

# Mirrors in Russian Decadent and Symbolist Prose: Valery Briusov and Dmitry Merezhkovsky

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## Introduction

The mirror constitutes a perfect image not only for Symbolism—an aesthetic drawn to suggestive, enigmatic imagery with a wealth of connotations—but also for Decadence, which exploited the mirror’s traditional associations with narcissism, death, and the occult.<sup>1</sup> Both movements, which to some extent overlap, also used the mirror as a metaphor for the work of art, relying on those associations to convey thoughts about the nature and/or effects of artistic creation.<sup>2</sup> In France, from which the movements spread to Russia in the 1890s, Stéphane Mallarmé’s frigidly ravishing *Hérodiade* (*Salomé*) of the eponymous poem, greatly admired by both Symbolists and Decadents in the master’s literary circle, combines most of these connotations.<sup>3</sup> Symbol of the inaccessible ideal of consummate verse, *Hérodiade* admires her beauty in a looking-glass—an act that suggests not only her vanity, but also her cold virginal sterility (the French *glace* denoting both mirror and ice).

Absolute absorption in one’s own reflected image epitomizes the myth of Narcissus, which particularly attracted Decadent writers. In Jean Lorrain’s short story “Narkiss” (1902), for instance, priests conceal the protagonist, a young Egyptian pharaoh descended from Isis, in an isolated sanctuary and prevent him from seeing his own reflection for fear that he might immediately recognize his own divinity and royal identity and attempt to reclaim his rightful power. They also keep him ignorant of their bloody sacrifices, which, they fear, would arouse his regal instinct for domination and execution. Narkiss, however, wanders farther than usual from his temple and stumbles upon the bloody, fetid bank of the Nile, which serves as

a dumping ground for the remains of sacrificial animals. There he first sees his divine beauty reflected in the putrid water, and the following day the priests find him dead, his diademed head protruding from the mire like a magnificent exotic flower. Like Hérodiade, this story encourages a metaliterary interpretation: the surface of the water resembles an artist's canvas, and, as in many Romantic and Decadent works, the subject dies as his image metamorphoses into art.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the Narcissus myth itself, as narrated by Ovid, highlights this topos, for in his amazement at his reflection Narcissus becomes "as still as a statue of Parian marble" (113), a state prefiguring his death and metamorphosis. Lorrain's tale illustrates the topos of dying into art—the converse of the Pygmalion myth—as Narkiss's head becomes an ornament in a setting that breaks down the opposition of nature and artifice, for it comprises a coronet of flowers resembling jewels and reptiles, evoking enameled designs against the metallic background of the Nile.

The mirror may represent a threshold where the opposition between life and art disappears, resulting in death and the transformation of the living being into art, as in the example above, or it may mark a threshold at which the distinction between dream and reality is blurred. In either case, it is an ideal image for Decadents' obsession with transforming life into art and with the blurring of reality and dream visions conjured up by the imagination.

In his 1867 novel *Claire Lenoir* and subsequent works, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam formulated a philosophy of radical subjective idealism that would profoundly influence many French writers associated with the Decadent movement, including Rémy de Gourmont and Henri Régner.<sup>5</sup> For Villiers, the external world is merely a projection of each individual's consciousness, thus not objectively knowable; to distinguish among dream, hallucination, artistic vision, and reality is impossible. As Victor-Emile Michelet put it with typical Decadent elitism in a novella of 1891, "The distinction that is commonly made between reality and unreality seems to me a kind of hair-splitting on the part of intelligences so coarse that I will not deign to dwell on it" (qtd. in Pierrot 74). While denial of the certitude of perception, and consequently of a basis for mutual communication and understanding, may seem disconcerting to the average person, the positive aspect of this idealism formed the foun-

dation for the empowering aesthetics of Decadence. If each individual cultivates his own unique world, then he potentially has both the ability and the freedom to manipulate that world in accordance with his will, realizing his personal vision. It is the artist, above all, who possesses this immense creative power. The realm behind the mirror symbolizes the space of unreality, indistinguishable from reality, which allows the artist free rein to assert his superior will and create his own reality.

However, as Régnier's 1894 story "Hertulie, or the Messages" illustrates, the alternate universe beyond the mirror can be terrifying, especially for someone with insufficient strength of will.<sup>6</sup> Rather than discovering and asserting her creative identity through contemplation of her reflections and penetration into the zone of the imagination, Hertulie finds her very being dispersed and fragmented into an infinite series of mirror images. Her involuntary exploration of the mirror realm leads not to deeper self-knowledge, but to a sense of alienation from herself and eventually to her death. Similarly, the inability to distinguish reality from falsehood often results in madness or death when one takes a mirror reflection to be an evil being (as in Guy de Maupassant's *Le Horla* of 1887) or a double. The *Doppelgänger* is intimately linked with the topos of the mirror, for reflection has the power to shock the unprepared viewer suddenly forced to face the stark, even cruel, representation of his external appearance.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, it may distort his appearance, creating a gap between self-perception and objective reflection. If the alienated mirror image finds embodiment as an independent being, the latter may take the form of a second self or appear as an evil version of another character. Like the trope of the deadly portrait, the double, too, derives from Romanticism, populating many of E.T. A. Hoffmann's stories, for instance, as well as Maupassant's later, fantastic stories.<sup>8</sup> In the Russian context, the theme is elaborated in Fyodor Dostoevsky's story "The Double" (1846).<sup>9</sup> The most influential example of the Symbolist/Decadent double comes from *Bruges-la-Morte*, the 1892 novel by the Belgian writer Georges Rodenbach, in which the protagonist yields to a perverse and morbid love for a woman who looks exactly like his deceased wife (he even calls her his wife's double). He ultimately strangles her with his wife's braid.

Such associations with mirrors, so popular in French Symbolism and Decadence, surface in the prose of their Russian counterparts, who looked to the French, as well as to the common heritage of Romanticism, for inspiration. Valery Briusov's story "In the Mirror" and Dmitry Merezhkovsky's novel *The Resurrected Gods: Leonardo da Vinci*, both written in 1902, exemplify the functions of mirror imagery in Russian *fin-de-siècle* writing. Mirrors in Briusov's and Merezhkovsky's texts, while invoking the occult or the demonic, explore contemporaneous philosophies related to Decadence and Symbolism and reflect upon artistic creation and its relation to life.

