

The Great Escape: Principal Themes in Valerij Brjusov's Poetry

Danylo Struk, University of Toronto

At his death in 1924, after fifty-one years of a prolific creative life, Brjusov could have been assured that his wish to be remembered in the history of world literature by at least two lines¹ would certainly be realized. To insure the realization of this wish Brjusov left behind not only a novel, several short stories, critical essays, and manuals of poetics, but also and primarily, thirteen collections of verse. From 1894 to 1924 Brjusov published his verses regularly, collection after collection, every few years. *Juvenilia*, 1894, was followed by *Chefs d'oeuvre*, 1896, by *Me eum esse*, 1897, *Tertia Vigilia*, 1901, *Urbi et Orbi*, 1904, *Stephanos*, 1906, *Vse napevy*, 1909, *Zerkalo tenej*, 1912, *Sem' cvetov radugi*, 1915, *Devjataja kamena* (prepared as a collection but never published, probably because of the Revolution), *Poslednie mečty*, 1919, *V takie dni*, 1920, *Mig*, 1921, *Dali*, 1922, and, finally, *Mea* (Hurry), 1924.²

The first six collections of poetry would have been sufficient, however, to discuss the poetic themes in Brjusov's poetry. Most critics, moreover, agree with Močul'skij that, "Starting with *Chefs d'oeuvre* through *Me eum esse*, *Tertia Vigilia*, and *Urbi et Orbi* Brjusov's poetic creativity follows unwaveringly an ascending line. *Stephanos* is the apex, the measure of perfection accessible to the poet. After that collection the line of descent begins."³ The critics who do not agree with this view, primarily the Soviet critics, admit that after *Stephanos* there was a change in Brjusov's poetry, what D. Maksimov calls the "third stage."⁴ They base their opinions on Brjusov's declarations in a letter to N. I. Petrovskaja :

And the time has come when it is no longer possible to travel the road I have travelled. *Urbi et Orbi* already gave all that was in me. *Stephanos* has completed my poetry, has placed on it really a "wreath." To go on creating in the same spirit would mean to repeat oneself. . . . I must prepare all the forces of my soul in order to break the barriers behind which there will open to me some sort of new vistas. . . .⁵

Brjusov would wish us to believe that he did succeed in opening new vistas for himself. Unfortunately, he did not. True, he managed to try some innovations, the most notable of which is the attempt at creating scientific poetry

which, however, turned out to be nothing more than bad poetry with names of scientists and scientific terms. Even his poems praising the new Soviet order were not part of a progression, were not new. Brjusov had praised heroes before—now the heroes changed names from Napoleon to Lenin—the qualities Brjusov found in each were the same. There was no change in Brjusov's themes after his crowning "wreath"; everything he wrote was still part of the same cycle. As Ruprecht, the hero of Brjusov's novel, *The Fiery Angel*, never changed during the course of the novel, so Brjusov himself never ceased to be a Ruprecht in relation to his poetic themes during his whole life. To understand this "Ruprecht-psychology" one must first, however, understand Decadence. The prime motivation behind Brjusov's poetic themes lies in the understanding of him as a Decadent.

Brjusov's childhood upbringing and his *fin de siècle* development were perfect conditions for the formulations of a decadent outlook on life. Having learned to read before he was four, Brjusov had at his disposal his father's voluminous library. His parents did not believe in special literature for children and therefore as a child Brjusov read everything and anything that caught his interest.⁶ The only books which were not available to the child were fairy tales and religious books. His father, a free thinker, would not have the child contaminated by any of that *čertovščina* (p. 102). This type of fast intellectual growth produced by voluminous reading had a twofold effect on young Brjusov: he had no friends, no equals, and he turned to the world of books in his games. "Primarily," he later recalled, "I wanted to become a great inventor or a great traveller. I was seduced by the glory of Keplers, Fultons, Livingstons. While playing (I grew up without companions . . .) I always imagined myself either as an inventor of an air boat, or as an astronomer, who discovered a new planet, or as a seafarer who reached the North Pole." (p. 103.)

In these childhood fancies it did not matter much that he was all alone. His loneliness came to fore later, in school. The confrontation with his schoolmates was a bitter one:

I was 11 years old then. I was not used to dealing with contemporaries (having met them only during summers at the cottage) and in a crowd of friends I was completely lost. I knew a lot about which youngsters of my age had not even heard, but I did not know a thousand small things about which they were very well informed, and primarily I did not know how to fight or how to curse. . . . In the depth of my soul I hated them for not knowing anything about the canals on Mars, about the properties of electricity, about the formation of crystals. . . . Dreaming of becoming in the future a "great man," I became accustomed to looking at others somehow from above. (p. 104.)

