that guided our ancestors on how to suffer.<sup>410</sup>

Briusov and his Russian Symbolist colleagues proposed a counter-narrative to degeneration theory and experimented with new (and renewed) guiding principles to resolve the psychological and cultural dislocation of their historical moment. To do so, they focused both on the limits and boundaries of the individual personality and human consciousness and on the liberating abilities of art and the act of creation to transcend such limits in the quest for restored psychic wholeness.

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<sup>410</sup> Arthur Kleinman, *Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 28.

At the historical moment of the crisis of culture and consciousness that defined the turn of the twentieth century, Russian Symbolists, seeking significance and direction, engaged (among others) two ancient narratives of restorative transformation: the story of Christ and the story of Wisdom-Sophia. Solov'ev's idea of *syzygy*, or All-Unity, established a synergy of the physical and spiritual/Gnostic paths to perfection these two stories promised. Within the "fragmented, pluralistic modern world," Solov'ev told a story of revelation and redemption. He put forth the idea of life creation, invested in Love, Beauty, and Art, as an aesthetic method for spiritual and physical regeneration.

The concept of life creation, founded on the messages of masculine and feminine completeness embodied in the story of Christ and Wisdom-Sophia, provided Russian Symbolists with two things in their attempt to write a "mythic" counter-narrative to degeneration, despair, and social pathology: theory and ritual. First, life creation offered "the theoretical framework of myth," which Kleinman defines as "paradigmatic exemplars of how pain and loss [the consequences of our fall into material dross] should be borne (as in the case of Job)."<sup>411</sup> Second, life creation also presented an "established script for ritual behavior."<sup>412</sup> Kleinman acknowledges the capacity of the theories and rituals embodied in myth(s) to "transform an individual's affliction into a sanctioned symbolic form for the group."<sup>413</sup> The parables of Christ and Wisdom-Sophia, as Solov'ev had recast them, provided Russian Symbolists with the necessary theory and ritual, which, in Kleinman's view, facilitate the healing capacity characteristic of illness narrative.

In an attempt to reconcile religion and science, Solov'ev upheld that art and beauty are effective measures against degeneration and the Promethean and demonic despair of modern

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid.

men and women's eschatological burden because, he asserted, "Beauty is a product of real natural processes perfected in the universe."<sup>414</sup> Solov'ev determined that the "aesthetically beautiful should lead to an actual improvement of reality."<sup>415</sup> He translated this ancient alchemical story of the transformation of material dross into spiritual gold into a contemporary scientific narrative that told the story of a quantifiable, physical transformation: the transformation of the lowly content of coal into the realized perfection of a diamond. Briusov recognized that "all of [Solov'ev's] philosophy, in essence, is merely a rationalistic attempt to justify the Christian belief that every personality has had bestowed upon it the fullness of being, that our existence does not end with death."<sup>416</sup> Solov'ev's assertion that the human personality or consciousness can overcome the limitations of the phenomenal realm interested Briusov, who, at the time, identified as a spiritualist and powerful medium. Briusov noted that, at least among his peers, the "mysticism with a naturalistic face" (Gellner) embodied in Solov'ev's theories had become a fixed idea in the Symbolist circle's lively discourse about the nature and role of art and artist.

Briusov was well acquainted with Solov'ev's theories about life, art, artist, religion, and science. In an essay about the poet and philosopher, Briusov recognized that

Solov'ev was confident that the walls of that dungeon, in which the human being is imprisoned [the prison house of matter], are not insuperable, that the chains, imposed

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<sup>414</sup> Vladimir Soloviev, "Beauty in Nature," in *The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics*, ed. and trans. Vladimir Wozniuk (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 37.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>416</sup> Valerii Briusov, "Vladimir Solov'ev. Smysl ego poezii." *Russkii arkhiv* 8 (1900). [http://dugward.ru/library/brusov/brusov\\_vladimir\\_solovyov.html](http://dugward.ru/library/brusov/brusov_vladimir_solovyov.html): "вся его философия, в сущности, есть только попытка рационалистически оправдать то христианское верование, что каждой личности дарована полнота бытия, что смертью не кончается наше существование."

upon him, are not fatal, that still here, in this life, he has the strength, albeit for only a few moments, to achieve freedom.<sup>417</sup>

Briusov added that he understood that, in Solov'ev's world view, "Love is the redemptive force in human beings; the Eternal Feminine [Wisdom-Sophia] is the force that redeems the world."<sup>418</sup>

In an essay written a year earlier, Briusov articulated, in his own way, though clearly under the sway of Solov'ev's ideas, how he had arrived at his own reconciliation between the language of religion and the language of science.

In our soul we discern that which we have not noticed before: here are phenomena such as the disintegration of the soul, second sight, hypnotic suggestions; here are the resurrected secret doctrines of the Middle Ages (magic) and attempts at intercourse with invisible beings (spiritism). Consciousness, evidently, is preparing to celebrate yet another victory. At that moment, a new art and a new science, more perfectly achieving their goals, will arise. Our science and art are temporary, they are mortal in comparison to the spirit. They will pass away, become obsolete, become unnecessary. Our science and art are beautiful and worthy of worship, but they are not superior to what the spirit is capable of even in consciousness.<sup>419</sup>

Early in his career as a poet, Briusov concluded that the "myth of narrativity" embodied in Symbolist life creation offered him an opportunity to achieve immortality. By composing "the myth of Valerii Briusov," the young spiritualist believed that a piece of his personality could live

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid.: "У Вл. Соловьева была уверенность, что стены той темницы, в которой заключен человек, не преодолимы, что цепи, наложенные на него, neroковые, что еще здесь, в этой жизни, в силах он, хотя бы на отдельные мгновенья, получать свободу."

<sup>418</sup> Ibid.: "Любовь – сила спасающая в человеке; Вечная Женственность – сила, спасающая мир."