#### Valery Briusov: "In the Mirror"

The myth of Narcissus illustrates the dangers of confusing the unreal with the real. Narcissus mistakes his image for a living person and, falling in love with it, pines away in longing until he dies. Yet one may also read the myth of Narcissus as a tale of contemplation and discovery of the self—or, more precisely, failure to discover the self. Self-revelation is a basic principle of Decadence, which, with its individualism and elitism, calls for the writer to delve into and reveal the deepest depths of his unconscious; however, as in the Narcissus myth, self-discovery may easily lapse into a dangerous solipsism. Briusov's "In the Mirror" deploys the mirror and its world as metaliterary symbols. Exploring the limitations and implications of subjective idealism central to Decadence, Briusov transforms the rather tired plot of entry into a mirror world into one based on the era's trendy neo-Kantian questioning of the empirical existence of space and time, which rejects along neo-Cartesian lines everything but the I as verifiably real.<sup>10</sup>

Heavily invested in subjective idealism, in his essay "On Art" (1899) Briusov expounded his philosophy of art as a manifestation of radical individualism. The artist, he proclaimed, must possess above all the courage to explore his own soul, to know himself, and to assert, "This is I" (45). Indeed, Briusov had inscribed this prerequisite for art two years earlier in the title of his poetry collection *Me eum esse*. Each individual, his essay argues, inhabits his own world, separated from everyone else, whose subjective worlds he can never penetrate: "The world is my conception [of it]. Only my thoughts, my sensations, my desires are given to me—never anything else"

(52).<sup>11</sup> Yet, as a skeptic, Briusov continually examined and revised his own beliefs, as evident in the story “In the Mirror.”

The story’s plot is simple: when a woman with a long-standing love of mirrors discovers one that particularly attracts her, a struggle of wills begins between her and her reflection in that mirror. While frightened at the realization that the reflection wishes to replace her in the real (i.e., tangible) world, she is simultaneously drawn to the mysterious realm beyond the mirror’s surface. To some extent, she luxuriates in her life in that realm, but she also wishes to recover her place in the real world. Finally defeating her reflection, she resumes her role in everyday reality, only to be perceived as mad and consigned to an insane asylum, where she yearns to see the mirror again, uncertain whether she is, in fact, her original self or merely her own reflection.<sup>12</sup>

The huge printed “I” that opens the story in both the original and the translation announces its subjective idealism. The first paragraph teems with repetitions of prefixes signaling the narrative’s preoccupation with access to seductive alien domains: *pro-*, meaning ‘through’ (*prozrachno* ‘transparently’; *propast* ‘abyss’; and *tselye dni provodit* ‘spending whole days’), and *pere-* ‘across’ (four: *perestupaia kraia* ‘walking over the edge’; *perekreshchivaiushchi[e]sia miry* ‘intercrossing worlds’; *perspektiv[y]* ‘perspectives’; and *vselenny[e]*, *pererezyvaiushchi[e] nashi* ‘universes cutting across our own’).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the very first sentence paradoxically links the enigmatic and empirically unverifiable worlds beyond the mirrors with truth through the phrase *prozrachno-pravdiv[aia] glub* ‘transparently truthful depths,’ in which the first syllable of each Russian word is pronounced identically (51, 55).<sup>14</sup> From the outset, then, Briusov complicates a straightforward view of reality by describing and linguistically reinforcing the notion of multiple universes, each like an abyss, mysterious and unknown, intersecting with ours. The locus of this violent intersection is the surface of the mirror, which conceals depths that both lure and terrify the narrator, who spends hours before her many beguiling mirrors, passionately “giv[ing] her body” to their depths (55).

Though this phrasing evokes the Narcissus myth, with its suggestion of erotic attraction, here the narrator gives her body to the space beyond the mirrors rather than to her own reflection. The

surface of a mirror marks the boundary between art and life—a conceit enabled by the similarity between the surface of a mirror and an artist’s canvas: the framed, reflecting mirror parallels a painting. The narrator, however, emphasizes the magical realm beyond the mirrors’ surface—the realm of the imagination. Seduced by the infinite possibilities of the imaginary, she is like an artist, perceiving the world within the mirrors as one of silence, contemplation, and mystery—all categories associated with Symbolist and Decadent aesthetics, with self-contemplation as their central tenet.<sup>15</sup> The author further suggests his protagonist’s status as a potential artist by making her the author of the story, which he presents as a found manuscript (from a psychiatrist’s archive).

Drawn into the hypnotic mirror world, which elicits both apprehension and joy, the narrator undergoes a magical transformation whereby “the atoms of [her] being ... change their mutual relationship” (63). This fantastic journey, informed by tales of magic mirrors such as Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) and George MacDonald’s *Lilith* (1895), relies on the topos of dying into art. Describing how the narrator of “In the Mirror” grows numb with repugnance upon touching her reflection, Briusov uses the verb *pomertvela* (55), which is etymologically related to death (cf. *smert’* ‘death’). Her passage, accompanied by agonizing pain (the glass feels like “burning icy water” [63; *ognenno-studenaia voda*, 55]), marks a voyage into the deepest depths of the self and the Underworld. Briusov explicitly describes her arrival at the other side as entry into *nebytie* “non-existence” (64, 56). Like Narcissus in Ovid’s myth, she unites with her image as she plunges into the abyss, the transfer paralleling her symbolic death and transfiguration.

The dark souls of the mirror world in which she awakens, described as *dremliushchie soznaniia*, ‘slumbering consciousnesses’ (64, my trans.; 56), are phantoms that can acquire form only when someone looks in the mirror, whereupon they become that person’s reflection. The narrator explicitly compares their existence to the life of the dead, who possess only “a dim consciousness of [... their] ego, a confused memory of the past, and an oppressive desire to be incarnated anew, even if only for a moment, to see, to hear, and to speak” (64). Through a powerful exertion of her will, the narrator at last manages to draw her reflection back into the mirror and resume

her normal life, only to be forcibly committed to a psychiatric ward and to doubt her own identity.