The effect of such a confrontation at the age of eleven gave Brjusov, if anything, the necessary stimuli to continue his withdrawal into the realm of

fantasy and books. Thus, by early adolescence the primary notion of a Decadent, aestheticism, was firmly imbedded in Brjusov's psychological make-up. At the age of twelve he found another possible escape: into the world of passions. "I was only 12-13," he wrote, "when I discovered 'love for sale' and entered into the sphere of cafes and 'happy houses'" (p. 104). Here he, like everyone else, paid and found that he was not lonely, at least he could pretend not to be. On the outside, however, he realized that the world was not a place for him. Values and realities did not match. He was part of the general uneasiness that prevailed toward the end of the century. It is not surprising that when he discovered the French Symbolists he felt an affinity of souls. In the French authors he discovered a creed identical to his own. They emphasized the autonomy of art, the superiority of artifice over nature, hostility to the bourgeois world, and an endless quest for new sensations—qualities which Brjusov possessed from his earliest childhood.

Loneliness, which on the one hand led to extreme egotism and hatred of people who simply do not understand, led also on the other hand to an escape into the realms of books. Aestheticism led to belief in the superiority of artifice to nature and consequently to a nihilistic view of reality. By the same token, desire for new sensations led to an utter amoralism, no choice between good and evil, for both were valid as sources of sensations. The natural end of this was immoralism—for vice was always more fruitful in producing new sensations than virtue. Eroticism and perverse sexuality became realities of everyday life and subject matter for aesthetic creations. Aestheticism, amoralism, and immoralism became a matter of necessity, and the early acquaintance with "houses of pleasure" confirmed the possibility of new sensations in the sphere of eros. The total lack of religious upbringing facilitated the acceptance of art over nature, of vice over virtue, and of self over society, but did not help Brjusov in his aesthetic escape. At least one path—the path later taken by the "younger" Russian Symbolists—was closed for him. He was not a religious thinker or a metaphysical one, and the whole Symbolist concept of an outer reality lying behind the worldly one, behind the symbols, appealed to Brjusov only as a statement reaffirming the idea that aesthetic reality is superior to the worldly one and that there are correspondences, polarities, to prove this. In this respect Mirskij's formulation is perhaps the best: "His whole philosophy boils down to juxtapositions, the 'correspondances' beloved by Symbolists, to contrasts and 'polarities.'"⁷

Only with this view of Brjusov as a Decadent can one approach the examination of his poetic themes. Poetry for Brjusov provided the best means of escape from the reality of everyday lonely life. Georgette Donchin is correct in maintaining that "almost the entire range of subjects in symbolist [also decadent] poetry can be correlated to the one theme of

escapism. The importance attributed to art assumes a new significance if one considers, as the symbolists did, that art is the best means to forget life, for it allows the poet to live a passive way and frees him from the duty of active participation in life."⁸ Perhaps the last part of Donchin's statement can be amplified: that poetry frees the poet not only from the "duty of active participation in life" but also from the conscious realization that he is not capable of actively participating in life. Brjusov certainly was not, except as some sort of leader of men. Brjusov consciously set out to be a leader of the Russian Symbolists and remained one as long as he could.

Aesthetic escapism was, however, the primary motivation behind Brjusov's poetry. One can find many subjects in his poetry, but basically they are all related to the few central themes—all of which were avenues of escape from life and from self.

Three central themes unite all of Brjusov's poetry from beginning to end, and that is why, though he claimed a change and did indeed change his subject matter and verse structure, Brjusov in essence did not change. He could not lose his preoccupation with his central themes, for to do that he would have had to undergo a metamorphosis of his soul—a successful escape—and this he was unable to do.

The three primary themes can best be labeled *loneliness*, *love*, and *lore*. The remainder of this article will endeavor to show how these three threads bind all of Brjusov's poetry and how his various subjects fall under these three fundamental categories.

The first theme, the theme of loneliness (*odinočestvo*), is the most essential, for it is as central in Brjusov's poetry as it was in his life. It is actually from the theme of loneliness and because of the desire to escape from it that the other themes come into being. The loneliness theme in Brjusov's poetry, as in his life, has a twofold division. To deal with loneliness in life, Brjusov tried either to run away from people or to rule over them. In poetry, on the one hand he bemoaned his loneliness, and on the other he prided himself in it and expressed his full satisfaction with self.

Loneliness is bemoaned by Brjusov in a full range of feeling—from a humble adoration for a lonely star to the ravings of a madman. The poet feels affinity to a lonely star and prays to it: "Tebe, o Sirius, ne znajuščij ljudej, / Ja voznošu molen'ja / Sredi tolpy, i v xizine svoej, / i v mig poslednij upoen'ja!" ("Žrec," 84.)⁹ Yet this idealization of far removed loneliness soon passes, for the poet feels like a lone thief: "Robko, kak vor, vyxožu, odinok, / Putnik bezvremennyj, gost' ubegajuščij. . . / Čto mne do žizni čužoj i stradajuščej!" ("Belye klaviši," 92.) His life is but a lonely journey in which he wanders aimlessly in silence, alone: "Bredu v molčan'i odinokom" ("Proxlada utrennej vesny," 109). As if reflecting during his mute lonely wanderings, Brjusov devotes a whole poem to his loneliness in which all of its bitterness is portrayed. There is no escape from

the loneliness which imprisons one at the depth of one's soul. Not through love, for even in passion one is alone. The circle of loneliness is impenetrable:

Проходят дни, проходят сроки,
Свободы тщетно жаждем мы.
Мы беспощадно одиноки
На дне своей души-тюрьмы!

