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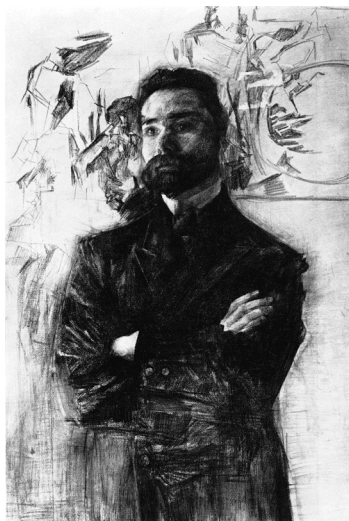
**MEMORY OF GESTURE: ICONOGRAPHY OF MELANCHOLY  
IN EUROPEAN AND RUSSIAN CULTURE OF MODERN TIMES**

To begin with, I am going to discuss only one iconographical motif connected with melancholy, namely, the posture of arms crossed over the breast. The fanciful metamorphoses of this motif can only be roughly outlined in a brief essay, hence the iconographical study is bound to be sketchy.

Furthermore, it is important to make the reservation that the logic of research unfolded from the early 20<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and not the other way round. The original purpose was to describe images of “cultural memory” brought to life in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and trace the sources of iconographical schemes and the metamorphoses of their meanings. This movement back to the birth of the iconographical motif predetermined the composition of the narrative.

The graphic *Portrait of the Poet Bryusov* (1906), one of the last works of Mikhail Vrubel, is a vivid example of a gesture associated with certain mythology that took shape at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but, obviously, suggested a long-standing iconographical tradition. Vrubel rather than Bryusov most likely chose the posture for the portrait, as is attested by the notes taken by both the artist and the sitter. In a letter to his wife Vrubel described the portrait, commissioned by N.P. Ryabushinsky: “...a knee-length portrait, standing with the arms folded and shining eyes looking up towards the bright light”<sup>1</sup>. Bryusov, who left fascinating notes about the sitting sessions, recalled that he had to stand for hours on end in “a rather uncomfortable posture with folded arms”. Later on Bryusov remarked: “After that portrait I don’t need any other. And I often say half-jokingly

<sup>1</sup> Vrubel. *Perepiska. Vospominaniya o khudozhnike* (Vrubel. Correspondence. Recollections about the Artist), Moscow-Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1963, pp. 86–7.



Mikhail Vrubel  
Portrait of Poet  
Valery Yakovlevich  
Bryusov. 1906  
State Tretyakov  
Gallery, Moscow

that I'm trying to continue looking like my portrait made by Vrubel"<sup>1</sup>.

Vrubel indeed made a good guess with that gesture: "Bryusov's buttoned-up frockcoat and his crossed arms à la Napoleon have already become traditional in the memoirs of contemporaries," wrote G. Chulkov<sup>2</sup>. "He took no part in debates. He stood with his arms crossed, his face raised up," was how M. Voloshin described his first impression of Bryusov in 1903, at a Religious-Philosophical Society session<sup>3</sup>. Sensitive to the mystical correspondence between art and life, Bryusov subsequently may have consciously stylised his appearance to match Vrubel's portrait; anyhow, memoirists remembered Bryusov precisely that way, "looking like his portrait" and invariably with folded arms. Remarkably, that gesture was not perceived as occasional or ordinary – it was always attributed a symbolical meaning. In essays on symbolism it became a sort of emblem of the epoch. "Perhaps, he alone knew how

sadly the dream of mysteries would be dispelled and in his textbook posture – with arms crossed – observed it from afar," Nina Petrovskaya wrote<sup>4</sup>. Andrei Bely "read" "an expression of being agonisingly crucified by himself" into Bryusov's crossed arms. "From the first meeting I saw him in this gesture of superfluous self-crucifixion – his arms folded over his breast, his face distorted with anguish; yet versifying even in this state of woe, and that was how Vrubel saw him; that was how we glorified him<sup>5</sup>."

This salient gesture, found by Vrubel and stressed by everybody writing about Bryusov not only as a recognisable characteristic of his look, but also as some sign of a certain character and temperament makeup, leads to the "identification" of some stable plastic subject in the very posture.

European and Russian romanticism proves to be the closest pictorial tradition within which the repetitiveness of this posture is so pronounced that it is possible to speak about it becoming an iconographical motif. Paintings and graphic works of the first thirty years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are peopled with characters posing with folded arms. This is how O.A. Kiprensky, P.F. Sokolov and A.P. Bryullov portray their sitters. European parallels are found in T. Lawrence and E. Delacroix. One recurrent feature stands out in the seeming diversity of these romantic characters: the posture with crossed arms over the breast encountered almost exclusively in male portraits is reserved above all for poets and military men. We see this gesture in Kiprensky's portraits of the late 1810s – 1820s, namely, *Portrait of S.P. Buturlin*

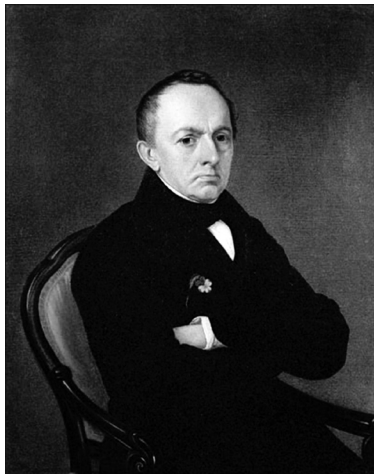
<sup>1</sup> Vrubel. *Perepiska. Vospominaniya o khudozhnike*, p. 269.

<sup>2</sup> Chulkov, G. *Gody stranstvii* (Wander-years), Moscow, 1930, p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> Voloshin, M. *Liki tvorchestva* (Faces of Creativity), Leningrad, 1989, p. 407.

<sup>4</sup> Petrovskaya, N. *Vospominaniya* (Memoirs). Published by E. Garetto. "Zhizn i smert Niny Petrovskoi" (Life and Death of Nina Petrovskaya // *Minuvsheie*. History almanac, No. 8, 1989, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Bely, A. *Nachalo veka* (The Beginning of the Century), Moscow, 1990, p. 171.



(1824), *Portrait of I.A. Annenkov* (1819), *Portrait of Prince George of Oldenburg* (1811) and *Portrait of Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich* (1819). It becomes a constant plastic motif of P.F. Sokolov's watercolours, including *Portrait of P.A. Nashchokin* (1826–7), *Portrait of an Unknown Military Man* (late 1820s – early 1830s), *Portrait of P.G. Demidov* (?) (1831), *Portrait of Baron A.I. Barclay de Tolly* (?) (ca. 1837) and *Portrait of a Young Man with Folded Arms* (1830s). The same posture is in the last lifetime portrait of K. Batyushkov and the portrait of V.A. Zhukovsky, a copperplate print by A. Frolov after a drawing by P. Sokolov.

Unknown artist  
K.N. Batyushkov.  
Early 1850s

The posture with crossed arms becomes a sort of personal iconography for great poets and great military leaders. Such was the stable iconography of portraits of Alexander Pushkin, George Byron and Napoleon of the 1820s–1830s. Pushkin's textbook image is associated with his famous portrait painted by Kiprensky on A.A. Delvig's commission in 1827. Pushkin's friends preferred precisely Kiprensky's portrait when commissioning prints from the original painting or watercolour copies from the well-known portrait produced by Sokolov as a variation of Kiprensky's picture<sup>1</sup>. The latter composition served as the basis for countless representations done both in Pushkin's lifetime and after his death. For instance, the *Portrait and Biographical Gallery of Literature, Sciences and Fine Arts in Russia*, published in 1841, included a lithographed portrait of Pushkin from the aforementioned watercolour by Sokolov<sup>2</sup>.

The posture with crossed arms is also stably associated with the iconography of Napoleon. The "myth of Napoleon" became especially popular in Russia in the 1820s – 1840s. The iconography crystallised from the mid-1810s and promoted the spread of the myth. Onegin had in his study

"...the iron figure on the table,  
the hat, the scowling brow, the chest  
where folded arms are tightly pressed"<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See Sidorov, A.B. "Portrety A.S. Pushkina raboty P.F. Sokolova. Problema datirovki" (Portraits of A.S. Pushkin by P.F. Sokolov. Problem of Dating) // P.F. Sokolov. Russkii kamernyi portret. Gosudarstvennyi muzei A.S. Pushkina (P.F. Sokolov. Intimate Russian Portraits. State A.S. Pushkin Museum), Moscow: Pinakotheka, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> For the attribution of this description as a statuette of Napoleon see Lotman, J.M. Roman A.S. Pushkina "Evgenii Onegin". Kommentarii (A.S. Pushkin's Novel *Eugene Onegin*. Commentaries) // Lotman, J.M. *Pushkin. Biografiya pisatelya. Statyi i zametki. 1960–1990. "Evgenii Onegin"*. Kommentarii (Pushkin. Life Story of a Writer. Articles and Notes. 1960–1990. *Eugene Onegin*. Commentaries), St Petersburg, 2005, p. 687.



Napoleon Bonaparte,  
First Consul.

First quarter  
of the 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Lithograph  
by Zephirin Belliard  
after Jean-Baptiste  
Isabey's painting

For contemporaries the above description was so obvious that there was no need to mention Napoleon's name.