The narrator's experience charts the failed symbolic journey of a modern-day artist under the conditions of subjective idealism. As Pierrot observes:

Professing as they did a fundamental idealism that led them to challenge, if not to deny outright, the reality of the external world, the decadents were quite naturally predisposed to turn in upon the self, upon their own consciousness, representing as it did the only reality remaining to them after the shipwreck of the external and illusory world. The decadent is thus quite naturally given to introspection and narcissism. (122)

While possessing the will and inquisitiveness necessary to descend into the depths of her own subjectivity, Briusov's narrator/protagonist lacks the requisite willpower to create her own artistic world from what she has experienced. She hardly fits the Symbolist paradigm of the Orpheus figure, which must descend to the Underworld and emerge from the crucible of profound sorrow as an inspired great artist, for her grief and her lesson learned seem insignificant in light of the universes and abysses evoked in the story's first paragraph.<sup>16</sup> Though realizing that intangibles (reflections, phantoms, and alternate universes) are just as real as empirical phenomena, she is defeated by her inability to tell her double apart from herself. A true Decadent, as exemplified by the Decadents' (and the Symbolists') ideal hero, Richard Wagner, would translate the seemingly pessimistic tenets of subjective idealism into a liberating creative philosophy and assert the power of her/his artistic will in the construction of a new reality.<sup>17</sup> In a sense Briusov's narrator is a sacrifice to potential art—with the mirror symbolizing that potential as a kind of blank framed canvas—but her sacrifice is in vain, for it yields no art.<sup>18</sup> Like Lorrain's Narkiss—another typically Decadent, solipsistic character—she has died into art, yet her martyrdom has created nothing of aesthetic value except the narrative of her downfall—which, according to the story's subtitle, languishes in the archives of a psychiatrist. The subtitle prompts us to read her account as curious interlopers examining a medical document. The narrator

can relate what has happened to her, but she cannot create a new artistic world out of that experience.

Yet the narrator's failure is not entirely her fault, Briusov suggests, but a logical consequence of the touted philosophy of subjective idealism, which depends on the absolute reality of the self while denying the reality—or at least the possibility of proving the reality—of everything else. On what philosophical basis, however, can we assume that the "I" is real? Briusov's narrator is undone not simply because she cannot distinguish reality from unreality, but also because she is uncertain whether she herself is real. This doubt topples the edifice of subjective idealism.

Briusov explores subjective idealism in two similar stories later included, together with "In the Mirror," in his 1907 collection, *The Earth's Axis: "Now That I'm Awake"* (1902) and "In the Tower" (1907). In the first, the narrator by sheer force of will exercises complete control over his dreams, which allows him to engage in sadistic fantasies while he sleeps. Like the narrator of "In the Mirror," he crosses into the mirror realm that symbolizes alternate reality. In Decadent terms, his capacity to manipulate a world of his own making within this alternate reality renders him a successful artist. As in the story "In the Mirror," however, failure to distinguish between dream and reality proves his ultimate undoing. Believing that he is dreaming, he kills his wife, only to discover that he is awake. Yet again subjective idealism fails, the narrator's inability to distinguish between dream and reality resulting in his being labeled a psychopath.

Similarly, in the later story, the narrator dreams that he is a Russian living in 1241, in the days of Alexander Nevsky, and, knowing that he is dreaming, he dares to stand up to the Teutons attacking his homeland. Thrown into a dark, dank dungeon, where he subsists on moldy bread and develops sores all over his body, he finally awakens, to find himself in the present day, surrounded by his beloved books. He begins to have doubts, however: what if he is in reality still in the dungeon, and dreaming that he is at home in the future? Which reality is real, and which is the alternate reality that exists beyond the mirror? Briusov thus continues to probe the paradoxes and problems of subjective idealism. Though at times it may yield something resembling art (a psychiatrist's archived document

or a dreamer's sadistic scenarios, known only to him) and inspire a superior exertion of willpower in the unreal realm (as in all three stories), it usually leads to madness or murder.

Dmitry Merezhkovsky: *The Resurrected Gods: Leonardo da Vinci*<sup>19</sup>

In *Leonardo*, the second novel in his trilogy *Christ and the Antichrist*, Merezhkovsky likewise explores the many ambiguities and paradoxes in the complex aesthetic-religious philosophy he elaborates through the surrogate of an artist figure, but does so without Briusov's characteristic self-irony and skepticism. Though subsequently Merezhkovsky would reject the philosophical position of *Leonardo*, while writing the novel he was passionately attached to the notion of Leonardo as the artist whose work, if only sporadically, can overcome and unify the ever-present dualities of paganism and Christianity, body and soul, the earthly and the celestial. Whereas Briusov's narrator represents a Decadent approach to art, Leonardo comes close to a Symbolist artist *avant la lettre*. At the same time, Merezhkovsky's novel, like Briusov's story, engages in dialogue with aspects of Decadent thought.

*Leonardo* reflects the "dual, mirror structure of the world" as Merezhkovsky saw it in the late 1890s (Sobolev 34). Whereas the French Symbolists often used mirror imagery to evoke emptiness or the void (exemplified in Mallarmé's "Igitur," 1870), Merezhkovsky's manifold mirroring is replete with meaning. The central opposition structuring the novel is of the Antichrist as the mirror image of Christ—in other words, absolute evil mirrors absolute good. Although the apocalyptic "Short Tale of the Antichrist" (1900) by the religious philosopher Vladimir Soloviev was certainly one of Merezhkovsky's chief sources of inspiration, the concept of good and evil as mirror images also attracted many *fin-de-siècle* Decadents whose works Merezhkovsky would have known. In particular, European Decadents cultivated this paradox in portrayals of Satanic masses, popularized by Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *Down There (Là-Bas)*, 1891), in which, paradigmatically, a Satanist priest consecrates hosts holding them upside down (61). He thus turns the rite into a mirror image of the Catholic ritual, with the latter representing the norm that the evil mirroring reverses, as it does throughout Merezhkovsky's novel and in European tradition in general.<sup>20</sup> Huys-

mans, the author of the “breviary of decadence,” *Against the Grain* (*A rebours*, 1884), explicitly acknowledges as much when he comments that Satanism is based on “Catholic principles ... followed in reverse (*à rebours*)” (qtd. in Praz 321, my trans). In *The Synagogue of Satan* (1897), the influential Polish Decadent Satanist Stanisław Przybyszewski echoes Friedrich Nietzsche as well as Huysmans when he similarly asserts, “In the realm of the Satanic only one principle is valid: *à rebours*, the reversal of all values which are sanctified by law” (25).