<sup>419</sup> Valerii Briusov, *O iskusstve*. Moscow, 1899. [http://dugward.ru/library/brusov/brusov\\_o\\_iskusstve.html](http://dugward.ru/library/brusov/brusov_o_iskusstve.html): "В душе своей мы усматриваем, чего не замечали прежде: вот явления распада души, двойного зрения, внушения; вот воскрешающие сокровенные учения средневековья (магия) и попытки сношений с невидимыми (спиритизм). Сознание, видимо, готовится торжествовать еще одну победу. Тогда возникнут новое искусство и новая наука, более совершенно достигающие своих целей. Наши наука и искусство временны, сравнительно с духом смертны. Они прейдут, отживут, станут ненужными. Наши наука и искусство прекрасны и достойны поклонения, но они не высшее, что доступно духу даже в сознании."

forever. The medieval magic that the young Briusov engaged in this assertion was the occult science of alchemy.

Briusov embraced alchemy's analogy between the phenomenal and noumenal, between micro- and macrocosm; moreover, alchemy was sufficiently "rational" and its vocabulary sufficiently "scientific" to appeal to him. His world became his alchemical laboratory and his relationships became his experiments.

*Fin-de-siècle* spiritualism blended with the occult notion of alchemical transformation. This alchemical and spiritualist counter-narrative to degeneration theory informed Briusov's own attempt at reconciling religion and science. During the early years of his artistic career, Briusov upheld spiritualism as a convincing and valid form of science that offered an explanatory model for the relationship between the natural and supra-natural. (Both alchemy and spiritualism also sustained Briusov's considerable *amour-propre*.)

Julia Mannherz states that the occult permitted self-fashioning:

Occult exercises were modern because of the centrality they awarded to the self as their point of reference. It was not external constraints, but internal development that motivated occult resolutions and choices. This self-referential nature led to a constant reassessment and development of the self within occult practice.<sup>420</sup>

The will and personality of the writer and artist were equally as persuasive in this new self-fashioning as were the psychiatric theories of the day that, in many ways, became reliant on, if not obsessed with them.

The values, assertions, and world views that fueled spiritualism, religion, and psychiatry intersected in the practice of hypnosis, which, Mannherz notes, was a practice many people

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<sup>420</sup> Julia Mannherz, *Modern Occultism in Late Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, US: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013), 190.

associated with faith healing and questions about the semantics of “will.”<sup>421</sup> New ideas, theories, images, and diagnoses about the nature of and relationships among the individual, the collective, willpower, the divine, immortality, and the miraculous appeared not only in medical journals, but invaded the daily lives of people from all walks of life in newspapers, popular literature, literary salons, mass entertainments, and gossip. Ideas about the efficacy and nature of language and storytelling were in many ways at the heart of this discourse. Mannherz cites Carl Jung, who “argued that the process of passing on and thereby modifying narratives can be seen as shared psychological analysis that reveals veiled meaning.”<sup>422</sup> Things that had hitherto been considered absurd were revalued; hauntings, ghost sightings, dreams, and séances were now worthy not only of commentary, but of self-reflection and even scientific study.<sup>423</sup> An excellent example of the seriousness with which leading men and women of science approached the research and study of spiritualist phenomena is the life and work of French neurologist Charles Richet (1850–1935).

Artists and philosophers were not the only ones affected by the ideas of alchemy, spiritualism, and various occult doctrines. Modern scientific and medical theories about the human mind and body shared similar interests. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century Russian psychiatrist, spiritualist, Mason, author, and Briusov’s friend, Dr. Nikolai Bazhenov (1857–1923), in an article titled “Diseased Writers and Pathological Art” (1903), asserted that the individual human psyche is a microcosm of the universal macrocosm and, in the formation of one’s identity, it is subject to and a reflection of the same evolutionary processes.<sup>424</sup> In doing so, Bazhenov expressed the new *fin-de-siècle* psychopathology Mircea Eliade would later call “the millenarian dream of the alchemist” that so clearly defined the period’s master narrative of

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<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 69-70, 88.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 134-139.

<sup>424</sup> N. N. Bazhenov, “Bol’nye pisateli i patologicheskoe tvorchestvo.”  
<http://pathographia.narod.ru/bajenov/bolpisat.html>

transformation and the aspirations of Symbolist life creation.<sup>425</sup> “Intellectual life, in its entirety,” wrote Bazhenov,

constitutes a complex mechanism in constant operation, assimilating certain impressions, discarding others, breaking them into their component parts and reconnecting them into new groups, and, finally, combining these groups into systems of a higher order, the totality of which, in the end, makes up the psychological personality. In short, our psychic life is a microcosm, which experiences all that occurs in the whole universe: the constant struggle for existence, the destruction of agents of the weak and unnecessary, the survival of the strong and useful, in a word, the same great law of universal evolution dominates [the microcosm of our psychic life].<sup>426</sup>

Bazhenov was concerned that perhaps it was beyond the capacity of the individual personality to process this constant and eternal principle of change. If so, Bazhenov questioned whether the formation of a person’s identity might be inhibited, especially in degenerate and diseased minds that were already at a disadvantage.

But if this is so, if there is constant movement, eternal struggle, ongoing organization, then it is obvious that the psychic content of the personality may not be identical to itself, and perhaps, it could be said, cannot *crystallize*.<sup>427</sup> [italics mine]

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<sup>425</sup> Mircea Eliade, “Alchemy: An Overview,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Ed.*, ed. Lindsay Jones, v. 1 (Detroit: Thompson Gale, 1987, 2005), 236.

<sup>426</sup> Bazhenov, “Bol’nye pisateli i patologicheskoe tvorchestvo”: “умственная жизнь, в своем целом, представляет собою сложный и находящийся в постоянной деятельности механизм, ассимилирующий одни впечатления, отбрасывающий другие, раздробляющий их на составные части и снова связующий их в новые группы и, наконец, сочетающий эти группы в системы высшего порядка, совокупность которых, в конце концов, и составляет психическую личность. Коротко сказать, наша душевная жизнь есть микрокосм, в котором происходит то же самое, что и во всем мироздании: постоянная борьба за существование, уничтожение факторов слабых и ненужных, выживание сильных и пригодных, словом, властвует тот же великий закон мировой эволюции.”