The personality of Napoleon in different interpretations, from a "son of happiness" to a "messenger of Providence"<sup>1</sup> became a fad along with the Byronic hero sharing with the latter common features, such as individualism, identifying oneself with the select, contempt for the world and control of it, loneliness, dramatic fate, etc. In his notes on the translation of *The Corsair* Pushkin wrote that the secret of the extraordinary popularity of Byron's poem in England was the magnetism of the main character, who was largely "modelled" on Napoleon<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, the distinction between the Byronic hero and Byron himself becomes vague: "...Most probably here, too, the poet por-

trays a character that appears in all his creations and that he eventually assumed himself in Childe Harold"<sup>3</sup>. Gradually, the comparison of Byron with Napoleon, in part owing to Byron himself ("One way or another, the poet had never clarified his intent, his connection with Napoleon pleased his vanity"<sup>4</sup>) became commonplace in the culture of Romanticism. Small wonder that Onegin had in his study "Lord Byron's portrait on the wall" next to "the iron figure" of Napoleon. The metaphorical comparison of the poet and the military leader popular in Romanticism also echoes this double image of Byron-Napoleon. In his *Little House at Kolomna* Pushkin made tongue-in-cheek use of this metaphor migrating from one romanticist work to another.

The poet feels himself the Sword of Fate,  
Like Bonaparte, or Tamburlaine the Great.

A parallel to such literary metaphors in pictorial art is precisely the common iconography of "crossed arms". It attests to the semantic kinship of the images of the poet and the military leader in the romantic mind. The "powerful", "grim" and "mysteriously enchanting" characters of the great poet and the great military leader come close together in part to being identified one with the other and generously share their features with all poets and military leaders in general as representatives of some common and, beyond doubt, upper caste. Its "ancestral emblem" turns out to be "crossed arms".

<sup>1</sup> See Larionova, E. "Pushkin i napoleonovskii mif" (Pushkin and the Myth of Napoleon) // *Pina-kotheke*, Nos. 13–14, Moscow, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> "The Corsair owes its incredible success to the character of the main protagonist, who mysteriously reminds us of a man whose fateful will then ruled over one part of Europe threatening the other." Pushkin, A.S. *O tragedii Olina Korser* (On Olin's Drama *Corsair*) // Pushkin, A.S. *Sochineniya* (Works), Moscow, 1949, p. 721.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

However, the common iconography of different images, albeit with certain parallels in literature, does not explain this semantic kinship and is merely indirect evidence of a common source. In other words, it points to the existence of some stable iconographic tradition that acquired new meanings with time and that initially had a potential for such different images drawing closer together. The common iconography of the poet and the military man in romanticist art is intriguing as such indirect evidence. The invariant basis of various representations obviously references some single subject in the memory of European culture of modern times. Within that tradition the posture with crossed arms, which was often used in 19<sup>th</sup>-century art as a plastic quotation, “goes back” to its meaning.

Aiming not so much at a detective suspense in our story as at affirming its integrity, I will begin by saying that the source of this motif is the iconography of melancholy in 16<sup>th</sup>-century English art. After stating the paradoxical coincidence of the iconographic motifs of the 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries with those of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, let us trace, if only briefly, the connections which could have brought them together within the European “cultural memory” tradition.

#### FASHIONABLE ELIZABETHAN ERA “MALADY” IN ENGLAND

The first description of the posture with folded arms and the context of its appearance have to do with the concepts of melancholy, which took shape in European art in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The fullest corpus of diverse interpretations formed in the English philosophy and literature of the Elizabethan era and the early Stuart period. England is also the birthplace of the ramified iconography of melancholy. Starting from the 1580s there arose a sort of intellectual fad for melancholy in England. Medical, philosophical and historical treatises are written about it, and the melancholic becomes the main character in drama and poetry, his recognisable image engraved in numerous portraits of the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and encoded in numerous emblemata. Contemporaries write about melancholy as the epidemic of the century<sup>1</sup>.

The different interpretations of melancholy at that time, just as the etymology of the word (traditionally traced to Hippocrates) go back to the antiquity theory of four temperaments correlated with four “body fluids” (called “humours”). Melancholy is derived from the Greek *melaina chole*, meaning black bile. It was thought that the melancholic temperament was caused by the excess of black bile in the body, just as the phlegmatic one was explained by the excess of phlegm, the sanguine by the excess of blood

<sup>1</sup> This definition given by contemporaries lent this name also to 20<sup>th</sup>-century studies of melancholy in the Elizabethan era. See, for example, Lawrence Babb. *The Elizabethan Malady. A Study of Melancholia in English Literature from 1580 to 1642*, East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1951.

and the choleric by that of yellow bile<sup>1</sup>. In different modifications these ideas were current in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period and were rejected by European medicos only about 1700<sup>2</sup>.

The two main concepts of interpreting the melancholic temperament are likewise rooted in antiquity. One stems from the medical tradition going back to Galen, the Greek physician of the Roman Empire. In this tradition, melancholy denotes not so much a certain temperament as illness, although its degrees are often vague and pronounced characteristics of the melancholic temperament imply “ailment” or border on it. English treatises and translated writings of the 16<sup>th</sup> century complying with the Galenist tradition consider melancholy as grave psychopathology, to use modern terminology. Studies of different forms of melancholy as a psychic disorder – from apathy to insanity – are always accompanied with a list of typical traits of appearance and not very appealing particulars of melancholic behaviour. One of the more typical descriptions of this kind belongs to Levinus Lemnius, according to whom a melancholic is “tall, skinny, lean, often dark, pale or with unhealthy complexion... As for his nature and mindset, he is withdrawn, sullen, unsociable and greedy... His gait is slow, he walks with his head down, his brows knitted and expression surly... Melancholics are taciturn, prefer solitude and are endlessly eaten up by anxiety, worry and fears<sup>3</sup>.”

The other concept goes back to the Aristotelian interpretation of the melancholic temperament as related to creative endowment, a poetic and philosophical gift and divine inspiration.

In the Middle Ages, melancholy was interpreted mostly in the Galenic tradition. In the Renaissance period, the concepts of the Neoplatonists of Florence, primarily Marsilio Ficino’s treatises *De Vita Libri Tres* (Three Books on Life), were highly instrumental in “exonerating” melancholy. Ficino

<sup>1</sup> The etymology of two other names for melancholy – hypochondria and spleen – that began to be used somewhat later and were popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries also goes back to ancient and medieval medical concepts. According to them, melancholy humours nourish the “cold and dry parts of the body”, that is, the bones and spleen. The spleen has to absorb excess black bile, and if this does not happen, “melaina chole” spills all over the body causing melancholia or spleen. Other physiological causes of melancholia are diseases of the so-called “hypochondriac” organs, hence the stable term hypochondria. The appearance of the expressions “soul-sapping passions” and “soul-sapping knowledge” is most likely connected with the Renaissance interpretation of ancient concepts of melancholia. It was commonly believed that melancholia could be caused by not only physiological but also by “psychological” reasons, such as passion and “much knowledge”. Passion and knowledge literally “dry up” the body, and dryness is the main symptom of “melaina chole” and leads to melancholy.

<sup>2</sup> Melancholy in European culture was the theme of a large exhibition “Melancholy: Genius and Madness in the West”, Grand Palais, Paris, 13 October 2005–16 January 2006; Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 17 February – 7 May 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Levinus Lemnius, *The Touchstone of Complexions*, translated by Thomas Newton. London, 1576, fol.146



combined the interpretation of melancholy as a temperament conducive to creativity with Plato's theory of *furor divinus* (divine frenzy), producing the concept of *furor melancholicus* (melancholic frenzy) characteristic of a creative genius. Ficino was also associated with a group of Saturnists, who reinterpreted the astrological tradition of understanding melancholy, which was extremely popular in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. According to astrological treatises, the melancholics, born under the sign of Saturn, were subject to its influence, equally beneficial and baneful. In the Renaissance tradition, Saturn was a "cold and dry" (the main qualities of *melaina chole*) and barren planet, a planet of night and death. Meanwhile, the same qualities constitute the other side of extraordinary talents with which the "nurslings" of Saturn are endowed: not only abilities for contemplation and reflection, but also a special intuition giving them insights into the hidden dark mysteries of being<sup>1</sup>. The association of melancholy with the influence of Saturn was so stable that the words "Saturnist" and "melancholic" became synonymous. The sign of Saturn is present in all Renaissance emblemata and compositions on the theme of melancholy<sup>2</sup>.

Ficino's concepts, in particular, his hermetic theories of melancholy, are also linked with the widespread notions of the nocturnal, Saturnist, visionary and creative temperament of a melancholy genius, which led to the perception of melancholy as a sort of "symptom" of talent. This identification was to emerge as one of the more persistent connotations of the melancholic temperament in European culture.