Присуждены мы к вечной келье,
И в наше тусклое окно
Чужое горе и веселье
Так дьявольски искажено.

Напрасно жизнь проходит рядом
За днями день, за годом год.
Мы лжем любовью, словом, взглядом,—
Вся сущность человека лжет!

Нет сил сказать, нет сил услышать,
Невластно ухо, мертв язык.
Лишь время знает, чем утешить
Безумно вопиющий крик.

Срывай последние одежды
И грудью всей на грудь прильни,—
Порыв бессилен! нет надежды!
И в самой страсти мы одни!

. . .

И путник, посредине луга,
Кругом бросает тщетный взор:
Мы вечно, вечно в центре круга,
И вечно замкнут кругозор!
(“Одиночество,” 206–207.)

The effect on one's soul after the realization that the circle of loneliness is an inescapable cell can be devastating. Madness is imminent. Brjusov gives a glimpse of this derangement in his poem, “The Madman”:

Чтоб меня не увидел никто,
На прогулках я прячусь, как трус,
Приподняв воротник у пальто
И на брови надвинул картуз.

Я встречаю нагие тела,
Посинелые в рыхлом снегу,
Я минуты убийств стерегу
И смеюсь беспощадно с угла.

Я спускаюсь к реке. Под мостом
Выбираю угрюмый сугроб.
И могилу копаю я в нем,
И ложусь в приготовленный гроб.

Загорается дом...и другой...
 Вот весь город пылает в огне...
 Но люблюсь на блеск дорогой
 Только я—в ледяной тишине.
 ("Сумасшедший," 88-89.)

The eerie picture of the "hero" lying in a grave and watching with glee the burning of the city reminds one of the Nero legend. Though the malady to which loneliness can drive a man is frightening, Brjusov confesses that he likes to be alone, to wander in loneliness, aimlessly: "Ljubljú odno: brodit' bez celi / Po šumnym ulicam, odin; / Ljubljú časy svjatyx bezdelij, / Časy razdumij i kartin." ("Ljubljú odno," 211.) He likes to be alone, for while alone and giving free reign to his thoughts he can create the world of his fantasy. From his youth he was a dreamer and now his aestheticism makes him assert that the artistic worlds of his thought are far superior to the real world around him: "Sozdal ja v tajnyx mečtax / Mir ideal'noj prirody,— / Čtó pered nim ètot prax: / Stepi, i skaly, i vody!" ("Četkie linii gor," 100.) He repeats the same idea more emphatically, declaring that soon the real world will perish and only the world of thought will remain:

Есть что-то позорное в мощи природы,
 Немая вражда к лучам красоты:
 Над миром скал проносятся годы,
 Но вечен только мир мечты.

Пускай же грозит океан неизменный,
 Пусть гордо спят ледяные хребты:
 Настанет день конца для вселенной,
 И вечен только мир мечты. (стр. 101.)

Later on he went one step further and postulated that perhaps all of life is nothing but a subject for vivid poems. But to realize this one had to love, accept, and cherish one's loneliness—one had to be a complete egotist. Brjusov makes this quite clear in his two poems addressed to the poet. In the first, he gives the poet three commandments: look to the future, love yourself, worship art. In the second, he amplifies the idea and emphasizes cold detachment and utter passivity:

Юноша бледный со взором горящим,
 Ныне даю я тебе три завета:
 Первый прими: не живи настоящим,
 Только грядущее—область поэта.

Помни второй: никому не сочувствуй,
 Сам же себя полюби беспрдельно.
 Третий храни: поклоняйся искусству,
 Только ему, безраздумно, бесцельно.
 ("Юному поэту," 96.)

Ты должен быть гордым, как знамя;
 Ты должен быть острым, как меч;
 Как Данту, подземное пламя
 Должно тебе щеки обжечь.

Всего будь холодный свидетель,
 На всё устремляя свой взор.
 Да будет твоя добродетель—
 Готовность взойти на костер.

Быть может, всё в жизни лишь средство
 Для ярко-певучих стихов,
 И ты с беспечального детства
 Ищи сочетания слов.

В минуты любовных объятий
 К бесстрастью себя приневожь,
 И в час беспощадных распятый
 Прославь иступленную боль.

В снах утра и бездне вечерней
 Лови, что шепнет тебе Рок,
 И помни: от века из терний
 Поэту заветный венок.

(“Поэту,” 287.)