Thus Merezhkovsky was operating in a well-defined philosophical context when in *Leonardo* he cast a witches’ sabbath as a Catholic mass, but with certain terms reversed. Satan, for instance, first appears ambiguously as the Unknown sitting on a throne. Only the context and the fact that the throne is black indicate that he is the ruler of Hell rather than of Heaven. His first words could very well be spoken by Christ: “Accept ye my gifts—the humble, my strength; the meek, my pride; the poor in spirit, my knowledge; the grieving at heart, my joyousness—accept ye them!” (117, my trans).<sup>21</sup> A higher member of the Most Holy Inquisition serves Satan as the patriarch of the wizards: he is the evil *Doppelgänger* of the servant of the Inquisition in the realm of evil. He ironically proclaims in Latin, “May your name be blessed throughout the world and deliver us from all evil,” whereupon the sacrilegious choir begins to sing, again in Latin, parroting churchly chanting: “I believe in God—the father of Lucifer, who has created the heavens and the earth. And in his son Beelzebub” (117, my trans). This scene spotlights Merezhkovsky’s concern in *Leonardo* and the trilogy as a whole with the problem of distinguishing absolute good from absolute evil, which he dramatizes through the use of mirror imagery. For Merezhkovsky, evil abides in the space beyond the



Fig. 1. Konstantin Somov, *Sorcery* (1902).

mirror. Whereas in Briusov's story that realm is magical and somewhat frightening, though tempting, for Merezhkovsky it is demonic and terrifying because of its resemblance to the sacred, and thus its power to deceive. In visual art of the period, the temptation of the unknown world beyond the mirror is suggested by the woman's expression in Konstantin Somov's *Sorcery* of 1902 and, even more clearly, his *Sorceress* of 1915, in which the image in the mirror suggests the demonic sabbath and pure evil that Merezhkovsky associates with that domain (figs. 1, 2, 3).

Following Charles Baudelaire, for whom the gaze of Beauty is both "infernal and divine" (29), Huysmans in *Là-bas* focuses on the proximity of saintliness to evil.<sup>22</sup> The protagonist, Durtal, is researching the life of the Satanist Baron Gilles de Rais, who, he discovers, started out as a pious man aspiring to holiness and a companion of Jeanne d'Arc. However, Durtal is told that "[f]rom lofty Mysticism to base Satanism there is but one step. In the Beyond all things touch. He [the Baron] carried his zeal for prayer into the territory of blasphemy"



Fig. 2. Konstantin Somov, *The Sorceress* (1915).



Fig. 3. Alberto Martini, illustration approved by Briusov accompanying the second (1910) and third (1911) editions of *In the Mirror*.

(52). This Decadent philosophy is reflected not only in *Leonardo's* refrain, "as above, so below," but also in the portrait of Renata, alternately saintly and diabolical, in Briusov's novel *Ognennyi angel* 'The Fiery Angel' (1907). The Baron attracts Durtal (and possibly Huysmans) above all because he has the courage and character to commit deeds not only of devout piety but also of unrestrained evil, in contrast to the bourgeois mediocrity that Huysmans perceived everywhere among his contemporaries. Similarly, under the influence of Nietzsche, Merezhkovsky admired the protagonists of his own trilogy—Julian the Apostate, Leonardo, and Peter the Great—for their extraordinary accomplishments, despite doubts as to their morality.<sup>23</sup>

As in the first novel of the trilogy, *Julian the Apostate*, and the third, *Peter and Aleksei*, Merezhkovsky's major question is whether the titular character of *Leonardo* is godlike or demonic. The story is set in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, when Girolamo Savonarola is arousing the people with fiery speeches prophesying the imminent end of the world and the coming of the Antichrist, while the Inquisition systematically is putting to death anyone suspected of dealings with the devil. The monk Fra Timoteo, who suspects Leonardo of being the Antichrist's forerunner, incites the people against him, warning that the face of the "Great Seducer" is "like unto the face of Christ, and he will be given a voice persuasive, delectable.... And his cunning mercifulness will seduce many" (145, my trans). Another monk, Brother Tomas, later affirms that "many will believe [in the Antichrist] ... and will be seduced by the guise of holiness.... Even the most righteous will not recognize him ..., they will not see where light is and where darkness is" (*Sobranie* 133).<sup>24</sup> These words horrify the apprentice Giovanni, who fears that he will not be able to distinguish Christ or his precursor from his diabolical mirror image.

Throughout the novel, the mirror serves as the symbol of Leonardo's possible heresy. The author tells us early on that Leonardo's inverted writing is legible only in a mirror, which observers interpret as a strategy for concealing heretical thoughts. People also fear him because he is left-handed—the mirror opposite of the norm—which they ascribe to his having made a pact with the devil and practiced black magic. Furthermore, the narrator connects Leonardo's right-

to-left script with writing conventions in the East, the locus of Islam and Judaism. Within the framework of the novel's series of oppositions, the East is negatively valued *vis-à-vis* Christianity and the West. Merezhkovsky thus situates the mirror and the realm beyond it (in which Leonardo's writing becomes legible) within the domain of the diabolical.

Leonardo's practical application of his scientific knowledge without concern for morality particularly troubles Giovanni, who is shocked by Leonardo's sketches of war machines, including one that advances with rotating blades like a spider's legs, chopping up everyone in its path. Leonardo made these sketches with the same care and finesse that he brought to his drawings of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child. At the same time, a series of *mise-en-abyme* ekphrases mirror Leonardo's sacred works, which in turn mirror nature, which mirrors a transcendental reality. Here mirroring is not diabolical, but divine. Seeing *The Last Supper* convinces Giovanni, overwhelmed by its celestial beauty and clarity, that no human being is closer to God than Leonardo.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the lifelike qualities of Leonardo's drawing of the infant Jesus make Giovanni feel "as though [he] himself had seen Him, had forgotten, and had now suddenly recalled Him" (321). Since the impact is that of a mirror image of Jesus, in accordance with Leonardo's conception of art as a mirror of reality, the experience persuades Giovanni, however briefly, that Leonardo knows God intimately, and therefore his talent must be a divine gift.

