

Artículo de investigación

The fall of the roman empire in Valery Bryusov's novel-myth The Altar of Victory

Падение Римской империи в романе-мифе Валерия Брюсова «Алтарь Победы»

La caída del Imperio Romano en la novela-mito de Valery Bryusov *El Altar de la Victoria*

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Abstract

The article considers the antique motifs in Bryusov's novel-myth *The Altar of Victory* (1913). We found that there is a complex multi-level hierarchical system of the different motifs. The division of them into three large groups was carried out on the basis of religious beliefs. There are pagans, heretics and Christians. The struggle between them determines the main conflict of the novel. The protagonist, against his will, is involved in historical collisions of a universal significance. Heretic teachings play the leading role among them, which is explained by the enormous influence of Vladimir Solovyov's work devoted to this topic. Furthermore, the novel reflected Bryusov's deep interest in the history of ancient Rome, his activity as a translator of Latin poets and his fascination with mysticism and spiritualism. We deduce that Bryusov's neomythologism has determined the ways of the embodiment of the ancient myth in *The Altar of Victory*. The author tried to establish correlates between the fall of the Roman empire and a pre-revolutionary era that preceded the October Revolution in Russia (1917) and the

Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются античные мотивы в романе-мифе В.Я. Брюсова «Алтарь Победы» (1913). Мы определили, что в романе создана сложная многоуровневая иерархическая система, включающая в себя различные мотивы. В зависимости от религиозных убеждений персонажей все мотивы делятся на три большие группы: языческие, еретические и христианские. Борьба между язычниками, еретиками и христианами определяет основной конфликт романа. Главный герой романа, против своей воли, вовлечен в исторические столкновения универсального значения. Среди них ведущую роль играют еретические учения, что объясняется огромным влиянием на Брюсова работ Владимира Соловьева, посвященных этой теме. Кроме того, роман отражал глубокий интерес русского писателя к истории древнего Рима, его деятельность в качестве переводчика латинских поэтов и его увлечение мистикой и спиритизмом. Мы пришли к выводу, что неомифологические интенции Брюсова обусловили способы

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Soviet Union (USSR). It gives us grounds for the genre definition of Bryusov's work as a neomythological novel.

Keywords: Bryusov; ancient myth; neomythologism; novel-myth; motivic analysis; Gnostics.

воплощения древнего мифа в романе «Алтарь Победы». Автор попытался установить корреляции между падением Римской империи и дореволюционной эпохой, предшествовавшей Октябрьской революции в России (1917) и Советском Союзе (СССР). Это дает нам основание для жанрового определения произведения Брюсова как неомифологического романа.

Ключевые слова: Брюсов; древний миф; неомифологизм; роман-миф; мотивный анализ; гностики.

Resumen

El artículo discute motivos antiguos en la novela de mitos "Altar de la Victoria" de Bryusov (1913). Determinamos que la novela creó un complejo sistema jerárquico multinivel que incluye varios motivos. Dependiendo de las creencias religiosas de los personajes, todos los motivos se dividen en tres grandes grupos: paganos, hereéticos y cristianos. La lucha entre paganos, herejes y cristianos determina el principal conflicto de la novela. El protagonista de la novela, en contra de su voluntad, está involucrado en enfrentamientos históricos de importancia universal. El liderazgo hereje lo juegan las enseñanzas hereéticas, lo que se explica por la enorme influencia de los trabajos de Vladimir Solovyov sobre este tema en Bryusov. Además, la novela reflejaba el profundo interés del escritor ruso en la historia de la antigua Roma, su actividad como traductor de poetas latinos y su pasión por el misticismo y el espiritismo. Llegamos a la conclusión de que las intenciones no mitológicas de Bryusov determinaron las formas de traducir el antiguo mito en la novela "Altar of Victory". El autor intentó establecer correlaciones entre la caída del Imperio Romano y la era prerrevolucionaria que precedió a la Revolución de Octubre en Rusia (1917) y la Unión Soviética (URSS). Esto nos da la base para la definición de género del trabajo de Bryusov como una novela neo-mitológica.