The most important element in both poems is the emphasis on withdrawal, on maintaining oneself free from contamination by others and especially by life, on narcissistic egotism. In another poem Brjusov restates this more blatantly, claiming that there is no other behest than to believe in oneself, to see oneself as above oneself: “Ja ne znaju drugix objazatel'stv, / Krome dejstvennoj very v sebja. . . / Unosjas' v bezbrežnost', / Za soboj videt' sebja.” (“Objazatel'stva,” 110–111.) This liturgy to the “I” closes the cycle of the loneliness theme. From bemoaned loneliness Brjusov progressed toward a world of his own creation where his loneliness was no longer a bother but a means to create that world. He ended this theme with a paean to the lone and egotistical self.

Brjusov might have wished that his egotism would act as an antidote to his loneliness, that the world created by his thought would suffice for him to dwell in. But under the egotistic shell there still gnawed the worm of loneliness, and the poet was still surrounded by all his numerous enemies. In a rather morbid poem Brjusov admits all this, comparing himself to St. Sebastian (“Sebast'jan,” 303).

When he was still a young boy he found that loneliness could be forgotten in a “house of pleasure.” Perhaps one could forget if one were to submerge oneself in poetry of love—the second major theme in Brjusov's poetry. As a continuation of the “Great Escape,” Brjusov expands his second theme to encompass a multitude of subjects. He is perhaps best

known for this theme, in which are included all the poems dealing with eroticism, exoticism, and erotic perversity. Brjusov handles the theme in a wide range, from simple love lyrics à la Heine to macabre erotic perversity à la Baudelaire. The Heine influence Brjusov admits himself: "*Juvenilia* is the first book of my poetry. The poems are written under a strong influence of Heine and Verlaine. . . ." (p. 719.) The Baudelaire influence is also noted by critics, primarily Donchin, who claims: "Amoralism in Bryusov is usually connected with pronounced eroticism. The range of evils analysed by Baudelaire is equally narrow. . . . Bryusov's indebtedness to Baudelaire in this respect is apparent from his earliest poems."¹⁰

The second theme, love, can be roughly divided into four groups. The first may be termed idyllic and consists of poems in a standard love-lyric form. It is the smallest group in the love theme and is perhaps best exemplified by a little poem in *Juvenilia*, "My vstretilis' s neju slučajno" (71-72), where the last two lines ("Vot staraja skazka, kotoroj / Byt' junoj vseгда suždeno.") are a direct reference to Heine's poem, "Ein Jüngling liebt ein Mädchen"; the whole poem expresses conventional attitudes about love.¹¹

The second group of the love theme can be classified as exotic and macabre eroticism. Here the poet approaches love as a phenomenon concurrent with exotic lands and places, as in the following poem where love takes the poet to the hot noon of Java: "Moja ljubov'—paljaščij polden' Javy, / Kak son razlit smertel'nyj aromat, / Tam jaščery, zrački prikryv, ležat, / Zdes' po stvolam svivajutsja udavy." ("Predčuvstvie," 77.) In another instance, Java is replaced by exotic Egypt ("Vstreča," 299). The exotic scenery often leads the poet to think of very strong passions—so strong that they become macabre, as in the poem already quoted, in Java, where, after the exotic scene is presented, the poet exclaims, ". . . My budem naslaždat'sja,— / . . . Tela spletat', kak para žadnyx zmej!" Exotic scenery is not necessary, however, for Brjusov to think of macabre passion, for even without an exotic background he dreams of kissing the lips of a corpse: "Ja odnoju mečtoju volnuem: / . . . pripast' poceluem / K dorogim poblednevšim gubam" ("Èto matovym večerom maja," 106), a desire which is more fully expressed in the poem "V polnoč'" where the lovers (and the readers, for that matter) discover toward the end of the poem that they are in a grave: "'Il' my v mogile, vnov', kak prežde?' / —'Da, my v mogile, vnov', kak prežde.'" (p. 302.)

The macabre intermingling of love and corpses is not far removed from the third group of poems in the love theme. These may be classified under perverse and masochistic eroticism. A strong amount of perversity is present in many love poems. Torture linked with love plays a major role. In one poem, after describing a young girl about to be burned at the stake and first beaten by her tormentors, Brjusov ends the poem with an indirect comparison to love: "Vsja v krovi podnjata palačami, / 'Ja ljublju' ty

xotela skazat'" ("V prošlom," 84). In another poem the difference between passion and torture is completely indistinct, for the poet wonders: "Gde že my: na strastnom lože / Il' na smertnom kolese?" ("V zastenke," 255.)

Perversity can be seen in the shameless voyeurism indulged in by Brjusov's poetic hero. In one instance he watches shadows as a whole passionate scene is vividly described ("Teni," 77-78). In another, the voyeurism is more direct. Brjusov's hero (the lyrical "I") is now a slave of a beautiful princess, and in the long poem "Rab" he watches the princess make love while he is chained to her bed like a dog. Though he is punished for it, he does not repent, but only wishes that he might live through that night once again:

И в ту же ночь я был прикован
У ложа царского, как пес.
И весь дрожал я, очарован
Предчувствием безвестных грез.

. . .

И падали ее одежды
До ткани, бывшей на груди...
И в ужасе сомкнул я вежды...
Но голос мне шепнул: гляди!