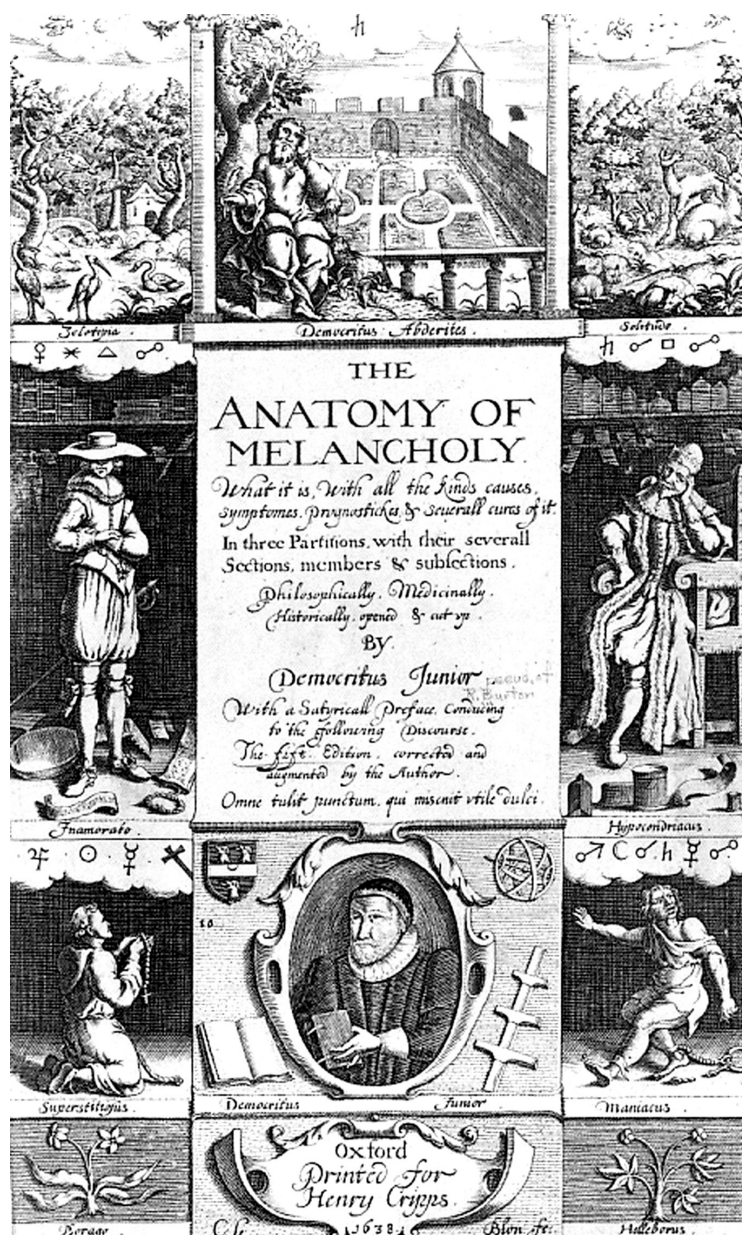
#### MELANCHOLIC TRAVELLERS AND MALCONTENT

The Renaissance fashion for melancholy formed in England primarily under the impact of the ideas of Marsilio Ficino and the Florentine Saturnists. It spread fast across England owing to Italian trips of the noblemen, who upon return sought to inculcate the taste for what they had seen and assimilated. Initially, melancholy was associated precisely with Italian trips and there appeared a "melancholic traveller" character, made especially attractive by stable aristocratic connotations.

By the early 1580, the "melancholic traveller" had become a social type that went down in English culture under the name of "malcontent".

<sup>1</sup> The obvious link is the tradition in which Saturn is an allegory of Death and Time. For other opposites within the ambivalent image of Saturn and the nature of melancholics governed by it (e.g., poverty-richness) see Klibansky, R., Panofsky, E. and Saxl, F. *Saturn and Melancholy*. London, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> The astrological connotations of the melancholy concept in 15<sup>th</sup>- and 16<sup>th</sup>-century European culture are so substantive that we can speak of the stable traditions of interpreting famous melancholy-themed works as personal horoscopes. For instance, the tradition of interpreting Durer's *Melancholia I* as Emperor Maximilian's horoscope goes back to Aby Warburg. See, for example, Barlow, T.D. *The Medieval World Picture & Albert Durer's Melancholia*. Cambridge. Printed for presentation to members of THE ROXBURGHE CLUB, 1950.



Frontispiece  
of Robert Burton's  
treatise  
The Anatomy  
of Melancholy. 1638

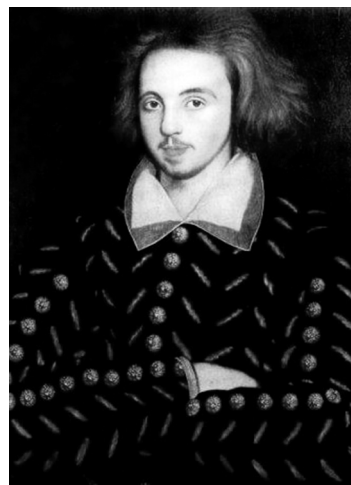
Imported from Italy, the intellectual fashion for the melancholy of the “malcontents” back home often had to bear the brunt of mockery as contemporaries failed to show adequate attention to the “humanistic project” of the upper-class travellers. Many of the “malcontents” had ties with the political opposition, due to which the notion of melancholy gradually acquired new meanings, adding social connotations to the traditional range, namely, eccentricity, freethinking and rebelliousness. In the late



16<sup>th</sup> century, the word “malcontent” was persistently associated with travels to Europe, everyday eccentricity, intellectual independence and political freethinking. However, in literature of the Elizabethan era the “malcontent” character went through a transformation and semantic “expansion” of sorts, retaining but a tenuous link with the aristocratic melancholic traveller. The spread of the stable iconography of the melancholic and its multifarious semantic variations was explained precisely by the versatile repertory of the “malcontent” in English literature and theatre of the late 16<sup>th</sup> – first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In his book about melancholy in Elizabethan literature, Lawrence Babb singles out five types of the “malcontent”: the primary type, which comprises the melancholy travellers and their imitators; the melancholy villain, the melancholy scholar, the melancholy cynic (appearing principally in drama) and the melancholy lover (Marsilio Ficino was the first to describe love melancholy)<sup>1</sup>.

The primary “malcontent” type described by Babb is in fact a generalisation of the most common and vague characterisation of the melancholic, which had struck root by the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is a person marked by intellectual superiority or else convinced of having it; his relations with the world always lack harmony, his gifts more often than not go unrecognised, he is ridiculed and persecuted, and his natural melancholy is aggravated by rejection and disillusionment. His attitude of existential loneliness finds all sorts of mundane embodiments ranging from political rebellion to commonplace eccentricity and breach of social etiquette. An outcast *per se*, he goes beyond the limits of the average mind potential, as well as any rules considered a commonly accepted social norm. On the one side, such a character fills the abstract formula of the rejection of the world with live human content, thus giving it a human dimension when the life of an individual becomes a dramatic and full-blooded reliving of a mental construct; on the other, human passions are elevated to philosophical generalisation. This ambivalent interpretation is based on the dualism of antiquity ideas (illness – creative talent) reinterpreted in a new dramatic vein.



Unknown artist  
Portrait  
of Christopher  
Marlowe (?) 1585  
Corpus Christi  
College, Cambridge

## THE ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLY

In his famous treatise *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1624)<sup>2</sup>, Robert Burton listed the iconographic melancholy types as a parallel of sorts of the five “malcontent” types of Elizabethan literature. That book summed up all the

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Babb. *The Elizabethan Malady. A Study of Melancholia in English Literature from 1580 to 1642*. East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1951, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> The first edition of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* was printed in 1621.

existing concepts of melancholy at that time in an ambitious effort to classify the 16<sup>th</sup>-century theories in the Cartesian spirit of the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. The emblemata table on the frontispiece of the second edition of the book shows the five features and consequences of melancholy: *zelotypia* (jealousy), *solitudo* (solitariness), *superstitiosus* (superstition), *hypocondriacus* (hypochondria) and *maniacus* (madness), and two melancholy types of the scholar and the *Inamorato* (enamoured). The latter two are in fact the main iconographic motifs of melancholy.

The scholar sits under a tree with an open book on his knees, one arm propping up his bent head. The poetic commentary names him as Democritus:

Old Democritus under a tree,  
Sits on a stone with book on knee;  
About him hang there many features,  
Of Cats, Dogs and such like creatures,  
Of which he makes anatomy,  
The seat of black choler to see.  
Over his head appears the sky,  
And Saturn Lord of melancholy.

The choice of name is not accidental: Burton describes Democritus as a famous melancholy thinker of antiquity and publishes his *Anatomy* under the penname of Democritus Junior. The title page of the third edition has the picture of the melancholy scholar (Democritus Senior) and the portrait of the author (Democritus Junior) placed symmetrically along the vertical: Burton thus acts as a successor to the great philosopher and simultaneously an heir to the melancholy tradition<sup>2</sup>. The landscapes on the left

<sup>1</sup> *The Anatomy* is a compendium including medical and philosophical treatises, a historical chronicle and other works written in different styles from pedantically scientific to colloquial and spiced with historical anecdotes and witty commentaries. The multiple genres correspond to diverse sources, including the Bible, theological and historical writings, works by Greek and Latin authors, cosmography, travelogues, political treatises and satirical pamphlets, medical and scientific treatises, speeches, epistles, plays and English poetry and drama – Geoffrey Chaucer, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Ben (Benjamin) Johnson, etc. This enormous motley collection consists of several parts: the first gives a definition, causes, symptoms and characteristics of melancholy, the second focusses on treatment, and the third deals with the symptoms and ways of curing two types of melancholy – love and religious.

<sup>2</sup> Burton was known to be a melancholic; the epitaph on his tombstone at the Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, reads: *Paucis notus, paucioribus ignotus, hic jacet Democritus Junior, cui vitam dedit et mortem Melancholia* (Known to few, unknown to even less, here lies Democritus Junior to whom Melancholia granted life and death), died 7 January 1639". See A.G. Inger's commentaries to the translation of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (two chapters) // *RuBrica. Russian-British Chair*. Issue 2, winter-spring 1997, p. 204. The Melancholia in the epitaph obviously means both Burton's melancholy temperament and the title of the famous treatise which had immortalised his name.

and right of Democritus – components of the emblems of jealousy and loneliness – comprise all the traditional melancholy attributes, including the sign of Saturn, the bat and the sleeping dog. The iconography of the recluse scholar, a solitary genius, the most famous and enigmatic version of whom is Durer's *Melencolia* (1514), was to become one of the stable motifs of European painting of the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The enamoured person in Burton's table is a no less common iconographical melancholy type. He is standing with folded arms, his hat pulled down over his eyes. His lute and books are at his feet (as symptoms of his vanity, according to Burton's comment), apparently indicating that the lover and the poet have a common iconography. The numerous portraits of poets done at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century make use of the same folded arms motif, for instance, the 1585 portrait traditionally thought to be that of Christopher Marlowe, the possible co-author of Shakespeare's early plays. Marlowe is portrayed with folded arms, the Latin inscription in the upper right-hand corner "Quod me nutrit me destruit" (what feeds me destroys me) can be taken for the textbook motto of the melancholic. This maxim is encountered in Marlowe's and Shakespeare's plays. Isaac Oliver depicted an *Unknown Melancholy Young Man* in the same posture in his 1590 miniature, which some scholars tend to regard as the portrait of Philip Sidney, philosopher, poet and diplomat at the court of Queen Elizabeth. The composition of this portrait is close to the melancholy philosopher emblem in Burton's *Anatomy*: Sidney is sitting under a tree with a labyrinth in the background, a frequent attribute of melancholy, possibly, symbolising the bizarre road to truth (Nicholas of Cusa wrote about melancholy as a road to truth). Oliver's miniature differs from Burton's emblem only in the folded arms posture, as a reference to the theme of poetry and/or love.