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.: “Но если так, если — постоянное движение, вечная борьба, продолжающаяся организация, то, очевидно, что и психическое содержание личности не может быть само себе тождественно, не может быть, так сказать, кристаллизованным.”

Bazhenov applied this “alchemical” conclusion to writers who displayed the signs and symptoms of degeneracy. Bazhenov specified three ways in which degenerate authors exposed their mental illnesses: first, for some authors, the very act of artistically retelling their experiences could instigate psychiatric derangement; second, authors could expose their degeneracy by leaving an imprint of their unique psychopathic features throughout their works; and third, when writers and artists of true genius, Dostoevskii and Guy de Maupassant, for example, analyzed their own mental condition through the lens of tremendous talent, they often did so at the cost of great psychic suffering. Through the vehicle of his *Fiery Angel* and the psychological and physical suffering he depicted, Briusov sought to demonstrate that the cost of his talent and the madness he endured with Petrovskiaia belonged to the third category of “degeneracy.”

Bazhenov noted the popularity of Max Nordau’s ideas in Russia, though he estimated that, realistically speaking, the list of seriously mentally ill, yet accomplished writers was short. “But, maybe,” he admitted, “of even greater interest would be an analysis of how the known features of the mind and character of the author and, in this instance, his psychopathic peculiarities, are reflected in his works.”<sup>428</sup> As Nordau and Bazhenov’s theories demonstrate, at the intersection of art, philosophy, and medicine, the lives and works of Decadent and Symbolist writers, poets, musicians, and artists have provided and continue to provide readers and scholars with ample material to investigate, if not evaluate, the crisis of culture and consciousness that defined the *fin de siècle*. *Fiery Angel* is no exception.

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid.: “Но, быть может, еще больший интерес представляет анализ того, каким образом известные свойства ума и характера автора, в данном случае, его психопатические особенности, отражаются на его произведениях.”

## The Microcosm

“She wasn’t pretty. She had strange, somewhat mad eyes. She was a somnambulist.”<sup>429</sup>

This is the manner in which Briusov, in a vignette under the simple title “Nina,” described his first “muse” in his fictionalized memoir *From My Life: My Youth (Iz moei zhizni: Moia iunost’*, 1927). Though Briusov gave this “degenerate” woman the made up name “Nina Karina,” the reader recognizes an integration of two real-life women: Elena Kraskova, Briusov’s deceased fiancée, and Nina Petrovskaia, the real-life inspiration for Renata in *Fiery Angel*. In the same fictional vignette, Briusov confessed that these apparent signs and symptoms of madness did not deter him from pursuing a tryst with “Nina”:

It was *all the same* to me with whom I was in love—I simply needed someone’s image, so that I could write verses to it and dream of it—so I immediately, in that very half-hour, changed my love and fell in love with Nina.<sup>430</sup>

Briusov admitted that for him the concept of “falling in love” facilitated his indifferent search for a muse in his development as an artist because that is what great artists do. In his concluding statement of what “Nina Karina” meant to him, Briusov transformed her into a faceless medium and psychopomp:

But what did Nina see in me? This is a question I have not managed to clear up before now. Maybe (oh, what an arrogant hope!), she divined in my soul some better thing that I

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<sup>429</sup> Valerii Briusov, *Iz moei zhizni: Avtobiograficheskaia i memuarnaia proza/Coct., podgot teksta, poslesl, i comment V. E. Molodiakova* (Moscow: TERRA, 1994), 158: “Она не была красива. У нее были странные, несколько безумные глаза. Она была лунатик.” *From My Youth* was first published in 1927 after Briusov’s death in 1924.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, 159: “мне было *все равно* в кого не быть влюбленным, – мне просто нужен был чей-нибудь образ, чтобы писать к нему стих и мечтать о нем, – то я тотчас же, в те же полчаса, переменил свою любовь и стал влюбленным в Нину.”

myself was not aware of. Once she said to me: “You know, you are much better than you think you are.” Perhaps she was bored with the typical faces of every suitor that she had seen in her time, and she came to like the wild and ridiculous boy who shouted at the crossroads that he is a genius.<sup>431</sup>

Briusov revealed that from the very beginning and throughout his subsequent career he pursued women as a necessary ingredient in his alchemical transformation as a poet. He confessed, quite unabashedly, that he preferred her to be the “degenerate” and “mad” complement to his rational and logical self. He understood that his construction of “Nina” was a symbol and projection of his own anima (even if not quite in Jung’s terms).

In a series of letters in the summer of 1906, written to the actual Nina Petrovskaia, Briusov was more generous to his real-life psychopomp and anima projection. He acknowledged all that she had done for him. In a very long letter to Petrovskaia on 13-14 June 1906, Briusov outlined what he perceived to be the sum total of his experience as an aspiring poet up until that moment. Rather uncharacteristically, in this letter Briusov removed his public mask of control and calm reserve to lay bare his hopes, dreams, disappointments, and encroaching boredom with Symbolism. In this letter, Briusov made similar statements to those he would repeat years later in his fictional memoir, however unkind and altered in the “Nina Karina” vignette cited above: Nina Petrovskaia had changed his life and revived his enthusiasm for art. She had helped him transform his *life* into *art*. Briusov wrote:

And suddenly came—You, like something new, unexpected, unrealizable, about which I had dreamed for a long time and that had suddenly materialized. Love came, about which

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid.: “Но что видела во мне Нина? Этот вопрос я не успел разъяснить до сих пор. Может быть (о, гордая надежда!), она прозревала в моей душе то лучшее, чего я сам не создавал в ней. Однажды она сказала мне: “Знаешь ли, ты гораздо лучше, чем это думаешь сам.” Ей, может быть, наскучили обычные лица всяких кавалеров, виденных ею на своем веку, и ей понравился дикий и смешной мальчик, кричавший на перекрестках что он гений.”

