Title: The “hubris topos” in Symbolist poetry

Abstract:

Departing from the opacity of decadent tropes, early Symbolist poets like Bal'mont and Merezhkovskii crafted more “transparent,” daring personas that may in retrospect seem more typical of Maiakovskii. The poet’s arrogant self-affirmation developed in tandem with a vogue for the philosophical problems and characters of canonical tragedies. Bal'mont declared in *Budem kak solntse* (1903), “Красив лишь тот, в ком дерзкая отвага, / И кто умен, хотя бы ум его – / Ум Ричарда, Мефисто, или Яго.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In his essay “Kop'e Afiny,” Ivanov linked the tragic hero’s audacity (*derznovenie*) with the “necessity” of the tragic plot and, earlier, in *L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii*, Merezhkovskii presented tragedy as the “most audacious and most profound contemplation” of human fate.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, despite Merezhkovskii’s own pretention to poetic boldness, Volynskii claimed that he achieved just the opposite – “*samounichizhenie*.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In his Symbolist “manifesto,” “Kliuchi tain,” Briusov asserted “Искусство только там, где дерзновенье за грань […].”[[4]](#footnote-4) Yet the “audacity” of the bold poet is a tragic assertion of uncommon ability, carrying the seed of self-destruction. Also posturing, classical poets often employed the humility topos for ironic effect. Analyzing the discourse of selected Symbolist poets, in this paper, I argue that the “hubris topos” of Symbolist poetry is not simply a display of vain arrogance, but a demonstration of the potential reversibility of the self-elevating hubris and the humble lowering that one witnesses in the tragic genre.

1. K.D. Bal'mont, “Khudozhnik” in *Budem kak solntse. Kniga simvolov* (Moskva: Skorpion, 1903), 240. Cf. also in this volume “Khochu byt' derzkim, khochu byt' smelym…” (158). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. V.I. Ivanov, “Kop'e Afiny,” *Vesy* 10 (1904): 6-16, 12-13; D.S. Merezhkovskii, *L.* *Tolstoi i Dostoevskii* (S.-Peterburg: Mir iskusstva, 1901), 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A.L. Volynskii, Review of *Novye stikhotvoreniia (1891-1895)* in *Bor'ba za idealizm* (S.-Peterburg: Izdanie N.G. Molostvova, 1900), 375. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Valerii Briusov, “Kliuchi tain,” *Vesy* 1 (1904): 3-21, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)