#### MELANCHOLICS OF ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

The type of a melancholic with folded arms and a hat pulled down on his eyes was one of the most popular in English literature of the period. That was how Babb's classification most frequently described the primary melancholy type. His recognisable image in the well-known engraving of 1615 entitled the *Sullen Melancholic* is matched by the typical description of a stage embodiment of the melancholic: "Black silks and charcoal black feather on the hat pulled down so that the face be buried in the shadow, lowered head and folded arms these are the outward 'signs' of those possessed by grimly coloured melancholy"<sup>1</sup>. Melancholy travellers "walke melancholy with their arms folded" and engage in contemplation, for instance, in T. Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller: or, the Life of Jack Wilton* (1594). The image of a melancholy knight becomes popular. In 1615, Samuel Rowlands

<sup>1</sup> See Chernova, A. ...*Vse kraski mira, krome zhyoltoi* (All Colours of the World Save for Yellow), Moscow, 1987, p. 118.

Isaac Oliver  
Poet Philip Sydney (?)  
as melancholy  
philosopher.  
Circa 1590–5  
Royal collections,  
Great Britain

writes a poem *The Melancholy Knight*, in whose monologue the iconography of the melancholic receives distinctly religious connotations: the cross turns out to be the prototype of the crossed arms. The Melancholic Knight soliloquizes: “My braines with melancholy humers swell, I crosse mine armes at crosses that arise<sup>1</sup>.” What is also used to good effect here is the “migrating” motif of blindness, the unseeing eyes of the melancholic simultaneously hidden from the world and refusing to look at it – the hat concealing the face is a variant of this motif. Burton suggests a “scientific”

psychological explanation: “the melancholic likes darkness, cannot stand light, cannot stay in brightly lit places; his hat is pulled down to the eyes, he will never agree to see or to be seen of his own free will”. In *The Melancholic Knight* Rowlands interprets the same motif allegorically: the melancholic’s conscious blindness, on the one hand, mocks and challenges “blind Fortune” and, on the other, endowed with the gift of foresight and prophesy, the melancholic turns out to be a sort of travesty embodiment of Fortune. “And scoffe blinde *Fortune*, with hat ore mine eyes: / I bid the world take notice I abhorre it, / Having great *melancholy* reason for it.”<sup>2</sup> The title page of the poem shows the melancholic knight deep in thought, with folded arms and a hat concealing his face.

The motifs of eyes closed or “hidden” from the world – a melancholy trance of sorts – may also be connected with the ideas of hermetic philosophy, which formed the “core” of the Renaissance Neoplatonic movement and which reflected, among other things, the concept of knowledge as creative imagination. In this sense of special interest in Giordano Bruno’s concept of “the art of memory”, embodied, according to F. Yates, in “the change from forming corporeal similitudes of the intelligible world to the effort to grasp the intelligible world through tremendous imaginative exercises”<sup>3</sup> Bruno published *Seals*, one of his major writings on memory, during his stay in England in 1583, when the English philosophy and iconography



<sup>1</sup> Cit. Lawrence Babb. *The Elizabethan Malady. A Study of Melancholia in English Literature from 1580 to 1642*. East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1951, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> The melancholic knight. By S.R. [quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A11133.0001.001?view=toc](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A11133.0001.001?view=toc)

<sup>3</sup> Yates, F., *The Art of Memory*, London and New York: Routledge, 1966, p. 367.

of melancholy, directly linked with the Neoplatonist ideas of the nature of knowledge and of creative genius, was in the making. Bruno's treatises provoked heated debates in Oxford and Cambridge. Yates believes that it was in Bruno's writings that the Elizabethan reader first came into contact with the new ideas: "If so he would have come upon an exposition of the Renaissance theory of poetry and painting such as had not before been published in England, and he would have found it in the context of the images of occult memory"<sup>1</sup>. Philip Sidney was enthusiastic about Bruno's ideas, and it is only natural that his portrait relied on the traditional iconography of melancholy.

Distinguishing four grades of knowing, namely sense, imagination, reason and intellect, and regarding them as really a single whole, Bruno nevertheless speaks of the primacy of the imagination in the cognitive process. For him "the function of the imagination of ordering the images in memory is an absolutely vital one in the cognitive process. Vital and living images will reflect the vitality and life of the world... unify the contents of memory and set up magical correspondencies between outer and inner worlds"<sup>2</sup> through an intricately developed system of images. Cognition of the world through the workings of imagination is above all the lot of poets and artists, whom Bruno identifies with philosophers. In a section of the *Seals* treatise entitled "Zeuxis the Painter", Bruno compares painting with poetry and philosophy within the framework of the art of memory concept: Zeuxis is the painter who depicts the inner images of memory; the mental power of the poet and the philosopher consists in contemplation and description of inner images. "For there is no philosopher who does not mould and paint; whence that saying is not to be feared 'to understand is to speculate with images', and the understanding 'either is the fantasy or does not exist without it'.<sup>3</sup>" In the treatise "Phidius the Sculptor" Phidias stands for the sculptor of the memory, moulding "memory statues within". "So also (Bruno would seem to say) does Phidias the sculptor of the fantasy release the forms from the inform chaos of memory. Here, Yates observes, Bruno, as though [...] were introducing us to the core of the creative act, the inner act which precedes the outer expression"<sup>4</sup>.

In the treatise "Statues" Bruno writes that with the help of artificial memory and imagination the human mind puts itself in contact with "divine and demonic intelligences" (p.292). "...we rise from the first to the last, collect the external species in the internal sense, order intellectual operations into a whole by art..."<sup>5</sup> The power of imagination and the art of imagery help us "hold within, the universe in all its ever changing forms, through images passing the one into the other in intricate associative

<sup>1</sup> Yates, F., *The Art of Memory*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 254.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 290.



orders, reflecting the ever changing movements of the heavens.<sup>1</sup> Like many other ideas of Bruno's, the concept of moving associative connection acquired in particular owing to the ecstatic force of imagination, was formulated in polemics with Aristotle's rationalistic philosophy of nature: "All things of nature and in nature, like soldiers in an army, follow leaders assigned to them ... This Anaxagoras knew very well but Father Aristotle could not attain to it ... with his impossible and fictitious logical segregations of the truth of things,"<sup>2</sup> Bruno wrote.

"A dilemma was presented to the Elizabethans in this debate," Yates sums up his reasoning about Elizabethan England coming into contact with Bruno's ideas. "Either the inner images are to be totally removed [...] or they are to be magically developed into the sole instruments for the grasp of reality. Either the corporeal similitudes of mediaeval piety are to be smashed or they are to be transposed into vast figures formed by Zeuxis and Phidias, the Renaissance artists of the fantasy. May not the urgency and the agony of this conflict have helped to precipitate the emergence of Shakespeare?"<sup>3</sup>

The equation of philosopher-poet-artist in the hermetic philosophy of Bruno and the high status assigned to the "artists of the fantasy" in the system of cognising the world through the art of memory and the power of imagination may have influenced the concepts of the melancholy philosopher and the melancholy poet and the popular idea of melancholy mystical propensities.

"Secret knowledge" open to melancholy scholars in the images of philosopher poets is often understood precisely as secret vision, contemplation of internal images (Bruno's hobbyhorse). The motif of a hidden "unseeing" melancholy gaze turned inwards instead of outwards is accompanied by the theme of extra sharp vision, literally in-sight. Literature, too, constantly put to good use the theme of perspicacity and visionary sharpness of the "thinking" vision of the melancholy poet and philosopher. One of Shakespeare's constant themes, it found its fullest enigmatic expression in the character of Hamlet.

The intent gaze typical of the melancholics – the desire to keep all the images and links of the universe before the mental gaze – gets a dramatic reinterpretation in Hamlet's manner of "looking at things". Hamlet tends to "examine the world from the 'end', from the nothingness of grave dust which lies in store for everything seemingly great"<sup>4</sup>. The scene of Hamlet talking to Yorick's skull, in which that tendency manifests itself, is obviously in line with the medieval and Renaissance tradition, in which "talking" skulls and skeletons became a common symbol of "memento mori" as distinct from the original meaning of "Carpe

<sup>1</sup> Yates, F., *The Art of Memory*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 260.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>4</sup> See Allenov, M.M. *Mikhail Vrubel*, Moscow, 1996, p. 78.

diem" (Seize the moment; enjoy while you can)<sup>1</sup>. In painting, Vanitas portraits popular in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century are the closest iconographical parallel to Hamlet's talk with Yorick's skull. In a portrait Sir Robert Peake Sr. painted in 1590, ten years before the appearance of *Hamlet*, Sir Edward Grimstone clad in the black clothes of a melancholic is shown with a skull in his hand. The "symbolical objects" in such portraits – a skull, a gravedigger's spade and sandglass – serve, as it were, as an invitation to melancholy. It is to take such a melancholy glance laying bare the essence of things and relieving them from the magical cover of illusions that Hamlet invites Horatio after the famous talk with the gravediggers. "Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so," Horatio answers. However, the scene with Yorick's skull is not merely a medieval "memento mori" in a Renaissance makeup. The old dualism of "memento mori" – "carpe diem" comes alive and manifests itself with a new force in the ambivalent idea of melancholy, which transforms the system of late Renaissance knowledge into a personal dramatically existential experience. At the same time, the tragically intense vision of the world makes action meaningless and depletes will, turning the melancholy philosopher into a doubting man who is existentially incapable of an active deed. Reflexion and inactivity become a recurring characteristic of the melancholy philosophers in Elizabethan drama.