I had only written in poems, but which I had never known; a woman came, [the kind] about whom I had only read in books.<sup>432</sup>

As the letter to Petrovskaia of 13-14 June continued, Briusov recalled how this love had affected both of them in 1904 and 1905. He continued, revealing the psychological transformation Petrovskaia brought about within him:

You have often told me that that year was a resurrection for You; but it was also a resurrection for me. My eyes were suddenly opened, were made a hundred times more perceptive; in my hands I felt a new strength. I suddenly saw for the first time treasures that my former glance had not discerned; I received the ability to break gold from concealing stones, which earlier I had not dared to attempt.<sup>433</sup>

The inspiration and motivation was short-lived, however. Briusov recounted that he fell into an even deeper depression than before—a depression he believed weakened his ability to create.

Weighed down by his stressful public image, which Briusov himself had crafted, as a demonic counterpoint to the “angelic” Belyi, his investment in the manic-depressive turmoil of Petrovskaia’s passion, his demanding work as an editor, and the responsibility of being a composed and reliable husband at home (and all this against the backdrop of the Russian Revolution of 1905-1906), overwhelmed and disillusioned Briusov. “I can no longer live by these obsolete beliefs, these ideals, over which I have already stepped,” Briusov asserted; he confessed to Petrovskaia in the same letter that the constant pressure to transform life into art had become unbearable:

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<sup>432</sup> *Perepiska*, 200: “И вдруг пришла—Ты, как что-то новое, неожиданное, несбыточное, о чем мечталось давно и что вдруг осуществилось. Пришла любовь, о которой я только писал в стихах, но которой не знал никогда; пришла женщина, о которых я только читал в книгах.”

<sup>433</sup> *Perepiska*, 200-201: “Ты мне часто говорила, что тот год был воскресением для Тебя; но он был и для меня воскресением. У меня вдруг открылись глаза, сделались в сто раз более зоркими; в руках я почувствовал новую силу. Я вдруг увидел вокруг вновь сокровища, которых мой прежний взор не различал; получил возможность разбивать такие таящие золото камни, на которые прежде не смел поднять руки.”

I can no longer live with outlived beliefs, with those ideals that I have moved past. But neither can I live with “decadence” and “Nietzscheanism,” which—I firmly believe—are now also alien to you, although you say otherwise (also from the desire to be contradictory? yes?); in poetry I cannot live with the “new art,” the very name of which has become unbearable. It’s good enough for Merezhkovskii, who flits from Pushkinism to decadence, from decadence to paganism, from paganism to Christianity, from Christianity to the religion of the Trinity or the Holy Spirit. You once told me that in my soul I am a monk, a friar, that in the Middle Ages I would have entered a monastery. Yes! Yes! I must believe in that which I serve, absolutely, to the end, and I should serve something.<sup>434</sup>

These words expose Briusov’s boredom both with Symbolism and the psychological games he and Petrovskaiia played with one another. Briusov accepted the characterization of himself as a medieval monk. The longing he expressed to hide himself away in a monastery, however, suggests he sought solace and quiet study rather than a religious mission. What he sought was an escape from life’s pressures. His complaints and his burdens are psychological in nature and essence.

Briusov admitted that at that moment in June 1906, when he wrote the letter, he was not divinely inspired. He had become more of a skeptic than not, but he insisted that he remained, nevertheless, a diligent and dedicated servant of art. Briusov found this self-observation debilitating, if not destructive. Once disillusionment with Solov’ev’s ideas about the transformative capacity of aesthetic creation set in, Briusov assumed feelings of guilt—guilt about his inability to stay focused on life creation as the dominant belief shaping and driving his life. Briusov invoked the biography and works of Edgar Allan Poe, whom he had long admired

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<sup>434</sup> *Perepiska*, 201: “Я не могу более жить изжитыми верованиями, теми идеалами, через которые я перешагнул. Но не могу более жить 'декадентством' и 'ницшеанством,' которые—верю, я верю—и Тебе уже чужды, хотя Ты и говоришь иное (тоже из желания противоречий? да?); в поэзии не могу жить 'новым искусством,' самое имя которого мне нестерпимо более. Хорошо Мережковскому, который перепархивает с пушкинианства на декадентство, с декадентства на язычество, с язычества на христианство, с христианства на религию Троицы или Духа Святого. Ты когда-то сказала, что я по душе—инок, монах, в Средние Века я пошел бы в монастырь. Да! да! Я должен верить в то, чему служу, совсем, до конца, и должен служить чему-то.”

and whose works he had translated, to find words and paradigms to convey his despair at the loss of his dream. “But before you I am always almost ashamed, almost in pain,” Briusov wrote in his letter to Petrovskaia. He continued:

To respond in the way that I respond to your love is disgraceful, criminal, unworthy. And being aware of this (precisely because I had become aware of it), I more stridently emphasized my strictness, severity, coldness. But this was a mask, a strange (not for you) pretense, an aspersion on my own self. I love you, I want to love You, but neither I nor my soul have strength for this right now, her [my soul’s] wings fall, like Edgar [Poe’s] Psyche, and sorrily drag in the dust. And I look upon myself with despair and horror.<sup>435</sup>

Despite the mask he wore and the pretense he assumed, Briusov saw aspects of his own personality in Petrovskaia, which makes it all the more intriguing that he poeticized her in his memoirs and novel *Fiery Angel* as a “somnambulist,” “witch,” and “hysteric.”

The specific poem by Poe that Briusov referenced in the important letter of 13-14 June 1906 is “Ulalume” (1847). That Briusov pointed to Poe’s poem served to emphasize aesthetically the disillusionment and psychological strain he was under in 1906, and the less-than-subtle fact that he longed for a new muse, despite the pull he felt toward Petrovskaia, a pull he had begun to despise.