Merezhkovsky exploits the ambiguity of the mirror, traditionally associated with both the demonic and the divine, to reflect Leonardo's enigmatic character.<sup>26</sup> When Giovanni's tormenting doubts cause him to fall ill and plunge him into delirium, Leonardo's evil double, who looks like Leonardo, visits him. Right-handed, unlike Leonardo, and described as the artist's mirror image, the double tells Giovanni that there is no God: what people call God is merely the laws of mechanics, which drive the terrible spider-like killing-machine with bloody legs that is Leonardo's invention. This eternal force called God is as indifferent as mathematics; there is no higher sense of right or wrong, good or evil, and humanity cannot plead with God because he is not a real being. Whereas formerly love originated in weakness, miracles, and ignorance—that is, mistaken

faith—now it derives from strength, truth, and knowledge gained through science. The serpent spoke the truth when he claimed that if humans ate from the Tree of Knowledge they would be like gods. This argument against the existence of God obviously recalls scenes from Dostoevsky's major novels, especially *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which petty devils embodying the consequence-laden principle of a sweeping skepticism appear in visions.

Upon realizing that the double represents the devil, Giovanni curses him and throws him out, but the motif of the double soon returns when Giovanni realizes that even Christ Himself has a mirror image that resembles Him yet lacks a certain human element. Viewing Leonardo's image of Christ in *The Last Supper*, Giovanni finds the countenance of Christ divinely beautiful and radiant with wisdom, but distant from humanity and even terrifying. Giovanni's inability to reconcile Leonardo's earlier drawing of the infant Jesus, who seems so human, with the later representation, both confounds and distresses him. Merezhkovsky complicates the basic opposition of Christ/Antichrist by bifurcating the first element: in the dual tradition of Russian Orthodox icons, Christ is depicted with either his divine or his human nature emphasized. Giovanni is shocked when his friend Cesare explains that the two representations of Christ are not only similar, but actually doubles. Jesus reveals his humanity through emotions, profoundly expressed when he prays to the Father on the Mount of Olives to take the cup away from him, his perspiration falling in drops of blood. At the Last Supper, however, he has accepted the "Eternal Necessity," as Cesare puts it, and "there is no longer for Him any good or evil, life or death, love or hate; there is but the will of the Father" (325). The latter Christ is beyond emotions; he is the Word, or Reason Contemplative. These are the two aspects of the Son, but they appear as doubles, Cesare explains, his revelation prompting Giovanni's mindless repetition of "Doubles ... doubles ..." as he once again falls ill.

Christ's dual nature, the resemblance between Him and the Antichrist, and doubts about Leonardo's true nature prove beyond Giovanni's endurance. He confides in his journal, notably employing a chiasmic, mirroring structure that emphasizes his obsession, "The visage of the Antichrist in the visage of Christ, the visage of Christ in the visage of the Antichrist.... The ultimate mystery: two are one.

Christ and the Antichrist are one. Heaven above and heaven below. Nay, may this never be...! Better death" (579, 580, my trans). These are Giovanni's last words before he hangs himself.

Giovanni first learns about this ultimate mystery from Cassandra, the woman he loves, who originally appears as a witch and, like her renowned namesake, possesses special knowledge. With the Antichrist's advent, she explains, the pagan gods, who became powerful demons after the coming of Christ, will be resurrected. Cassandra participates in witches' sabbaths, which develop into orgiastic Dionysian festivals enacted by the Olympian gods, risen from the dead, over which Dionysus presides as Satan.<sup>27</sup> Just as the first element of the Christ/Antichrist opposition splits into two, so does the second element splinter into Satan (the demonic) and Dionysus (the pagan), while the Christ/Antichrist opposition is shown to correspond to the pairs spiritual/sensual and heaven/earth.

Cassandra divulges to Giovanni the profound secret of divine and diabolical mirroring and identity. Human beings, she reveals, were created not by God, but by a lesser deity, and were given a spark of divinity by Sophia, Divine Wisdom. Enraged at this new creation, God directed His wrathful eyes upon the primordial black slime. "And there ... his whole face, full of fury, was reflected as in a mirror, and that image became the Angel of Darkness..., Satan—Damned Wisdom" (*Sobranie* 208). Satan is thus the animated reflection of God. Cassandra then shows Giovanni the following inscription:

Heaven above—heaven below,  
Stars above—stars below,  
All that is above is also below—  
If you understand this, you are blessed. (553, my  
trans)<sup>28</sup>

It is necessary, Cassandra tells Giovanni, to unite the Light gods with the Dark gods, the heaven above with the heaven below, to merge the Two into One. The ultimate secret—that the embodiment of pure evil is the mirror image of God because it ultimately derives from God and, in a sense, is God—is what prompts Giovanni's suicide.

Merezhkovsky uses the image of the mirror not only to formulate a metaphysical paradox, but also to emphasize Leonardo's enigmatic nature by repeatedly comparing him to swans swimming on

the mirror-like surface of water. Decadence and Symbolism boast an especially strong linkage between swans and reflection, in tandem with the Narcissus myth, thanks in large part to the fame of “The Swan” from Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil*. The poem compares a pitiful swan out of water to Narcissus, both reproaching the heavens for their cruelty, inasmuch as neither can gain access to what he yearns for. Baudelaire’s lyrical persona laments a world of grief and melancholy, and the homonymy of *cygne* ‘swan’ and *signe* ‘sign’ suggests that even art is incapable of restoring the world’s lost harmony. Merezhkovsky surely knew this poem, as well as the many grieving swan images of Symbolism and Decadence, and its mournfulness—though not its protest against God—informs the swan simile in his novel.