. . .

И было всё на бред похоже!
Я был свидетель чар ночных,
Всего, что тайно кроет ложе,
Их содроганий, стонов их.

. . .

Вот сослан я в каменоломню,
Дроблю гранит, стирая кровь.
Но эту ночь я помню! помню!
О, если б пережить всё—вновь!
(“Раб,” 190.)

To perversity and its commingling of love and torture is related the masochistic element. In a mild expression of it, the poet thanks his beloved for the pain of her love ("Blagoslovenie," 301). The masochism is more pronounced in the following excerpt, as the poet waits in joyous expectation for the tortures ahead: "Opjat' bezžalostnye ruki / . . . Opjat' na sčast'e i na muki / Menja mgnoven'ja obrekli." ("Opjat' bezžalostnye ruki," 343.)

The ultimate end of masochistic love is to be loved to death. The fourth group of poems in the love theme deals precisely with death, the ultimate escape connected with love. In that same poem about the exotic land of Java the poet shows the final conclusion of the exotic macabre love described in the poem: "Den' proskol'znet. Glaza tvoi smežatsja. / To budet smert'.—I savanom lian / Ja obov'ju tvoj nepodvižnyj stan." ("Predčuvstvie," 77.) In approaching love one must be ready not only for torture but also for the acceptance of the chalice of death: "Ljubov', protivnik neo-

bornyj, / Ja uznaju tvoj kubok černyj / I meč, vznesennyj nadо mnoj” (“Kubok,” 253). There is no doubt in Brjusov’s mind that love has one ultimate conclusion, as expressed in this programmatic poem:

Любовь ведет нас к одному,
Но разными путями:
Проходишь ты сквозь скорбь и тьму,
Я ослеплен лучами.

. . .

Любовь приводит к одному,—
Вы, любящие, верьте!—
Сквозь скорбь и радость, свет и тьму
К блаженно-страшной смерти! (345-346.)

Donchin quotes Zinaida Gippius as saying that no one had more necrophil poems than Brjusov.¹² One need not, however, quote more than the few examples given above to realize that the second major theme of Brjusov’s poetry, love, with its four groups of idyllic, exotic and macabre, perverse and masochistic, and death poems, upon reaching death, exhausted itself. Death was the ultimate escape, but it was possible to experience it only aesthetically, on paper. The risk in trying it “for real” was too great. It is curious, however, why love by itself, without death, was not enough for Brjusov. Several critics have dealt with this problem, and their insight is quite correct. Xodasevič, for one, claims that Brjusov “. . . not loving and not respecting people, did not fall in love even once with any of those with whom he chanced to ‘share the bed.’ All the women of Brjusov’s poems are as identical as two drops of water: that is because he did not love any of them, did not distinguish them, did not know them. It is possible that he really loved only love. But his lovers he did not notice.”¹³

Another critic, Viktor Černov, also finds fault in Brjusov’s love poems for similar reasons as Xodasevič, but his condemnation boils down to outright accusations of egotism.¹⁴ The trouble, therefore, seems to lie in Brjusov’s own dictum: “Vsego bud’ xolodnyj svidetel’.” This coolness and aloofness could never permit him to fall in love. Yet it is precisely this aloofness that other critics praise in him. The best expression of this attitude is given by V. Setschkareff:

Brjusov’s “academic coolness,” for which he is often reproached, seems to characterize his prose as well as his poetry; but this “coolness” is a literary attitude enabling him to see life in every form from a distance. He will never appeal to readers who seek the exhibition of strong emotions, but the subtlety of his seeming coolness proves that these emotions are still present and only controlled by an artistic judgment to which the clearness of the outlines means more than the appeal to immediate feeling.¹⁵

Perhaps Setschkareff is correct. The sad fact, however, remains that without really feeling love Brjusov could not actually experience it, and therefore the second avenue of escape from the lonely self proved to be a failure.

The love theme did not work out, and Brjusov sought relief in the third major theme of his poetry, "lore."

Like the first two themes, this theme is also subdivided into smaller groups. There are three: ancient lore (history), modern lore (myth), and future lore (prophecy). The theme of lore is also very voluminous in examples, for Brjusov devoted whole cycles of poems to it. It is one such cycle in the first group of the lore theme, ancient lore, that is considered to be Brjusov's best poetry. It occurs in his crowning collection, *Stephanos*, under the title "Pravda večnaja kumirov" (The Everlasting Truth of Idols). "That beautiful cycle," writes Mirskij, "is the center and height of Brjusov's creativity—and one of the best decorations in our modern poetry."¹⁶ Poggioli adds to this the statement, "It was this group of poems, hammered or chiseled out of a hard and noble matter, that earned for Brjusov the label of 'poet of marble and bronze' which Belyj awarded him."¹⁷

In none of the available editions is this cycle given in complete form. Out of the available poems, probably the best illustration of how Brjusov handles ancient lore can be found in the poem "Antonij":

Ты на закатном небосклоне
Былых, торжественных времен,
Как исполин стоишь, Антоний,
Как яркий, незабвенный сон.