“Ulalume” is one of Poe’s many poems about lost love, but it was published in 1847, the same year his wife Virginia Clemm died. The narrator attempts a reunion with his lost love, but such an effort is futile because she is dead, gone forever. His journey only leads him to her tomb. The poem represents dual yearnings. In “Ulalume,” Psyche, the “soul,” represents the narrator’s

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<sup>435</sup> *Perepiska*, 201-202: “Но перед Тобой мне всегда почти стыдно, почти больно. Отвечать так, как я отвечаю на Твою любовь,—позорно, преступно, недостойно. И, сознавая это (именно потому, что сознавал), я иногда еще резче подчеркивал свою строгость, суровость, холодность. Но это было маской, странным (не для Тебя) притворством, клеветой на самого себя. Я люблю Тебя, я хочу любить Тебя, но у меня, у души моей, нет сил для этого сейчас, ее крылья падают, как у Психеи Эдгара, и жалко влачатся в пыли. И я сам на себя смотрю с отчаяньем и ужасом.”

spiritual side, unwilling to admit that the ideal of beauty is gone forever. Astarte the moon goddess represents sexuality and the physical realm. But as Psyche—the narrator’s soul—warns him, that if he follows Astarte, the goddess of sexuality, it will only lead him into further despair. The narrator is limited in his search because he is human. The final message is that despite the strength and endurance of the human will, beauty and truth are perhaps unattainable ideals, but striving for them is not pointless.

Like many of Poe’s poems, “Ulalume” is told by an unreliable narrator. As a result, Eric Carlson noted, “the coherence of the narrative is psychological rather than logical.”<sup>436</sup> Many of Poe’s poems and stories are not objective descriptions of events; rather, they express moments of intense emotion and self-reflection. Briusov similarly, in the composition of his own myth about himself, generated and privileged a psychological, and often times “unreliable,” narrative “alchemy” in the *Gesamtwerk* of his life and art over a “logical” one. This was most explicit in the seeming contradiction between his public performance as a black mage and ruthless lover, on one hand, and the reliable husband, who lived a quiet and routine life of study and editorial work at home, on the other—a contradiction even Petrovskaia found hard to believe.

Commentators on *Fiery Angel* have repeatedly observed Briusov’s use of a rational narrator, Ruprecht, to describe what was, at some points, unbridled passion. This psychological tension in his real-life between reason and the irrational nature of mysticism and eroticism fueled, for a fleeting moment in the summer of 1905, a creative and sublime “madness” for Briusov, which he identified as an important stage in his artistic evolution as his creative and psychological selves came together. Branimir Reiger states that “literature and psychology are

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<sup>436</sup> Eric W. Carlson, “Symbol and Sense in Poe’s ‘Ulalume.’” *American Literature* 35, no. 1 (March 1963): 26. A similar analysis could be applied to another one of Poe’s works Briusov referenced at least twice (in a letter to Nina Petrovskaia and his diary entry from April 1907, cited above), “A Descent into the Maelstrom” (1841). The shipwrecked survivor’s scientific explanation for his survival is faulty, but the emotional impact of his message that “truth lies at the bottom of a well” (Democritus) remains effective.

complementary disciplines, for each contributes to an understanding of personality.”<sup>437</sup> He adds that “writers who deal with madness as a general theme reflect a deep awareness of human personality.”<sup>438</sup>

The fact that Briusov more than once directed Petrovskaja to read, study, and model herself after the female characters in Poe’s stories and poems dedicated to the American author’s dead wife reveals the extent to which Briusov mined Poe’s life and art for paradigms in the construction and composition of his own automyth, muse, and “creative madness.” Briusov emulated Poe, at least in his relationship with Petrovskaja and his construction of her as his psychopomp.

In this letter to Petrovskaja in June 1906, Briusov used Poe’s poem to construct a metaphor for his life, at least as he saw it at that moment. Briusov had lost *his* “Ulalume” with the death of Elena Kraskova. She was gone from him forever. A decade later when Petrovskaja entered his life, Briusov recognized that he had been drawn to her as sexually charged and evocative “Nina Astarte”—a tempting new beginning—but he quickly realized that she was not the ideal muse he sought. Though Briusov attempted a psychological experiment in “Love” with Petrovskaja, she was not a successful replacement for his idealized and forever-lost “Ulalume.” Thus, Briusov’s self-comparison to Poe’s Psyche in his letter served as a confession to Petrovskaja that he now understood that the answer to his problems did not lie outside of himself. He admitted that all he was left with was his own tragic “Briusov-Psyche.” Poe is celebrated for his refined and subtle understanding of psychology, madness, and personality. Briusov sought the same for himself.

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<sup>437</sup> Branimir Rieger, “Introduction,” in *Dionysus in Literature: Essays on Literary Madness*, ed. Branimir M. Rieger (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994), 13.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Briusov understood that as a Symbolist poet he required Dionysian “madness” to create true aesthetic and transformative works, but he found the quest for it more than tiring. Within Petrovskaja’s love and passion for him, he did not find inspired madness; rather, he found a medical condition.

### **The Macrocosm**

Russian Symbolists embraced the tenor of their age, an apocalyptic tenor that was reflected in both biological theories of degeneration and mania, especially among artists, and sociological theories about cultural fatigue and social and political crisis. At the turn of the twentieth century the theme of the demonic often linked these ideas about science, art, and culture. Demonic figures proliferated in the graphic arts and literature. The journal *The Golden Fleece* (*Zolotoe runo*) opened a competition in May 1906 for the best entry on the theme “The Devil” in the graphic or literary arts; they were flooded with submissions. Dystopian science fiction (including Briusov’s own *Republic of the Southern Cross* (*Respublika iuzhnogo kresta*, 1907) became popular. Political cartoons in ephemeral satiric journals included not only demons, both Satanic and petty, but also vampires and other ogres.