The theme of mystical propensities and "thinking" vision also finds a peculiar reflection in other literary and stage images of the melancholics. The melancholy cynic is one of the more curious types of the malcontent. His character is a sort of "simplification" of the philosophical interpretation of intense gaze, its reduction to a projection on the mundane plane. The melancholy cynic can be an eccentric, schemer or political rebel, but his chief predestination is to be a critic of society, modern mores or human nature in general, in other words, to hold up a mirror before society, giving it a chance to look at itself from aside. The mirror is known to be another traditional attribute of Vanitas, and the role of the cynic, albeit in a different variation, is again to invite to melancholy that inevitably accompanies "an intense gaze at things". Hamlet, who incorporated all the possible gradations of melancholy, alternately plays the different roles of the melancholy philosopher, lover and, of course, cynic. "...I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you", Hamlet says to Gertrude.

The melancholy cynic is in many ways akin to the philosopher, although his diatribes have primarily didactical goals. The cynic is endowed with wit, which is in line with the "social" sharpness of his vision, and his speeches against vices become scathing satirical pamphlets. Wit is another hypostatis of the melancholy gift of imagination and visionariness: the cynic reaches out to the truth hidden from society by "bringing close distant things

<sup>1</sup> For the changing meanings of skulls and skeletons in connection with the overall concept of life and fate see Panofsky, E. *Meaning and the Visual Arts*, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, 1955, p. 309.

and combining the mutually exclusive”<sup>1</sup>. The melancholy cynic is the most colourful type in the European gallery of wits, the mordant possessors of a “sophisticated mind”. One of the most charming melancholy cynics of Elizabethan literature is Jaques of *As You Like It*. “I love to cope him in these sullen fits, For then he is full of matter”, Duke Senior says about Jacques.

The melancholy villain is a special “malcontent” type. The continuity of the “negative” tradition of perceiving melancholy is especially pronounced in this image. The depths of melancholy are fraught with something more than madness. According to demonologists, this state of soul poses a dangerous temptation. “Melancholy is a ‘place’ in the soul, through which the devil can easily get inside”<sup>2</sup>. In his treatise *De sacra philosophia* (On Sacred Philosophy, 1587) Francisco Valles connects the onset of melancholy directly with a “diabolical” temptation: “The devil induces the disease of melancholy increasing the amount of melancholic humour in us and, stirring up what is already in us, transfers black vapours to the brain and sensation centres”<sup>3</sup>. Small wonder that Hamlet fears getting under the sway of the Prince of Darkness:

“Out of my weakness and my melancholy, /  
As he is very potent with such spirits...”

The medieval tradition connecting melancholy with demonomania was quite stable and could be traced not only through the Renaissance, but also the Enlightenment: the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D’Alembert defined demonomania as a “spiritual ailment, a variety of melancholy”. As a literary interpretation of this deeply rooted tradition, the melancholy villains form a whole gallery of stage “psychopathic monsters”, according to Babb. Their images are firmly associated with “black passions”, a Machiavellian mindset and Satanism, but also keen intellect, extraordinary abilities and a strong will. They are the only melancholics full of resolve and capable of action. These include Aaron the Moor from *Titus Andronicus*, Lady Macbeth and Don John from *Much Ado about Nothing*.

Love melancholy was among the commonest types of melancholy in Elizabethan England and the melancholy lover a popular literary protagonist. His image and mode of behaviour is a peculiar combination of the traditions of chivalrous knightly love, the Renaissance concept of melancholy and common scientific ideas of love passion as illness. The folded arms iconography, borrowed initially from the “malcontent”, emerged as such a recognisable emblem of love melancholy that, as we have seen, Burton chose

<sup>1</sup> For wit as the key concept for the 17<sup>th</sup> century see Khachaturov, S. “Otklonyayushchiyesya primery: oprokinutyi velikan” (Deviating Examples: Toppled Giant), *ArtChronica*, Nos. 3–4, 2005, p. 176.

<sup>2</sup> Cit. *Sad demonov – Hortus Daemonum. Slovar infernalnoi mifologii srednevekovyya i vozrozhdeniya* (Dictionary of Infernal Mythology of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance). Moscow: Intrada, 1998, p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

it to illustrate his treatise. Unlike the colourful melancholy villains, the stage melancholy lover types are monotonous: they are lean, pale and taciturn, shun company, write verses and letters during sleepless nights, pine and cry. Their manners are such a stable stereotype that they are often described in satirical tones in Shakespeare's plays. In *Love's Labour's Lost* the lover is advised "with your hat penthouse-like o'er the shop of your eyes; with your arms crossed on your thin belly-doublet like a rabbit on a spit..."<sup>1</sup>

The role of the melancholy philosopher, cynic or lover presupposed a strict canon of stage impersonation. Among other things, it included the theme of insightfulness, visionary knowledge and "thinking" vision: hence the motif of close, ecstatically intense gaze was its plastic or stage equivalent. The melancholic was to stand apart from other protagonists with folded arms and wide-open eyes; the actors sought to produce the effect of a tense, fixed gaze<sup>2</sup>. In Elizabethan era portraits, many melancholics have the same steadfast gaze. Colour symbolism in their clothes likewise played a special role: the melancholy villains appeared primarily dressed in black, whereas the lovers could combine sundry shades in their attire: white was the symbol of faith and purity, grey and green symbolising grief and lovesickness<sup>3</sup>.

It was in the stage canon formed in the Elizabethan theatre that the iconography of the melancholic with crossed arms and steadfast (or, conversely, "hidden") gaze proved especially lasting and practically did not change over centuries. In painting, the iconographic motifs of melancholy were more susceptible to change and, along with the metamorphoses of the melancholy concept itself, transformed in numerous new variations.

In ancient aesthetics, the theory of melancholy reflected ideas about the harmonious world order: four humours of the human body (microcosm) corresponded to the four elements of macrocosm. Excess of "melaina chole" was rationalistically balanced (harmonised) with a gift of creativity. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, this harmonious dualism, complicated by the impact of medieval, cabalist and Renaissance astrology and reinterpreted along the lines of humanist philosophy, was perceived as a tragic and fundamentally unsolvable contradiction. The concept of melancholy, firmly correlated with the theme of a gift of genius and dramatic attainment of truth, came to embody the crisis of late Renaissance consciousness. It found one of the most majestic and dramatic embodiments in Elizabethan literature: Hamlet – the most famous melancholic, whose name became the formula of melancholy



Sullen Melancholic.

1615

<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, W., *Love's Labour's Lost*. The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, London: Abbey Library, p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> See Lawrence Babb. *The Elizabethan Malady. A Study of Melancholia in English Literature from 1580 to 1642*. Michigan State College Press, East Lansing, 1951.

<sup>3</sup> For details see Chernova, A., Op. cit.

in European culture and a designation of a certain form of man's conflict with the world – made his appearance on the world stage.

In England of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the “malady” of the past century remained in vogue while retaining ambivalent interpretations. However, its status of high philosophical drama obviously gave way to parlour fashion: whoever aspired to intellectual superiority, artistic talent or aristocratic finesse “donned” the melancholy garb. An English poet of the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in an *Ode to Melancolia* called it the “sweetest state” and exclaimed: “there is nothing more exquisite, refined and sweeter than melancholy”. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* had several reprints up to the late 1670s. Under the influence of Burton's poetical prologue John Milton produced *L'Allegro* (The Happy Man) and *Il Penseroso* (The Melancholy Man). The theme of melancholy also appears in his *Paradise Lost*. The 18<sup>th</sup> century was less susceptible to the philosophy of melancholy: Burton's *Anatomy* looked anachronistic for 18<sup>th</sup>-century taste and refined melancholics of the previous centuries were seen as an outdated curiosity. In painting melancholy moved to the sphere of elegiac tradition, often assuming the image of a tragic Muse. That was how Joshua Reynolds pictured it in *Et in Arcadia Ego* (1769), where one of the ladies sentimentalizing over a tombstone inscription poses as melancholy<sup>1</sup>.

#### MELANCHOLY IN EUROPEAN ROMANTICISM

The turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw another upsurge of interest in melancholy. The “grande malade” of the 16<sup>th</sup> century became a new epidemic for those poets who were the forerunners of English romanticism and primarily for the romanticists themselves. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* reprinted in 1800 for the first time since 1676 was again an in thing. Lake School poets, such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, were enthusiastic about it. Byron admired Burton's treatise; images of melancholy featured in poems of John Keats. He used a quotation from Burton to introduce his poem *Lamia*, there has survived Keats' copy of Burton's treatise with numerous notes left by the poet. In 1819, Keats wrote an *Ode on Melancholy*: “Ay, in the very temple of delight / Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine...”<sup>2</sup>

Romanticists made active use of symbols associated primarily with the visionary aspect of melancholy. The concept of melancholy as a nocturnal, Saturnist temperament received a new lease on life, the theme of the artist's nighttime vision became popular, and T. Gautier, J. de Nerval and V. Hugo mention the “black sun of Melancholy”. The theme of contemporary melancholy and spleen, as well as the Saturnist symbols in the art of Charles Baudelaire merit separate research.

<sup>1</sup> See Panofsky, E., *Meaning and the Visual Arts*, 1955, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, p. 295.