. . .

Победный лавр, и скиптр вселенной,
И ратей пролитую кровь
Ты бросил на весы, надменный,—
И перевесила любовь!

Когда вершились судьбы мира
Среди вспененных боем струй,—
Венец и пурпур триумвира
Ты променял на поцелуй.

. . .

Как нимб, Любовь, твое сиянье
Над всеми, кто погиб, любя!
Блажен, кто ведал посмеянье,
И стыд, и гибель—за тебя!

О, дай мне жребий тот же вынуть,
И в час, когда не кончен бой,
Как беглецу, корабль свой кинуть
Вслед за египетской кормой! (250-251.)

What Brjusov praises in Mark Anthony are traits of a Decadent—a hero who gave all for a kiss. In this, Brjusov was trying to identify himself with mythological or historical personages and, after finding an affinity with them, explain himself to himself—and thus escape. "The Everlasting Truth of Idols" is by far not alone in the poetry of Brjusov. There are other cycles

devoted to the ancient lore theme. In *Tertia Vigilia* there is the cycle "Ljubimcy vekov" (Favorites of the Ages) where Brjusov identifies with such personages as Psyche, Circe, Moses, Alexander the Great, Cleopatra, Mary Stuart, and Napoleon. In all these he seeks a kindred decadent spirit: in Circe her ability to be calm and cool during passion and to rule over the passions; in Moses his rejection by his people and his duty to them in contempt; in Alexander the Great his incessant drive from one faith to another; in Cleopatra her immortality in love which still rules the imaginations of poets. Napoleon the great colossus is praised, although in a typically Russian attitude not without scorn.

Reality was not something which appealed to the decadent mind of Brjusov, but he realized that even in reality there could be found a man-made artistic element which interested him. Thus came into being the second group in the lore theme—modern lore, which Brjusov termed "Sovremennost'."

There are various subjects in this group. The most important ones are patriotism, the Soviets, and the city. First notes of patriotism which soon turned to outright chauvinism and jingoism were sounded by Brjusov during the Russo-Japanese War, which coincided with his collection *Stephanos*. In the cycle "Sovremennost'" Brjusov declares that the poet is always on the side of the people "when a storm is brewing" ("Kinžal"). Patriotism rings in the following lines: "Vot čego ždali my, deti stepej! / Vot ona, srodnaja serdcu stixija! / Čudo sveršilos': na grani svoej / Stala Rossija." ("K tixomu okeanu," 267.) Patriotism with overtones of jingoism is heard in "K sograždanam" (p. 270) and in "Cusima" (p. 271). The peace-seekers and -makers are damned in a completely jingoistic invective: "No vy bezvol'ny, vy bespol'ny, / Vy skrylis' za svoim zatvorom. / . . . Poèt venčacet vas pozorom." ("Da! cepi mogut byt' prekrasny," 274.)

After the Russo-Japanese War and disillusionment with it, Brjusov turned his attention to the revolutionary ferment in his society. The "Soviet" subject of his third poetic theme begins as early as 1905 and grows steadily till the end of his life. Brjusov the Decadent served all gods and in his apolitical amorality accepted all creeds:

Мой дух не изнемог во мгле противоречий,
Не обессилел ум в сцепленьях роковых.
Я все мечты люблю, мне дороги все речи,
И всем богам я посвящаю стих.
(“Я,” 118.)

Хочу, чтоб всюду плавала
Свободная ладья,
И Господа и Дьявола
Хочу прославить я.

(“З. Н. Гиппиус,” 229.)

It is not surprising, therefore, that he could accept the new Soviet regime which he formerly dubbed the "Approaching Huns" (Grjaduščie gunny). Yet there is an element of truth in Mirskij's contention¹⁸ that Brjusov joined the Soviet cause out of loneliness, having been abandoned by his fellow admirers toward the end of his life—a statement which is wholly supported by Xodasevič's reminiscences, where he paints Brjusov toward the end of his life as not much more than a Peredonov scheming for power.¹⁹ Whatever the reason for Brjusov's choice, it is not surprising when one remembers that Brjusov always admired force and strength. After 1905 when Russia showed herself to be weak he chose the next strong force, and it happened to be the "Approaching Huns."

Thus, in the second group of the third theme, modern lore, one finds a series of poems devoted to the revolutionaries and finally to the Soviets and their hero Lenin. Hating half-measures, Brjusov strikes out at the liberals who were satisfied with the limited constitution: "Na ètix vsech, dovol'nyx malym, / Vy, deti plamennogo dnja, / Vosstan'te smerčem, smertnym škvalom" ("Dovol'nym," 278). He prophesies the coming of the Soviets and relishes the thought of total power and total destruction: "Bessledno vsë sgibnet, byt' možet, / . . . No vas, kto menja uničtožit, / Vstrečaju privetstvennym gimnom." ("Grjaduščie gunny," 279.) When the Revolution did arrive, he urges it to spread as the red horse of the apocalypse whose rider wars and judges and is a forerunner of the New World: "Vsë vpered, za gran', za pregrady / Alym vsadnikom—mčis'!" ("K russkoj revoljucii," 431.) He eulogizes the new crest of the new force and sees in the hammer and sickle a universal unifier and leveler: "V edinyj snop, serp, nas vloži, / V edinyj cokol' skuj nas, molot!" ("Serp i Molot," 435.) And, finally, he praises the new hero, the new Colossus, Lenin: "Rastet iz bur' oktjabr'skix: *Lenin* / Na rubeže, kak velikan" ("Lenin," 470).