A similar tendency was visible in the response of numerous Russians to the political events that characterized the first years of the new century. Following the failed Revolution of 1905, an eclectic group of Russian intellectuals compiled a response in the form of a collection of essays titled, *Landmarks* (*Vekhi*, 1909). In it they addressed the crisis of the time in the form of cultural and political criticism. Though these essayists in more than one instance contradicted one another, they all addressed the spiritual and political ill health of the Russian intelligentsia.

In line with contemporaries such as Nordau and Lombroso, they diagnosed Russian intellectuals and revolutionaries as degenerate and analogized their political beliefs, fervor, and activities as expressions of religious mania akin to that which characterized the Middle Ages.

Sergei Bulgakov compared the factions between left and right in Russia at the turn of the twentieth century to that of the division between Protestants and Catholics during the religious wars of the Middle Ages.<sup>439</sup> He also stated that the current *intelligent* no doubt considers himself a Martin Luther, “the prophetic bearer of a new religious consciousness, called not only to renew church life but to create new forms of it, almost a new religion.”<sup>440</sup> Bulgakov also feared degeneracy:

The change in mood over the last few years, from heroic revolutionism to nihilism to pornography, is shocking to many, as is the epidemic of suicides, which they mistakenly try to explain solely on the grounds of political reaction and the grievous impressions of Russian life.<sup>441</sup>

Bulgakov then added, “but even this hysterical succession of moods is natural for the intelligentsia,” only to conclude, “I fear that degenerate traits are bound to appear with growing rapidity.”<sup>442</sup>

Another contributor to *Landmarks*, Petr Struve, wrote that the intelligentsia has “credulity without faith, struggle without creation, fanaticism without enthusiasm, intolerance without

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<sup>439</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, “Heroism and Asceticism: Reflections on the Religious Nature of the Russian Intelligentsia,” in *Vekhi: Landmarks*, trans. and eds. Marshall S. Shatz and Judith E. Zimmerman (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 47.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

reverence—in a word, here were all the external features of religiosity without its content.”<sup>443</sup> In his essay Mikhail Gershenzon discussed Russia’s ill health, stating that

liberation is only the removal of fetters, nothing more; but removing the chains from a person consumed by an internal malady is not enough to restore him to health. For us, freedom would only have established conditions more conducive to recovery.”<sup>444</sup>

He also wrote “nine-tenths of our *intelligenty* are neurasthenic. Scarcely any of them are healthy—they are all jaundiced, morose, anxious figures deformed by some secret dissatisfaction. Everyone is dissatisfied, some embittered and others aggrieved.”<sup>445</sup>

Though Briusov’s novel *Fiery Angel* preceded the publication of *Landmarks* by two years, both works, one fiction and the other non-fiction, engaged and applied the same daemonic diagnostic language to their historical moment. Perhaps Symbolists did not get it all wrong. The microcosm and macrocosm more often than not do mirror one another.

Briusov’s comparison between the illness categories of medieval demonomania and *fin-de-siècle* hysteria reveal his understanding of psychology and personality. The illness category called hysteria has a long and complicated history, characterized by numerous transformations and representations over time. As such, hysteria is a condition that, despite its enduring existence, claims no fixed content nor a stable set of causes and effects. Hysteria has been attributed to physical causes—a wandering womb or disorder of the womb—and inorganic causes, such as neuroses, a personality type, or conversion syndrome. Helen King argues that “hysteria” is a disease tradition that doctors have, over the centuries, read *into* texts, each time going back to the

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<sup>443</sup> Petr Struve, “The Intelligentsia and Revolution,” in *Vekhi*, 124.

<sup>444</sup> Mikhail Gershenzon, “Creative Self-consciousness,” in *Vekhi*, 65.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

language of the preceding medical generation to once again translate the diagnosis into the language of their own more “progressive” age.<sup>446</sup>

King argues that we now know that there is no “genuine corpus” of texts written down by Hippocrates alone, as once assumed. Over the course of the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, the medical understanding of hysteria shifted yet again, as professionals translated Arabic and Greek texts into Latin and, by the sixteenth century, began to compare authoritative texts against each other and against reality. By the nineteenth century, hysteria had been shaped in an almost exclusively female disease. As a result, King argues, hysteria is more a medical tradition than it is a fixed disease category that spans several centuries. As Mary Wack insists, hysteria emerges from “the rustle of parchments in dialogue.”<sup>447</sup>

When King’s observations are taken into consideration relative to Briusov’s novel, it can be said that Briusov offered a “lesson” to his peers through his comparison between demonomania and *fin-de-siècle* hysteria. In *Fiery Angel*, Briusov provided a philosophical diagnosis of his own based on what he understood to be the elusive dangers that arise from reading too much into texts and the seeming “truths” of idealized past generations and philosophers. Briusov’s alter ego Ruprecht asserts that this was one of the two lessons learned from his time with Renata:

Together with the fiery Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, author of the brilliant “Oration on the Dignity of Man,” I am ready to pour out my curses upon the “schools where men busy themselves in seeking new words.”<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>446</sup> Helen King, “Once Upon a Text: Hysteria from Hippocrates,” in *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, eds. Sander L. Gilman et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 64.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid. King cites M. F. Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and Its Commentaries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 292 n. 6.

<sup>448</sup> Valerii Briusov, *Ognennyi angel*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, v. 4 (Moscow: Khud. lit., 1974), 17: “Вместе с пламенным Джованни Пико Мирандолою, автором блистательной ‘Речи о достоинстве человека,’ готов я послать проклятие ‘школам, где люди занимаются приискиванием новых слов.’” Mirandola’s “Oration on the

Through the voice of his alter ego, Ruprecht, Briusov issued this less-than-subtle reprimand of his fellow Symbolists for trusting too much in books and medieval mages, such as Agrippa and Faust. When Ruprecht the eager apprentice finally gets the opportunity to see and converse with his idolized Agrippa, Ruprecht determines that he, the rationalist, is wiser than the aged scholar who still believes in “magic.” After spending time with Dr. Faust and his friend Mephistopheles, Ruprecht looks down upon the doctor as a tragic figure, who cannot give up his unattainable goals and the ideal of beauty, “Helen.”