<sup>2</sup> Keats, John. Ode on Melancholy – Poetry Foundation [www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173743](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173743)



It is noteworthy that the 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century ideas about the “Saturnist” temperament of the melancholic – the gift of foresight, visionariness, ecstatic power of imagination, powerful intellect, artistic genius and simultaneously rejection, loneliness and retirement – became an ideal mythological “form” for commonplace romanticist notions of free creative personality. Above all, they were the popularised ideas of Friedrich Schelling, which formed the groundwork of international romanticist aesthetics, including the concept of intellectual intuition as the only means of grasping the absolute, art as the highest form of cognising the world, the cult of the genius and religious mysticism. There is profound logic in that the most powerful mythology in history connected with the tragic dualism of an existentially lonely creative mind – the mythology of a melancholy genius – came back to life precisely at the development stage of European philosophical thought, when man’s spiritual world was first recognised as “objective existence”<sup>1</sup>. That revolution in consciousness manifested itself, among other things, in the concept of a “romantic genius” opposing the mob. The role of the melancholic in romanticist culture became one of the pithiest and most meaningful metaphors of the recognisable traits of the romantic genius, from exceptional abilities to demonism. Just as the romanticists found a treasure-trove of images and forms in the Middle Ages, in the philosophy of melancholy the romantic genius found genealogy and family emblem in the form of iconography.

A persistent motif of that iconography – the folded arms and an intensely steadfast or inspirationally ecstatic gaze – most likely came to romanticist culture from English art, having survived intact in the English stage canon.

Theatre of History: Hamlet and Napoleon

The new concept of historical painting, which took shape in England in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, facilitated the rejuvenation of that canon and its being loaded with new meanings.

From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, English painting developed a renewed passion for Shakespearean themes and steadily incorporated them in the repertoire of historical painting. In 1771, Joshua Reynolds, president of the Royal Academy of Arts, listing themes worthy of historical painting at an Academy lecture, confined himself to subjects from Roman, Greek and Holy history. In the early 1800s, the concept of historical painting changed fundamentally, in particular, owing to the London publisher John Boydell’s grandiose project of the Shakespeare Gallery. In 1786, he undertook the publication of all plays of Shakespeare illustrated by the best contemporary artists. The first stage of the project was the exhibition of 160 paintings on Shakespearean themes – the Shakespeare Gallery – that opened at a Pall Mall gallery in 1789. In 1791, Boydell printed a series of engravings after the exhibited original paintings and nearly ten years later, in 1802, nine volumes of Shakespeare’s saw the light of day. In 1803, Boydell published

<sup>1</sup> According to N. Sipovskaya.

a two-volume supplement with all the engravings after the painting compositions of the 1786 exhibition. The best English artists contributed to Boydell's project, including Reynolds, who painted three pictures for the Gallery and remarked that Boydell's undertaking had provided subjects and commissions to artists for another decade.

Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery indeed played a tremendous role in the history of English art: subjects from British history and literature made their way into painting and were readily embraced by culture that experienced a Shakespearean Renaissance in poetry. Gradually Shakespearean themes, on a par with subjects from new British, primarily military history formed a new repertory of historical painting in England, nearly squeezing out biblical and mythological themes. The terms of a competition for a cycle of frescoes called by Queen Victoria in 1843 to decorate the buildings of Parliament were an impressive sign of those changes, indicating that the process of changing the concept of historical painting had been finalised. One of those terms prescribed that artists should choose a subject from British history or from works of Spencer, Shakespeare and Milton.

Literary subjects and events of contemporary British history became established as a new concept of historical painting nurtured by romanticist aesthetics and understood as a chronicle of national history, its "spirit". That blanket concept was based on the romantic philosophy of history, which taught "to look for parallels in the instructive continuity and use the magic wand of analogy", according to Novalis, and also on the concept of "heroic history" in the spirit of Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle's concept of history with its cult of heroes not merely governing the historical process, but shaping history that was understood as a "chaos of being" (although formulated somewhat later), suited as best as any other the heroic epic of making history, which unfolded in English painting of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The method of metaphorical similes typical of Carlyle's historical thinking was close to English historical painters. The heroes of modern history and Shakespeare's characters existed, as it were, in the same space of "heroic history", easily exchanged sets and shared common iconographical motifs. Napoleon, Nelson and Wellington watching the course of battles or pondering on those to be fought (with a decision-making moment or "turning point" depicted) were portrayed in the pose of, say, Hamlet asking "to be or not to be".

The compositional solutions of themes from works of the great playwrights of the past frequently drew on the theatre canons. Many pictures were directly based on theatre impressions, or reproduced scenes from concrete productions that were recognised by contemporaries. Portraits of famous actors as Shakespearean characters gained currency. For instance, Thomas Lawrence painted John Philip Kemble as Hamlet (1801) and Thomas Sully portrayed George Frederick Cooke as Richard III (1811). Collages of sorts were also made of characters from

Shakespeare's plays that were popular on the English stage in the 1800s: Thomas Stothard, who had contributed to Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, exhibited a group portrait of *Shakespearean Characters* in 1813. One can easily recognise Malvolio, Falstaff, Lear and Cordelia, the Macbeths with the weird sisters, Ophelia and Hamlet in an "ink-coloured cape" with crossed arms.

The "journey" of the iconographical motif of melancholy in European art can be described schematically as follows: the melancholy posture preserved intact in the stage canon migrated from stage productions to painting, first as scenes from the plays of English playwrights of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries; it was then borrowed from the great men of the past by heroes of the present day within the framework of the "heroic history" concept performed on stage as a dramatic spectacle. The metaphorical parallels, which struck root in the new concept of historical painting, enabled Hamlet and Napoleon, Horatio and Nelson to appear on the same historical stage.

In other words, the famous Napoleonic posture with folded arms went back straight to one of the iconographical motifs of melancholy in Elizabethan drama. That motif gradually migrated from historical painting to portraiture, emerging as a stable pictorial iconography of not only the great military leader, but also any military man in romanticist art.

In the portraits of military men that iconography, originating in the English tradition, was widespread in European romanticist culture that tended to rely on commonly replicated and often "cliché" motifs. In Russian art of the 1820s-40s, one can find many portraits going back to that pictorial tradition. A curious example of living ties between English and Russian art is the portrait of Count Mikhail Semenovitch Vorontsov painted by Thomas Lawrence in 1821. Lawrence chose the traditional form of official portrait and the iconographical motif of folded arms for Vorontsov, son of the Russian ambassador to London, who was born and educated in England, took part in the Russo-Turkish and Russo-French wars and was commander of the occupation corps in France in 1825-6.

#### "NAPOLEONIC POSTURE": "GENS FATALES" ICONOGRAPHY. CONTEMPLATIVE MELANCHOLY

Within the iconography of military men and leaders, the "Napoleonic posture" developed its own overtones while the "Napoleonic myth" was taking shape in culture and thus added new meanings to the iconographic "shell". Unable to describe in detail the metamorphoses of this subject in Russian art of the 1820s-1840s, I will only say that the "crossed arms", up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century referred to as the "Napoleonic posture", in Russian pictorial tradition became a stable iconography of "gens fatales" involved in the romanticist discourse of chance and fate (described by Juri Lotman in his well-known article *"The Queen of Spades"* and the



Philibert-Louis  
Debucourt  
Portrait of Emperor  
Napoleon I. 1807  
Etching, coloured  
aquatint, tinted  
with watercolours

Theme of Cards and Card Games in Russian Literature of the Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century”<sup>1</sup>.

Having become a household name for an “homme fatal” of romanticism, Napoleon, on the one side, acts on behalf of anonymous forces, fate; on the other, he is in equal measure a “messenger of providence” and a “son of chance”, that is, a man who dares to challenge fate and gamble with it. Hermann from *The Queen of Spades* is the better known character of the “Napoleonic type” in Russian culture of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an “homme fatal” who gambles with fate. Hermann is compared with Napoleon not only directly (“He has the profile of a Napoleon, and the soul of a Mephistopheles,” Tomsy remarks), but because he takes the “Napoleonic posture”. In Liza-veta’s room (that is, when Hermann loses for the first time, overwhelmed by “the irreparable loss of the secret” with the death of the old Countess) “he was sit-

ting near the window, with his arms crossed and a fierce frown upon his forehead. In this attitude he bore a striking resemblance to the portrait of Napoleon.”

This iconography of an “homme fatal”, creator and visionary presupposes different, yet equally dramatic life scenarios, including madness, early demise or exile that romanticise the character’s image, and also “blissful indifference” and “the saving cold of an inactive soul” as the choice of the “lot of providence” in Baratynsky’s poetry<sup>2</sup>.

The melancholy posture emerges as a component of the composite characteristic of the mercurial spiritual “fabric” in romanticist portraits, fitting the play of personal emotions into the tradition of existentialist questions and turning it into a certain stage in the history of spirit as the history of contradictions. The harmony of reserve and strong sentiments, which is so palpable in the best of Kiprensky’s melancholy elegiac portraits, can be expressed most aptly by what Pushkin said about Baratynsky, the great melancholic of Russian poetry: “Nobody has more feeling in his thoughts and taste in his feelings than Baratynsky”. In Kiprensky’s portraits, the movement of thought and feeling is verified by this “golden ratio” of romanticist poetics. For all the thick-laid “textbook glamour”, every fresh look at Kiprensky’s portrait

<sup>1</sup> Lotman, J.M., “*Pikovaya dama*” i tema kart i kartochnoi igry v russkoi literature nachala XIX veka (*The Queen of Spades* and the Theme of Cards and Gambling in Russian Literature of the Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century) // Lotman J.M. Pushkin. Biografia pisatelya. Statyi i zametki. 1960–1990. “Evgenii Onegin”. Kommentarii (Pushkin. The Life Story of a Writer. Articles and Notes. 1960–1990. *Eugene Onegin*. Commentaries. St. Petersburg, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Individual myths of M. Yu. Lermontov and P. Ya. Chaadaev gave rise to a special variety of melancholy motifs.

of Pushkin reveals anew the perfect balance between uniqueness, the irreproducible “phenomenon” of genius and some vaguely discernible tradition hinting at the “spiritual biography” in the background. The recognisable iconographical motif lends force to this connection – the sharply outlined sculpted silhouette with folded arms. One can picture a hypothetical gallery of the type of the then fashionable family portrait galleries, in which the portrait of Pushkin would figure among the portraits of great poets of the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition to the new major meanings added by the age of romanticism – demonic grandeur, gambling with Fate and madness for retribution – the iconography of folded arms was partially correlated with a more traditional theme of “contemplative melancholy”. Russian romanticists had different names for this new type of melancholy, including “English spleen” or “Russian *handra*”<sup>1</sup> and “universal sorrow”.