The simile first occurs shortly after Giovanni meets Leonardo’s double. Duke Moro, Leonardo’s patron, watches the white birds swim out on his castle moat toward the light of torches. Silent and pure, they glide on the dark mirror-like water reflecting the heavens above them, between the heaven above and the heaven below, “equally foreign and akin to both” (330). Moro reflects that Leonardo, in his mysterious and perhaps transgressive life, is just as useless and beautiful, pure and virginal, as the ethereal, white birds—surrounded by stars, “with their doubles on the black mirror of the waters” (332, my trans).<sup>29</sup> This trope, linking white and black through the doubling mirror, suggests that Leonardo embodies neither absolute good nor absolute evil (Christ or Antichrist), but occupies an intermediate position between the two. Outside the human world of war and politics, as well as the divine sphere of religious revelation, he lives in his own world, a world of beauty that is incomprehensible and of no use to humankind. In a sense, however, his goodness, reflected throughout the novel in his profound love for all of nature, is recognized as divine insofar as he is surrounded, metaphorically, by heavenly stars, like a saint. Yet like the swans, he has a double in the heaven below, and thus, perhaps, some mysterious link with evil. If even the pure and beautiful swans have a dark double, perhaps the same holds for every living thing. Leonardo seems to embrace this view, approvingly citing in his journal Seneca’s words, “Within every man is a god and a beast, chained together” (491).

The symbolism of swans on mirror-like water alters somewhat

when the aged Leonardo moves to France to serve at the court of King Francis I, who settles him in a chateau on the Loire. Here, as Merezhkovsky tells us three times in similar terms, the water is still and smooth as a mirror, and wild swans make it their home. The calm water reflecting the heavens and the swans symbolize the peace of Leonardo's last years, the tranquility recalling the mirror-like lake in Venus's magical, silent kingdom that drowning men see before they perish, according to the tale with which Leonardo entertains Mona Lisa as she sits for her portrait.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, Leonardo's death again links Heaven and Hell through the mirror image: When Leonardo strives to fly up to heaven on enormous wings, he feels as though huge stones are pushing him down. He ultimately realizes that "the stones and the wings, the pressing of the weight and the striving for flight, the height and the depth [a]re one and the same: to fly or fall [i]s all the same" (627, my trans). In other words, he comprehends Cassandra's secret—that the heaven above is no different from the heaven below.

The mirror, so significant for the novel's metaphysics and the characterization of the protagonist, is also prominent in Leonardo's theory of art. When Giovanni first comes to him as an apprentice, Leonardo tells him that an artist's soul must be like a mirror, reflecting all objects, movements, and colors while itself remaining motionless and clear. Art should never imitate another work, but should reflect all of creation, the ugly as well as the beautiful—which is why Leonardo sketches expressions of pain and suffering and seeks out aged and sickly subjects for his canvasses. Like the later Symbolists, Leonardo perceives mysterious correspondences in nature, which are like voices from other worlds calling to one another. He captures these correspondences in his painting. In reflecting nature, then, the artist is reflecting both divine creation and the higher world of the divine. In their idealism and trope of reflection, Leonardo's aesthetic theories approach the theories of the Romantic poet Percy B. Shelley.<sup>31</sup>

#### Androgyny: The Complementary Ideal

Leonardo supplements his Neo-platonic concept of art with an unusual notion of authorial signature, maintaining that in painting portraits, every artist unconsciously blends his own face and body,

or at least his soul, with those of his subjects. This principle (which seems to contradict his conception of art as a mirror) becomes realized when Leonardo works on his portrait of Mona Lisa. As the work progresses over the course of three years, it seems to Giovanni that both the real Mona Lisa and the portrait look increasingly like Leonardo. The resemblance strikes him as less in her features than in her eyes and her smile, which appear to reflect a probing curiosity about the mysteries of creation and the divine similar to Leonardo's. Giovanni compares her smile to those of the disciple Thomas in Verrocchio's famous sculpture, for which for the young Leonardo had served as a model; of Eve before the Tree of Knowledge in Leonardo's first painting; of the Angel in *The Virgin of the Rocks*; and of Leda in *Leda and the Swan*. It is as though all his life Leonardo has been seeking the reflection of his own charm, Giovanni muses, to find it finally in the face of Mona Lisa. The similarity among these smiles seems miraculous to Giovanni and blurs the distinction between reality and dream, as though Mona Lisa were not a living person, but a phantom called up by the master's will, "a feminine double of Leonardo himself" (508). Giovanni concludes that Mona Lisa and Leonardo are two mirrors, reflecting each other into infinity.

Differing from him only in gender, Mona Lisa is thus almost identical—or perfectly complementary—to Leonardo. Together they could form the perfect androgyne—a concept Merezhkovsky does not mention here, but addresses later in the novel. Early on, however, he endows Leonardo with feminine facial features, long, light, curly hair, a feminine voice, and hands that are slim and beautiful, though immensely strong. The artist is apparently a virgin, despite rumors of sodomy in his youth, which the implied author deems unfounded. By contrast, Mona Lisa possesses certain characteristics considered masculine at the time, particularly her erudition (she knows both Latin and Greek). The androgyne as the symbol of the ideal union of masculine and feminine was popular among Russian Symbolists and Decadents. Soloviev, for instance, believed that spiritual, chaste androgyny represented the highest form of love, and in the West, the ideal of the androgyne was associated specifically with Leonardo da Vinci. This link was established by Walter Pater's famous essay on Leonardo in his 1873 *Studies in the*

*Renaissance*, and further promulgated by French Decadent occultist Joséphin Péladan in his 1891 novel, *The Androgyne*.<sup>32</sup> Merezhkovsky may be suggesting that Leonardo and Mona Lisa have the power to form a spiritual androgyne, and perhaps do so during the painting of the portrait, which profoundly connects them in spirit. Leonardo's masterpiece reflects this spiritual androgyne. Later in the novel a poet detects the androgyne in Leonardo's *John the Baptist*, which, significantly, he analogizes with the portrait of Mona Lisa, conjecturing that Leonardo wished to reunite in the subject the fundamental elements of feminine and masculine, which were once joined, according to Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. Whereas Sigmund Freud, who admired what he called Merezhkovsky's "great historical novel" (17), famously diagnosed the androgynous figures in Leonardo's paintings as a sublimation of the historical Leonardo's unrealized homosexual erotic drives, Merezhkovsky simply views the Renaissance enigmatic genius as an androgyne when projected into his art.<sup>33</sup>