Ruprecht asserts a second, but closely related, lesson. He privileged firsthand experience and “research.” “I will briefly say,” states Ruprecht,

just as the quiet days spent reading books with my dear Friedrich had cultivated my thoughts, so had the troubled years of my wandering *tempered my will in the fire of experience* and gave me the most precious quality of man: faith in one’s self.<sup>449</sup> [italics mine]

Once again, in the terminology of an alchemist, Briusov’s alter ego describes “enlightened” values: the individual—one’s own identity, destiny, and will, for instance—and the emergence of the scientific method.

G. S. Rousseau, however, does point out at least one narratorial consistency in the reading and writing of hysteria as a disease category over time. He notes that “hysteria” is almost always constructed out of binary oppositions:

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Dignity of Man” (1486) is often called the “Manifesto of the Renaissance.” In it, a twenty-year-old Mirandola defended the study of the liberal arts and philosophy as sources of human knowledge and discovery. He used his “oration” to introduce his 900 theses, which combined Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, Artistotelianism, Kabbalah, and a system of physics. Mirandola also defended two forms of magic, one productive and the other destructive, but remained vague as to their defining characteristics.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid., 23: “Скажу кратко: как тихие дни, проведённые за книгами с милым Фридрихом, воспитали мою мысль, так тревожные годы странствий закалили на огне испытаний мою волю и дали мне самое драгоценное качество мужчины: веру в себя.”

Hysteria is a unique phenomenon in the entire repertoire of Western medicine because it exposes the traditional binary components of the medical model—mind/body, pathology/normalcy, health/sickness, doctor/patient—as no other condition ever has.<sup>450</sup>

Rousseau makes another point that hysteria's "radical subjectivity" is a "conjunction of language and the body."<sup>451</sup> He asserts that subjectivity has been the most consistent teleology of hysteria throughout history, certainly relative to the patient and the patient's treatment, but also relative to the historical moment. Ideas about witchcraft, for example, are key in hysteria's own "myth of narrativity." In the tenth and eleventh centuries Europe had few witches, by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries they had overtaken the continent, and by the time of the Renaissance the demonization of witchcraft played a significant role in developing a more "enlightened" view of the world.

In effect, when Briusov conflated two illnesses—demonomania and hysteria—to diagnose his historical moment, what he in fact achieved was a successful capture of the subjective and "maddening" polarities that defined both periods: individual and collective, scientific and religious/spiritual, cosmic and personal, traditional and forward-looking or even revolutionary. Demonomania and hysteria share signs and symptoms that are both physical and psychological in nature. Throughout their respective "rustle of parchment," despite the debate between body and mind that they both embody, they underscore the notion of "will." Briusov looked upon the demonomaniac and the hysteric similarly; both kinds of sufferers could choose "rational" or "irrational" responses and outcomes. Briusov seemed to be of the opinion that, in the image of a saint, the demonically-possessed person could choose to turn to God or turn away. The hysteric could chose to turn toward modern science, the psychiatrist, and the process of

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<sup>450</sup> G. S. Rousseau, "'A Strange Pathology,' Hysteria in the Early Modern World, 1500-1800," in *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, 92.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

hypnosis for a cure or could continue to rail against mind, body, and reason and surrender to the impulses of the unconscious.

At least this is what Briusov wanted to believe and did believe until he met Petrovskaia. She animated an emotional and irrational side to his personality, one that pulled him away from the carefully constructed masks and personae he had created for himself and took pleasure in controlling. In *Fiery Angel*, the reasonable Ruprecht recalls his own emotional, but temporary, breakdown and his confession to the young Hans (Johann Weyer's historical character) about the psychological stress he was under. At another point in the novel, Ruprecht recorded a moment among the sisters of the Convent of St. Ulf, in the church, when the Archbishop attempted to relieve, through blessing and confession, the suffering of Renata, whom they called Sister Maria. Frighteningly, all the women became seized with frenzy and convulsions. Predictably, Ruprecht's explanation for the convulsive fits hovered between *miracula* and *natura*, possession or a psychotic/neurological attack. Ruprecht documented how he stood there in the midst of the chaos and looked into Renata's defiant and proud face and heard her cry out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In her wail, Ruprecht identified the "death" of Renata's faith in a cure for her suffering, a normal future, and even her salvation. At that moment, the mass hysteria and the incredibly loud knockings all around sickened and overwhelmed Ruprecht and he ran from the church.

In the image of a doctor who is able to step back and weigh and consider signs and symptoms in the search for a diagnosis, Briusov's alter ego remained aloof and removed from the hysteria of the women in the church, despite their grotesque effect. As soon as the emotional intensity and volume became too great, Ruprecht removed himself. Renata's inquisition marks yet another moment when Ruprecht remained distant, a present but "outside" (and therefore

objective) observer. He documented and rationally analyzed her answers to Inquisitor Brother Thomas's many questions. Ruprecht recognized that Renata had nowhere to go and that, in surrendering herself to death, she had already given up. However, her ready and inaccurate assumption of guilt, regardless of the absurdity of Brother Thomas's inquiry, only worked to intensify the nature of her death. Instead of gaining control and attempting to save herself through reasoned self-defense, an exhausted and hopeless Renata sought her own destruction.