On the one side, the theme of romantic “contemplative melancholy” is linked with the elegiac tradition of interpreting melancholy in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that was seen along the lines of a new experience of the current moment – a keen feeling of the outgoing epoch and “personal” time that is finite for everybody. “Melancholy is neither grief nor joy, but a shade of fun in the sad heart and a shade of dejection in the soul of a happy man”, V.A. Zhukovsky wrote, associating melancholy with the feeling of vagaries and fickleness of life and a “presentiment of irreparable and inevitable loss”.

On the other side, romantic melancholy was a sign of the exhausted optimism of the enlightenment and a harbinger of the diverse versions of the philosophy of pessimism that started taking shape at that time. Melancholy became “a sign of inner maturity” of a personality not only familiar “with wicked fate”, to quote Baratynsky, but also experiencing a sort of “release” from the world of aimless actions and passions. In Baratynsky’s poem *Dve Doli* (Two Lots) hope and excitement are the lot of those “who are kept awake by an inexperienced mind” while “hopelessness and peace” of those “who have received the knowledge of being”. What I mean here is not only the change of life phases, but the acute feeling of changing historical epochs in relation to different ages of mankind. Romanticist melancholy clearly resonates with the motifs of stoicism, detached contemplation and tragic scepticism, which were shortly to become the fundamental tenets of the philosophy of Schopenhauer.

<sup>1</sup> The word “handra” apparently appeared as a result of the colloquial contraction of “hypochondria”, a purely medical term for melancholy. Another contracted form, “pochondria”, transformed into the verb “pokhandrit”, from which the noun “handra” later on derived. The latter word, together with its synonym “spleen”, entered the literary language in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Pushkin was the first to introduce the expression “English spleen” in literary usage in *Eugene Onegin*.



MELANCHOLY AND "PHILOSOPHY OF PESSIMISM".  
HAMLET AS 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY "PESSIMIST".  
MELANCHOLY AND DECADENCE

A new surge of interest in melancholy in European culture of the 1880s had to do precisely with the spread of Schopenhauer's "philosophy of pessimism" and another "Shakespearean Renaissance". A new interpretation of *Hamlet* along the lines of Schopenhauer's philosophy and his perception as the "chief pessimist" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century emerged as a popular theme of the last two decades of the outgoing century. In his essay *The Decay of Lying* Oscar Wilde established a direct link between Hamlet's melancholy and Schopenhauer's pessimism (Schopenhauer has analysed the pessimism that characterises modern thought, but Hamlet invented it)<sup>1</sup>.

Russian magazines of the 1880s, too, demonstrated interest equally in the pessimistic "disposition of the epoch" and Shakespearean plays, above all in the different interpretations of *Hamlet*. *Severny Vestnik* (The Northern Messenger) published a collection of articles on the reasons behind the appearance and different concepts of pessimism. The author of the article "Despondency and Pessimism of Modern Cultured Society" published in 1885 wrote: "At present despondency and pessimism show in all manifestations of the human spirit; they are most pronounced in those fields where the human spirit has a chance to make the most intense and complete statement, namely, in *belles lettres* and philosophy. (...) Half a century has passed since the appearance of Schopenhauer's philosophy of pessimism and it was not until the latest decades that this morose philosophy, in which life envies death, became widespread in society."<sup>2</sup> A common turn in arguments about pessimism was its relation to mysticism, including in Russian culture. An essay, "On Mysticism among the Russian People and in Society, published by *Severny Vestnik* in 1886, dealt with this theme<sup>3</sup>.

The apogee of the "pessimistic sentiments" provoked by the ideas of Schopenhauer articulated in the romanticist and late romanticist period was accompanied by a revived interest in melancholy and the different interpretations of the Hamlet temperament as the "character" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest stage interpretations of that sort also appeared in the period of late romanticism. For instance, in 1889 the *Artist*<sup>4</sup>, a "theatre, music and art magazine" which carried articles about Shakespeare's works and their new productions in nearly every issue, published a detailed article on Shakespeare's plays that also dealt with melancholy. A significant part of an article about P.S. Mochalov "as an interpreter

<sup>1</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Decay Of Lying* at Online-Literature

<sup>2</sup> Prof. Ivanyukov. "Unyniye i pessimism sovremennogo kulturnogo obshchestva" (Despondency and Pessimism of Modern Cultured Society) // *Severny Vestnik*, No. 2, 1885, pp. 37–8.

<sup>3</sup> Prugavin, A. "O mistitsizme v russkom narode i obshchestve" (On Mysticism among Russian People and in Society) // *Severny Vestnik*, No. 3, 1886, p. 215.

<sup>4</sup> Ivanyukov, Iv. "Son v letnyuyu noch" (A Midsummer Night's Dream) // *Artist*, No. 1, 1889, pp. 56–71.

of Shakespeare's roles" published by *Iskusstvo* (Art, 1883) focussed on the interpretation of the role of Hamlet "in the spirit" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. "Hamlet is a man of our time, a child of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (...) His striving from the finite to the infinite, from earth to heavens, these inner tensions and moral fatigue can all befall only a man who had already had a brush with modern civilisation"<sup>1</sup>.

Such understanding of Hamlet's character was to become its commonest interpretation. In parallel with this desire to "modernise" Hamlet, the opposite trend was quite distinct: to detect extratemporal Hamletian traits in modern pessimism. The essay "Paul Bourget and Pessimism", which analysed the concepts of pessimism in Baudelaire, Renan, Bourget and others, listed the typically Hamletian traits of the modern mindset described as "scepticism without precedent in the history of thought". "The malady of doubting everything, even the doubt itself, entails a whole retinue of all too familiar weaknesses, such as vacillating will, sophist compromises with one's conscience, amateurishness half-detached from real life and always indifferent, and lack of firm energy of character."<sup>2</sup>

Hamlet's "modernisation" goes hand in hand with the spread of the iconography of melancholy – Russian periodicals are full of references to the Hamletian motif of "crossed arms" being used in the theatre and literature.

The likening of Hamletian temperament to the philosophy of pessimism and the renewed interest in the theme and iconography of melancholy in its Shakespearean and romanticist interpretations paved the way to the development of new myths of melancholy in *fin-de-siècle* European and Russian cultures. In England, which witnessed equally the Shakespearean Renaissance and enthusiasm with national romanticism, the theme of melancholy came back to life in the art of later Pre-Raphaelites<sup>3</sup> and decadent aestheticism. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* was popular among the Rhymers' Club poets and the motifs of melancholy recur in their poetry. In his introduction to the 1932 reprint of Burton's treatise Holbrook Jackson, the author of the famous book about the English Eighteen Nineties, points out a special interest in melancholy among the English decadents touched with a taste for mysticism and occultism<sup>4</sup>.

The Russian decadents were no less sensitive to mystic and occult interpretations of melancholy, following in the footsteps of not only the English, but also the poets of the French romanticist tradition, primarily

<sup>1</sup> "P.S. Mochalov kak istolkovatel shekspirovskikh rolei, i kritiki ego stsenicheskogo iskusstva (P.S. Mochalov as an Interpreter of Shakespeare's Characters and Critics of His Stage Art) // *Iskusstvo*, No. 7, 1883, pp. 71–2.

<sup>2</sup> Andreeva, A. "Paul Bourget and Pessimism" // *Severny Vestnik*, No. 2, 1890, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> See Shaw, W. David. "Edward Burne-Jones and Pre-Raphaelite Melancholy" // *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 2, spring 1997.

<sup>4</sup> See Jackson, Holbrook. Introduction to Robert Burton. *The Anatomy of Melancholy* / Everyman's Library/ London: Dent, New-York: Dutton, 1932.

Baudelaire and de Nerval. Such overtones are obvious, for instance, in the interpretation of melancholy by Voloshin, who centred his essay about Odilon Redon on it. “Only one sun at times rises in this world – le Soleil Noir de la Melancolie”, Voloshin writes about the world of images in Redon’s paintings. He opens his essay with a decadent style description of Durer’s *Melancholia* that hung in Redon’s studio<sup>1</sup>. His description of Redon’s works is laced with traditional attributes of Vanitas that are closely linked with the theme of melancholy: “The unending sorrow of knowledge is his lyricism. A thin laurel branch is quietly approaching the naked skull of a human puppet. With sad humility, the head bends down before it. This is Glory”<sup>2</sup>.