The second group of the third theme, modern lore, contains one more subject, the city. It was the contemporary city which attracted Brjusov; it was a man-made creation and therefore better than nature; it was seamy and squalid, a monster. First, the city is viewed as an aesthetic creation which appeals to the poet. The beauty of the city is short-lived, however, and, in "Slovno nezdešnie teni," Brjusov sees it as a huge tomb:

Я люблю большие дома
И узкие улицы города,—
В дни, когда не настала зима,
А осень повеяла холодом.

Пространства люблю площадей,
Стенами кругом огражденные,—
В час, когда еще нет фонарей,
А затеплились звезды смущенные.

Город и камни люблю,
Грохот его и шумы певучие,—
В миг, когда песню глубоко таю,
Но в восторге слышу созвучия. (132-133.)

Словно нездешние тени,
Стены меня обступили:
Думы былых поколений!
В городе я—как в могиле.

Здания—хищные звери
С сотней насытых утроб!
Страшны закрытые двери:
Каждая комната—гроб! (стр. 136.)

The city as a tomb is but a momentary impression. The town has life, like the city of all cities, the "many faced" Paris ("Paryž"). The city is alive with electric lights; it speaks with telegraph wires ("Sumerki"). It is a huge, live monster bent on self-destruction: "Kovarnyj zmej, s volšebnym vzgljadam! / . . . Ty nož, s svojim smertel'nym jadom, / Sam podymaeš' nad soboj." ("Gorodu," 307.)

Once the town is destroyed it will rise again like the Phoenix and the city of the Future will be born. But this is the beginning of the last group in the third theme: future lore. In the poem to the young poet Brjusov proclaimed that "the future was the realm of the poet." He himself used this realm in a whole series of poems. There are, again, three main subjects. There is the future city, man's conquest of space, and scientific poetry.

Brjusov envisioned the future of the world as the future of the city, which was to grow big enough to encompass the whole earth. In the more beautiful of his visions into the future he exclaims:

Единый Город скроет шар земной,
Как в чешую, в сверкающие стекла,
Чтоб вечно жить ласкательной весной,
Чтоб листьев зелень осенью не блекла;

Чтоб не было рассветов и ночей,
Но чистый свет, без облаков, без тени;
Чтоб не был мир ни твой, ни мой, ничей,
Но общий дар идущих поколений.
(*"К счастливым,"* 279.)

Yet it is not the beautiful that Brjusov sees most often, it is the horrible attained by science carried to the extreme—a totalitarian city:

И, как кошмарный сон, виденьем беспощадным,
Чудовищем размеренно громадным,
С стеклянным черепом, покрывшим шар земной,
Грядущий Город-дом являлся предо мной.

Приют земных племен, размеченный по числам,
 Обязан жизнью (машина из машин!)
 Колесам, блокам, коромыслам,
 Предвидел я тебя, земли последний сын!
 Предчувствовал я жизнь замкнутых поколений,
 Их думы, сжатые познанием, их мечты,
 Мечтам былых веков подвласные как тени,
 Весь ужас переставшей пустоты!
 Предчувствовал раба подавленную ярость
 И торжествующих многообразный сон,
 Всех наших помыслов обманутую старость,
 Срок завершившихся времен!

("Замкнутые," 171.)

This vision has a direct relation to a similar view of the future which Brjusov portrayed in one of his short stories, "Zemlja." Here he pictured also a huge city in which people live on artificial air in a city sealed off from the atmosphere. The people long for the sun, for the open sky, and construct machines to open the dome which closes them in. They have forgotten that past the dome there is no more atmosphere. When the machines do open the dome: "Many give out a groan. After which in a wild frenzy all rise from their knees. The eyes of the people are wide open, hands outstretched. And slowly, slowly, the whole quiet hall is turned into a cemetery of immobile contracted bodies."²⁰

In the poems dealing with man's conquest of space, however, the view into the future is much more optimistic. The best poem to illustrate this is "Komu-to," where Brjusov addresses the future spaceman:

Фарман, иль Райт, иль кто б ты ни был!
 Спеши! настал последний час!
 Корабль исканий в гавань прибыл,
 Просторы неба манят нас!

. . .

Наш век вновь в Дедала поверил,
 Его суровый лик вознес,
 И мертвым циркулем измерил
 Возможность невозможных грез.

. . .