The real-life Briusov agreed that both demonomania and hysteria represented vocabularies of discomfort. He held onto the notion, however, that people have a choice in the matter as to how to respond and react to change, confusion, and turmoil. One could respond rationally or irrationally. Under the heading "The Revolution of 1905," Briusov wrote in his diary, in April 1907,

I won't say I wasn't affected by our revolution. Of course I was. But I couldn't stand the compulsory requirement to fall into ecstasies over it and be indignant with the government, which my associates, except for a very few, demanded of me. In general I can't bear predetermined judgments.<sup>452</sup>

Briusov then described how he was eyewitness to the Moscow uprising. He described how he and his friend Dr. Nikolai Bazhenov walked together, how they went to the Provincial Council and chatted with future members of the Cadet party. Briusov recalled how he and his peers stood and "watched from the window how they were sawing down telegraph poles and building barricades."<sup>453</sup> Unaffected (so Briusov claims), he and Bazhenov then made it back to his editorial office in the Hotel Metropol, where Briusov gave his friend a copy of *Stephanos*. In

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<sup>452</sup> Joan Delaney Grossman, *The Diary of Valery Bryusov (1893–1905)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 144.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

documenting his level-headedness, despite the wounded and killed he saw or the gunfire he remembered, the “self” Briusov projected remained rational and, in the midst of “hysteria,” focused on his art. In fact, he pointed to the famous psychiatrist, Bazhenov, as someone who could confirm it.

Briusov, however, was not wholly insensitive. If one were to compare the events in the novel leading up to Renata’s death sentence (to be burned at the stake) and the epileptic attack that actually took her life to the events of the Revolution Briusov witnessed, one could argue that inner problems were what killed both Renata and squashed the mystical aspirations of the Symbolists. Both, in a sense, carried the seeds of their own destruction; both were seized and possessed by deceptive fixed ideas that only led to physical and psychological suffering.

Briusov emphatically asserted that it was not religion, mysticism, or “Beauty and Love” that would “save” Russia; rather, *science* and *reason* would. This did not exclude Art. After all, Briusov understood art to be a craft one could pursue and perfect (as the Acmeists would later insist). There was no reason to sit and wait for divine inspiration. The human mind never fully crystallizes, Briusov reasoned, in agreement with Bazhenov, and neither do art forms.

### **Life Creation: Putting It All Together**

The myth of narrativity imbedded in the idea of life creation (a principle, method, and world view) provided Symbolists with a mythic authority and authenticity that allowed them to expand their personal experiences outward and beyond themselves into the macrocosm. After all, in the Symbolist theurgic and occult world view, what occurs in the microcosm directly affects the macrocosm (and vice versa). As intellectual products of their age, it can be assumed that this

myth of narrativity pervaded not only Briusov and Petrovskaia's experiment in life creation, not only other creative experiments within the Symbolist milieu, but, arguably, also the whole of Russia at the turn of the twentieth century. Actions of the individual and (newly defined) group identities in the microcosm of revolutionary Russia granted themselves significance and efficacy, mythic authority and authenticity, on a macrocosmic level. In other words, they upheld the widespread notion (and "faith") that the events in the Russia of their present day could and would transform their future lives and the world. There is something daemonic, mad, and heretically Promethean in such a belief. This new "mythology" rivaled the "myths of the gods."

Briusov sincerely believed that he had invented a movement: Russian Symbolism. When the movement's theurgic aspirations were revealed as no more than an aesthetic ruse, Briusov took ownership and assumed responsibility for its failure on a micro and macro level. Just as his alter ego Ruprecht foretold the coming of a new world view, Briusov considered himself ahead of his time: a medium who had a special gift to look forward or backward in time, who could cross the liminal threshold between the phenomenal and noumenal. At least this is what he wanted for himself. Regardless of what "Renata" and her death symbolizes—a failed love affair, a lost psychopomp, a literary movement, Russia, a romanticized past, the loss of Beauty as an ideal, a weakness of will—what matters is that Briusov's alter ego wants to save her, transform her, cure her.

Thanks to his encounter with literal "madness" in his relationship with Petrovskaia, his diagnosis of her demonomania/hysteria, and his poetization of it in *Fiery Angel*, Briusov's life had become art, art had become a novel, and the novel had become a medical case study that functioned on micro and macro levels. "Renata" had transformed into a metaphor for the eager expectations and anxieties of an exciting and intimidating age, historical moment, and the

exacerbations of the Symbolist milieu. A woman Briusov depicted as ill from the start, whose “degenerative” qualities had carried the seeds of her own destruction, her own mental and physical problems that would, in the end, destroy her. Thus, a “person” had become a symbol for the psychoses of the Silver Age. In her preface to Petrovskaia’s memoirs, Garetto ascribed this meaning to her: “a ‘queen’ to poets of all ages, a hysteric, a drug addict, an alcoholic, a clot of all the extremes of her time.”<sup>454</sup>

In the context of Russians’ discussion, diagnosis, prognosis, and suggested “treatments” of various medical, social, and political “pathologies” at the turn of the twentieth century, Briusov’s novel reveals the extent to which he perceived that the Symbolist notion of life creation was fueled by the cyclical and “maddening” aspects of the quest for higher “truths,” the deceptive “rustle of parchments.” The goal of life creation—the writing of one’s own myth—required self-reflection, interpretation, retelling, and restoration of a “new” personhood—all therapeutic steps in modern psychology today, or what Nelson values as a process of narrative repair for “damaged identities” and Hawkins upholds as the ideological myth of our time, the myth of narrativity.

Through this process of rewriting narratives about diseases and sicknesses, individual and social, such authors are granted the moral agency to diagnose not only the pathology of their personal suffering and grief and that of others, but also to diagnose the pathology of their age and historical moments in time. When read as an example of pathography, Briusov’s novel *Fierly Angel* reveals that “the myth of narrativity” is a cultural myth at work in the modern psychopathology.

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<sup>454</sup> Petrovskaia, Nina. “Zhizn’ i smert’ Niny Petrovskoi.” *Minuvshee: istoricheskii al'manakh* 8, ed. Elda Garetto (Paris: Atheneum, 1989), 7-8: “‘покорительница’ поэтов всех возрастов, истеричка, наркоманка, алкоголичка, сгусток всех крайностей своего времени.”

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