Merezhkovsky explains Leonardo's failure to find genuine fulfillment (whether through earthly love or spiritual androgyne) by his inability to leave the "charmed circle" (523) of his art and enter life so as to develop a relationship with his subject outside of art—a failure disastrous for him and fatal for Mona Lisa. Needing to learn whether Mona Lisa is "a living being or only a mere specter—the reflection of his own soul in a mirror of feminine charm" (524, my trans), he ultimately decides that she represents life, and fearing that she would become repulsive to him, as other women have been, he chooses the portrait over the woman. Though aware that she can reveal the truth to him—that to penetrate the deepest, most wonderful mysteries of the Cave he needs more than the curiosity he amply possesses—he nonetheless cringes at the thought of sexuality, of the living female body. Caught between the conflicting claims of the flesh-and-blood man and the artist dedicated to representing God's world, he elects to stifle the living charm of Mona Lisa, slowly stealing her soul for the sake of the portrait. While she readily sacrifices that soul to create their spiritual child—their masterpiece—he, confident in his choice, knows "that she [will] be submissive to him until the end—[will] accept all things, endure all things; [will] die, and not wax rebellious" (526, my trans). Merezhkovsky compares

the shadow of a thought touching her face during her last sitting to “the misty trace of a living breath upon the surface of a mirror” (526), thereby emphasizing her reduction to Leonardo’s “complementary reflection” (526).

Soon thereafter Leonardo learns of her death and recalls superstitious tales of magical portraits that take the life of their subjects. Though at their final meeting he endeavored to draw her into the enchanted circle of his art by telling her fairy tales, like a sorcerer chanting incantations, now he reproaches himself for sacrificing a living soul to the dead—to Mona Lisa’s mere reflection on his canvas, however great the immortal work of art. Merezhkovsky thus takes up one of the Russian Symbolists’ favorite themes of the relationship between art and life, illustrating some of the moral issues involved by portraying the moral failure of even the great and pious master Leonardo, who appears here in his more demonic mode. In this episode, Merezhkovsky adapts the Romantic tropes of the double and the portrait that takes the soul of its sitter to fit his Symbolist philosophical framework and to explore issues that fascinated the Decadents and Symbolists: the creation of the androgyne as an ideal and the relationship of art to life.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

Commentators often fault *Leonardo* for the obviousness of Merezhkovsky’s oppositions and for his portrayal of Leonardo not as a human being, but as a symbol of the artist who strives to reconcile the truths of Christianity (heaven) and paganism (earth). One such critic admits that Leonardo becomes more sympathetic and human toward the end of the work, but she dismisses this change by asserting that by then he no longer functions as a symbol (Dolinina 192). Where exactly does he cease being a symbol and begin to be more human? My analysis indicates that, although the reader is meant to understand Leonardo symbolically as well as psychologically, his symbolic meaning as an artist is by no means univalent. Leonardo is far from a flat character, and Merezhkovsky’s world of intertwined mirror-like dualisms is equally complex. As a proto-Symbolist artist, Leonardo succeeds, overall, in creating a unique artistic world where Briusov’s would-be Decadent narrator fails. Both Briusov and Merezhkovsky rely on mirror imagery to explore the implica-

tions of their respective worldviews and the dangers inherent in artistic creation. In both cases, the mirror is a realm of alternative reality, either magical and seductive (Briusov) or potentially both demonic and, paradoxically, divine (Merezhkovsky). Moreover, the central concerns of both works are by no means limited to the Russian cultural context, and are better understood in connection with European trends, particularly French Symbolism and Decadence.

#### Notes

1 In brief, I define Symbolism as an art that seeks to evoke another reality through symbols—either the poet’s inner world or a mystical or religious realm beyond the earthly domain—and Decadence as an art concerned foremost with the perceived decline of contemporary civilization and its subtlest, most refined artistic creations in its final moments. Both, but especially Decadence, explored the hidden depths of the self and the problem of good and evil.

2 For a classification and discussion of permutations of the Narcissus myth in French *fin-de-siècle* literature, see Pierre Jourde, who claims that Symbolists and Decadents were drawn to “the specular myth *par excellence*” in large part because of their metaliterary tendencies: “A literature that observes itself and tends to turn away from the real to reflect on its own nature, to reflect itself, necessarily had to make narcissism the central question” (11).

3 A variant of the poem appeared in 1869, but it did not become well known outside the circle of Mallarmé’s initiates until its publication in 1898, after the poet’s death. Mallarmé considered “Hérodiade” one of his most important works, although unfinished—not surprisingly, if consummate poetry is inaccessible.

4 Romantic examples include Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Oval Portrait” (1850) and Nikolai Gogol’s “The Portrait” (1845). Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) represents a later (Decadent) variant on this motif.

5 On Villiers’s idealism and its influence, see Jean Pierrot 63-70. Pierrot also discusses mirrors in French Decadence (208-14).

6 This story was published in Régnier’s first collection of short stories, *The Jasper Cane*, in 1897. It is very likely that Briusov, whose story “In the Mirror” is in some ways similar, read it.

7 For instance, after having accidentally burned his beard, on October 5, 1875 Guy de Maupassant looked in a mirror and hardly recognized himself; in fact, “it seemed that he had never seen himself before” (qtd. in Gicquel 57). Many of his characters experience similar identity crises, and many are possessed

by doubles (see Gicquel). Warren Motte discusses this kind of dissociation at length, including how Rainer Maria Rilke's Malte Laurids Brigge's mirror image becomes a kind of double that takes over his identity (776-79). Joyce O. Lowrie notes that the word mirror derives not only from the popular Latin *mirare*, "to observe attentively," but also from the classical Latin *mirari*, "to be astonished" (1).

8 In many of Hoffmann's stories, as in both of the Russian works I discuss here, the double is associated with an artist figure.

9 For more on doubles in German Romanticism and the theory of doubles, see Andrew J. Webber.

10 Jourde identifies this identity crisis as the most important problem of the *fin de siècle*, solved only through withdrawal into the self, to "a sort of new Cartesian *tabula rasa*": writers turned away from the deceptive existence of the world to seek "the original illumination of 'I am'" (13). See his discussion of this phenomenon, particularly 13-15.