Так! мы исполним завещанье
 Великих предков. Шар земной
 Мы полно примем в обладанье,
 Гордясь короной четверной.

Пусть, торжествуя, вихрь могучий
 Врезают крылья корабли,
 А там, внизу, в прорывах тучи,
 Синее и скользит земля! (321-322.)

The least successful and the least important of all the subjects in this theme are found in the poems dealing with scientific language. Brjusov, having exhausted everything else, decided that it would be well to link science, the art of the future, with poetry. He tried to write what he called *naučnaja poëzija*. Two stanzas should suffice as illustration:

Для фарфоновых радужных лотосов
Петлицы ли фрака узки,
Где вот-вот адамант *leges motus*-ов
Ньютона—разлетится в куски!

При прежнем солнце глянет день, и, к тайнам
Причислен, станет баснословен—слон.
Бред в смене бредов—Архимед с Эйнштейном,
Легенда лет—Москва иль Вавилон.

(“Легенда лет,” 458.)

“The Great Escape” into themes of poetry was at an end. Brjusov was running out of time to find new themes, and the old ones did not seem to have succeeded in providing him with a way out. Having tried the themes of loneliness, love, and lore, or in decadent terms egotism, amorism, and aestheticism, Brjusov finally escaped the natural way. He died.

Stephen Spender best expressed the futility of the decadent man, of writers like Brjusov and his friends, when he wrote that “. . . the deeper the writers of the individual vision penetrated into contemporary reality, the greater the difficulty of communication with the reader. Several works have been written during the first half of this century which should terminate not with FINIS or THE END . . . but with the warning DEAD END.”²¹

Brjusov’s escape was a failure, but the paths he left behind, at least some of them, were anything but failures. The highest praise, in this respect, bestowed on Brjusov came from Poggioli: “Thus it is only fair to compare the task which Brjusov fulfilled in his own nation and time to that which Horace had accomplished for the poetry of classical Rome, and of which he had boasted in ‘Exegi monumentum’: like the Roman poet, who had transposed the song of Greece into Latin modes, Brjusov gave a Russian voice to the poetry of France.”²²

The two lines about Brjusov in world literature have been written, and that had been his wish.

NOTES

- 1 В. Ходасевич, "Брюсов: Отрывки из воспоминаний," «Современные записки», XXIII (1924), 222. Ходасевич quotes Brjusov as saying, "I want to live in order that in the history of world literature there be two lines about me. And they will be there." All translations of Russian in this article are my own.
- 2 Posthumously Brjusov has been republished in three edited collections: Валерий Брюсов, «Избранные стихотворения», ред. Иоанна Брюсова (М., 1954); Валерий Брюсов, «Избранные сочинения», ред. И. М. Брюсова (М., 1955); Валерий Брюсов, «Стихотворения и поэмы», ред. М. И. Дикман (Л., 1961). For the purposes of this study the 1961 edition was used, for it seems to be the most complete. The previously unpublished poems, collected into the 1936 edition, В. Брюсов, «Неизданные стихотворения» (М., 1936), were not discussed in this essay.
- 3 К. В. Мочульский, «Валерий Брюсов» (Paris, 1962), 115.
- 4 Д. Е. Максимов, "Поэтическое творчество Валерия Брюсова," introductory article to Brjusov, *Stixotvorenija i poëmy*, 51.
- 5 Quoted in the notes to Brjusov, *Stixotvorenija i poëmy*, 780.
- 6 В. Брюсов, "Автобиография," «История русской литературы», ред. С. А. Венгеров (М., 1914), 103. Brjusov wrote: "In our family they held the idea that there should not exist a special 'children's' literature, that children should read the same that the grownups do. Therefore from the start I had at my disposal not only the shelves of our home library but also the ones from the public library to which we 'belonged.' . . ." Further page references to this autobiography are given in text.
- 7 Д. Святополк Мирский, "Валерий Яковлевич Брюсов," «Современные записки», XXII (1924), 421.
- 8 Georgette Donchin, *The Influence of French Symbolism on Russian Poetry* (The Hague, 1958), 126.
- 9 All page references given in text are to *Stixotvorenija i poëmy* (L., 1961).
- 10 Donchin, 141.
- 11 Some other typical poems in this cycle are: "О когда бы я назвал своею" (110), "Осенний день был тускл и скуден" (138), "Я люблю" (141-142).
- 12 Donchin, 136.
- 13 Ходасевич, 221.
- 14 Виктор Чернов, "Эрос и мечта в поэзии Валерия Брюсова," «Заветы», 1913, № 12, стр. 73.
- 15 V. Setschkareff, "The Narrative Prose of Brjusov," *IJSLP*, I/II (1959), 265.
- 16 Mirskij, 422.
- 17 Renato Poggioli, *The Poets of Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 104.
- 18 Mirskij, 425.
- 19 Ходасевич, 233-234.
- 20 Quoted by Моцул'skij, 132.
- 21 Stephen Spender, *The Creative Element* (London, 1953), 179.
- 22 Poggioli, 101.