#### PORTRAIT OF POET BRYUSOV BY MIKHAIL VRUBEL

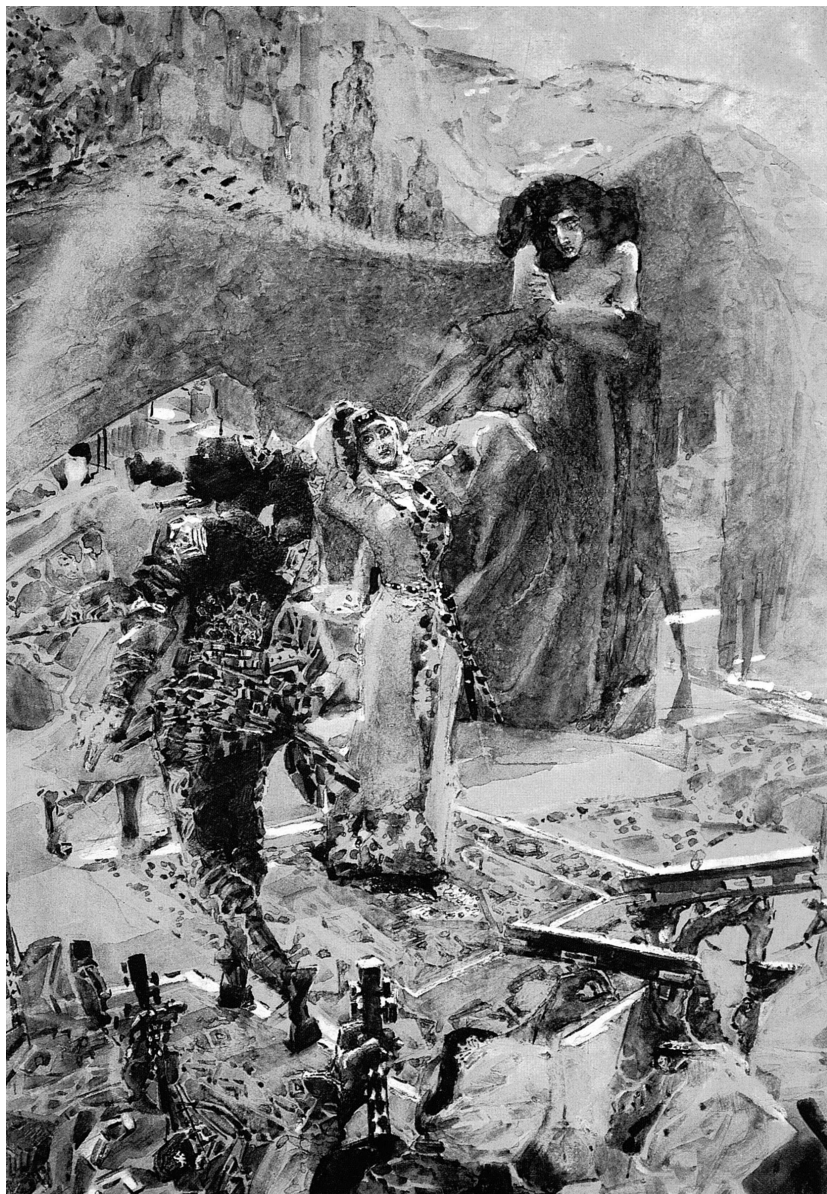
The iconography of melancholy linked to both Durer’s interpretation and the English stage canon struck root in Russian pictorial art of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. An exceptionally precise combination of the posture and subject was achieved in the works of Mikhail Vrubel, an artist who was especially consistent in mastering the repertoire of European literature. Vrubel used the iconographic motif of “crossed arms” when painting the Demon, the Seraph and, a little later, the *Portrait of Poet Bryusov*, which conformed to the traditional grades of meaning: visionariness, divination, nocturnal temperament and poetic genius. The motif first appeared in the cycle of Vrubel’s illustrations to Lermontov’s poem *Demon*, namely, in the watercolour *Tamara Dancing* (1890–1). The way Vrubel saw him, this Demon was not a devil, nor an evil spirit, nor the antithesis of the divine. Vrubel claimed that “in general the Demon was misunderstood, confused with the devil or Satan, meanwhile the Greek for devil is simply the ‘horned’ one and Satan (diabolos) means ‘slanderer’, whereas Demon means ‘soul’ and personifies the eternal struggle of the restless human soul, seeking to pacify passions besetting it and to comprehend life, yet unable to find answers to its doubts either on earth or in heaven<sup>3</sup>”. In *Tamara Dancing* the Demon is precisely the magnificent image of the “restless” doubting spirit, a demonic melancholic closely related to the most famous melancholics of European culture, from Shakespeare’s and Milton’s characters to romanticist heroes. The *Seated Demon* (1890)<sup>4</sup> would become a true embodiment of melancholy (albeit, based on a different iconography). Illustrations to Lermontov are a stage version of the theme. We know from N.A. Prakhov’s memoirs that “the production of Anton Rubinstein’s eponymous opera

<sup>1</sup> Voloshin, M. “Odilon Redon” // *Vesy*, No. 4, 1904, pp. 1–3.

<sup>2</sup> Voloshin, M. Op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Vrubel. *Perepiska. Vospominaniya o khudozhnike...*, p. 304.

<sup>4</sup> The *Seated Demon* can be interpreted as a variety of Durer’s iconography; however, this theme is beyond the scope of the present study.



in Kiev”<sup>1</sup> prompted Vrubel to develop the theme of the Demon plastically. The composition of *Tamara Dancing*, and in particular the “crossed arms” motif took shape directly under the impression of the Kiev production and in accordance with the stage genealogy of the iconography of melancholy. “The Demon here is just as theatrically reclining on the rock with crossed

Mikhail Vrubel  
*Tamara Dancing*.  
 1890–1

Illustration  
 to Lermontov’s poem  
*Demon*

State Tretyakov Gallery,  
 Moscow

<sup>1</sup> Prakhov, N.A. *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel // Vrubel. Perepiska. Vospominaniya o khudozhnike ...*, p. 303.





Mikhail Vrubel  
Seraph (Demon).  
1904  
State Russian  
Museum, Saint  
Petersburg

arms and looking at Tamara dancing a *lezghinka* as Tartakov was reclining in that scene,” Prakhov recalled<sup>1</sup>.

The iconographic motif of melancholy in Vrubel’s graphic works of 1904–5, as represented by the images of the standing Demon and six-winged Seraph, is in line with the main themes of Vrubel’s works – tragic “intercession” and ultra-vision attaining the nature, to quote M.M. Allenov, of an “abnormal exaltation” and “obsession with visual images”<sup>2</sup>. The same themes make up the repertory of classical motifs used to depict a melancholy genius. They find the most impressive and plastically inventive embodiment in the portrait of Bryusov mentioned at the start of this essay. Vrubel painted this portrait when his illness had gone into remission and when he was producing countless variations of the Seraph, the Prophet and his last work, *The Vision of the Prophet Ezekiel*. The themes of prophetic visions and the inner drama of a cre-

ative visionary merged in the portrait of Bryusov to produce the most poignant image of a melancholy poet in Russian art.

Very much like the *Seated Demon* was perceived by contemporaries in the context of Nietzschean ideas, popular interpretations of the philosophy of Schopenhauer provide a fairly exact context for understanding the *Portrait of Bryusov*. What is important here is not so much the theme of tragic scepticism as postulates of the intuitive visionary nature of creativity. The development of these ideas is the main intrigue of Valery Bryusov’s manifesto *Klyuchi tain* (Mystery Clues), written in 1904: “And I will point to one solution of the enigma of art that belongs precisely to a philosopher (...). It is the answer given by Schopenhauer. Art is what we call revelation in other fields. (...) We are not locked hopelessly in this ‘blue prison’, to use Fet’s image. It has ways out and clear openings. These openings are the ecstatic moments of super-sensitive intuition which give other insights into the world phenomena going deeper beyond their outer skin and into their core”<sup>3</sup>.

Bryusov’s portrait may well be interpreted as a variation (albeit intuitive) on the poet-visionary-prophet theme made within the framework of the mythology of melancholy. The crossed arms posture, the ecstatically steadfast gaze going beyond the canvas limits and the poet’s figure looking like a sculpted monument are the traditional motifs of the iconography of melancholy, which are, however, interpreted in a new way.

The theme of this portrait is not merely the at first glance obvious likening of the poet’s figure to a monument, but the plastic embodiment of the well-known literary subject of a “statue coming alive” or a “hero turning to

<sup>1</sup> Prakhov, N.A. *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel*, p. 314.

<sup>2</sup> Allenov, M.M. Op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> Bryusov, V. *Klyuchi tain* (Mystery Clues), // *Literary Manifestos from Symbolism to Our Day*, Moscow, 2000, p. 58–9.



stone". The contrast between the black "spread-eagle" silhouette (bringing to mind the "iron figure" of Napoleon) and the sharp light-and-shade modelling of the head, leaving half the face in deep shadow and the other half lit up with bright flecks, makes the viewer take Bryusov's stiff posture for the unnatural and agonising state of not just tenseness, but petrification. The impression of inner tension in the outwardly static figure is emphasised by the elaborate drawing of the eyes, which makes the poet's gaze look obviously strange. The left eye with a tiny fleck is set deep on the side of the face shadowed with soft hatching while the pupil of the right eye with a fleck of light is sharply squinted up and sideways. If you mentally "close" the right side of the face, Bryusov's gaze will look deeply concentrated, but if you do the same with the left side, you will get the impression of ecstasy and blinding: the poet is literally blinded by the light, which has suddenly "shone onto him", become reflected in the gleaming fleck on the dilated pupil and lit up the right side of the face. This unbalanced gaze, simultaneously detached and ecstatically tense, plastically imparts the theme of insight to the portrait but as an alarming dissonance linked with the theme of petrification.

Bryusov looks like his own tombstone, his blinding insight gained when the living flesh is turning to stone, that is, gained at the cost of parting with life. In other words, what the poet sees can only be seen on the other side of life, when one departs and is immersed in the blackness of non-being, turning into a stone cast of oneself. This insight comes from the melancholy gaze at the world from its "end" – this way Vrubel imparts the Hamletian theme to the portrait and conveys it through Hamletian iconography.