11 The Russian Decadent/Symbolist Fyodor Sologub takes an even more solipsistic position in his notorious 1907 article, "Man Is a Devil to Man," declaring, "Only I am everything and in everything" (*vse i vo vsem tol'ko ia*; 568). Georgette Donchin provides more examples of the Russian Symbolists' extreme egoism, which she, too, associates with Decadence (97-99).

12 Georges Rodenbach's "The Friend of the Mirrors" (1901), which Briusov may have known, has a similar plot. The protagonist both loves and fears mirrors, which he collects, isolating himself from the rest of the world in his hall of mirrors. Ultimately declared insane and committed to an insane asylum, he literally lunges into a mirror, trying to enter the realm behind the glass, and dies from the attempt. As in Briusov's story, the world behind the mirror is described as a zone of death, and the images in the mirror are vampiric, drawing life from those who look in the mirror. For a detailed discussion of this story, see Lowrie 145-56.

13 Although *perspektivy* does not contain the prefix *pere-*, it stands out as phonically linked to the other words listed.

14 The first page number refers to the Russian original.

15 In Russian the word for contemplation, *sozertsanie*, shares the root *zer-*, associated with looking, with *zerkalo* 'mirror'. Cf. the English 'reflection' and 'speculation.' Again, my distinction between Symbolism and Decadence is not meant to be absolute.

16 As Joan Delaney Grossman has shown, for the Russian Symbolists the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice was "a paradigm ... for creative activity where fantas-

tic images are drawn from the artist's soul into the world of reality" (126).

17 In Jourde's words, when the external world is in doubt, "one must become a world oneself" (14). In the Russian context the best literary examples of this type of artist are Trirodov and the narrator in Sologub's trilogy *The Created Legend* (serialized 1907-13).

18 That Briusov believed the artist must sacrifice himself to create great art is evident from his programmatic 1905 article "A Holy Sacrifice."

19 Hereafter *Leonardo*. The English translation, by Bernard Guilbert Guerney, is misleadingly titled *The Romance of Leonardo da Vinci*. The closest Leonardo comes to romance is a strong spiritual affinity with Mona Lisa. Moreover, the English translation is abridged and problematic. My discussion therefore is based on the original, and, as indicated in the text of my article, I have modified the translation in many instances.

20 S. Piskunova and V. Piskunov point out that the devil and the mirror are closely linked because both are related to duplicity: the mirror offers appearance rather than reality, just as the devil passes off "black for white, coals for money, evil for good" (189). They give Gogol's "The Night before Christmas" as an example of a Russian work in which the mirror is associated with the devil.

21 Unless otherwise indicated, page numbers in the body of this article refer to the English version.

22 The Baudelaire citation is from "Hymn to Beauty," in which the poetic persona questions whether Beauty is from Heaven or Hell, but in the end proclaims that it does not matter.

23 For a discussion of Nietzsche's powerful influence on Merezhkovsky, especially in the 1890s, see Bernice Rosenthal.

24 All translations from the original *Sobranie sochinenii* in the body of this article are mine, as the relevant passages are not included in the English translation.

25 Giovanni's name (John), also that of Jesus's favorite disciple, buttresses this image of Leonardo as a Christ-figure.

26 Jacques J. Lardoux discusses the ambiguity and paradoxes of mirror imagery, referencing, for instance, its association with both life and death and consequently its prominence in both marriage and funeral rituals in many cultures (135), as well as its link with both God and the devil (147). The mirror is also associated with both truth and deception, surface and depth, philosophical contemplation and vain self-absorption, etc.

27 The Olympian gods are symbolically resurrected from their graves in the novel as their statues are discovered and disinterred. The novel opens with the

exhumation of Aphrodite, the white devil.

28 A. L. Sobolev attests that this quatrain summarizes Merezhkovsky's artistic credo of the late 1890s and the early twentieth century. Merezhkovsky had included it earlier in a collection of poetry and written it in his friends' albums (34, 48n).

29 White swans might seem tautological, but it is notable that in Russian the first three letters of the two words mirror each other: *BELyi LEBedi*. According to Aage A. Hansen-Löve, swans are associated with prophecy in Russian Symbolism, especially for Andrei Bely and Viacheslav Ivanov (526-27).

30 Elsewhere Leonardo sees a different symbolic meaning in the silent, calm water of the Martesana Canal at the foot of the Alps, also likened to a mirror: for him this water symbolizes the power of the creative human will, contrasted with the rushing water of its wild sister, the impetuous Adda River, representing boundless nature. Each of these bodies of water, as well as what they stand for, is equally dear to Leonardo.

31 Compare Shelley's theories as elaborated, for instance, by M. H. Abrams in his classic study, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (127-32) and Beverly Taylor in her insightful article on Shelley. Taylor illustrates that Shelley saw poetry as "a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted" (92). For Shelley, she argues, the poet "must depict the Ideal so abundantly mirrored in this world of 'things'" (100). Shelley's formulation is not a call for passivity and mimesis, however, but an active endeavor to reveal the Ideal—more active than Leonardo's aesthetics as portrayed by Merezhkovsky.

32 On Pater, Leonardo, and the androgyne, see Mario Praz 355-56; on Péladan, Leonardo, and the androgyne, see Praz 334-40.

33 Freud designates homosexuality as pathology, whereas for Merezhkovsky androgyny constitutes completion. Like Merezhkovsky, Freud (who cites Pater's essay) references Mona Lisa, the Holy family, John the Baptist, flying, the enigmatic smile, and so forth, but posits the etiology of Leonardo's pathology as his desirous relationship to his mother(s): "[T]he love of the mother became his destiny . . . he represented the wish fulfillment of the boy infatuated with his mother in such blissful union of the male and female nature" (87, 89).

34 I agree, therefore, with Irene Masing-Delic's view that Leonardo fails in his relationship with Mona Lisa. However, I disagree with her assertion that Leonardo fails as an artist because "he seeks to grasp . . . reality intellectually and analytically, rather than to understand it with both mind and heart" (69). For Leonardo, as Merezhkovsky makes clear, great knowledge brings great love—love of nature, all creation, and the Creator. He may fail in many of his relations with other people, but this is not entirely his fault—he is a great misunderstood

and alienated artist.

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