Palabras clave: Bryusov; mito antiguo; neomitologismo; novela neo-mitológica; análisis de motivos; Gnósticos

Introduction

Valery Bryusov (1873-1924) is a famous Russian poet, prose writer, literary critic, playwright and translator. His works belong to the most vivid achievement of the Russian Symbolists movement. Bryusov's prosaic heritage includes such novels as *Star Mountain* (1895-1899), *The Fiery Angel* (1908), *The Altar of Victory* (1913), and science fiction stories, some of them were selected for *The Republic of the Southern Cross*. Bryusov showed interest in all the latest scientific achievements, was familiar with the works of such scientists as Charles Darwin, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, He paid special attention to the utopian projects described in the novels of Jules Verne and in Nikolai Fedorov's theoretical works, which inspired Bryusov's science fiction works. Belief in the power of science did not prevent him from taking part in spiritual sessions which were in fashion in fin de siècle Russia. Mysticism was sophisticatedly combined

with practicality and rationalism in writer's character.

Interest in the history of ancient Rome, especially the first centuries of our era, accompanied Bryusov throughout almost his entire life. First step was made in articles about the life and work of ancient Roman poet of the 4th century Avsonius and an officer of the Roman Empire Pentadius. Bryusov devoted a lot of time to translations of less known ancient Roman poets. Ashukin, one of the Russian researchers of Bryusov's work, stated that Bryusov "intended to compile a large book titled *Aurea Roma (Golden Rome)* about 4th century Latin writers but his plans remained unfulfilled" (Ashukin, 2006).

The historical theme attracted Bryusov as material for his neo-mythological literary constructions. The Russian Symbolists were convinced that the myths concentrate the main

peculiarities of the human culture, the knowledge of which will serve as a way to decipher the inner essence of the world. They understood myth as a container of the collective unconscious (a concept originally defined by German psychoanalyst Carl Jung) and as a reflection of the universal aesthetic ideal. At the same time, the Russian symbolists' works continued to develop the traditions of Romanticism and the Russian realistic novel, and sounded in unison with the Western European Modernism (Mintz, 2004).

The Greek philosopher Aristotle, comparing poetry and history, preferred the first one, because he believed that history deals with random events, and poetry is able to generalize. But Russian Symbolists tried to establish certain general regularities in the historical events, that could not only help to understand the essence of the modern cultural process, but even to predict the future. A poetical analysis of the crisis of ancient culture was projected onto the crisis of Russian culture at the turn of the 20th century. Therefore, in the texts of the Symbolists, including Bryusov, myth is connected with history and with current social issues.

Literature review

The works of Russian scholars (Ashukin, Shcherbakov, Abramovich, Gasparov, Khachatryan) are devoted to the embodiment of the ancient theme in Bryusov's prose. According to the researchers, Bryusov saw in ancient history the key to understanding the modernity, since he believed that past events were in many ways similar to the processes that took place in Russia in the first decades of the 20th century. The fall of the Western Roman Empire was accompanied by the spread of Christianity, which was formed not only as the antithesis of paganism, but also became the heir to the traditions of its predecessor. The clash of Christianity and the numerous Gnostic sects that flourished at that time, along with the eschatological premonitions of the end of the world, reminded the events of Russian history at the turn of the 20th century. There were unprecedented cardinal changes in a society, accompanied by an alarming feeling of *fin de siècle* and intense search for new ways of further cultural and historical development. A fundamental restructuring of consciousness, according to Bryusov, often entails the abandonment of the greatest achievements of the past and even leads to the barbaric destruction of the spiritual and material values of the past, but the poet was convinced of the need to accept

future changes, despite the tragic losses associated with them.

The interest in the Gnostic philosophical and religious doctrine, which probably arose before Christianity and drew material for its cosmogonical constructions from various sources (Egyptian, Babylonian, ancient Greek esoteric teachings, Judaism, etc.), never extinguished. As Evlampiev wrote, "created by ancient Gnostics thought structures turned out to be extremely fruitful, applicable in completely different historical conditions" (Evlampiev, 2009). At the International Colloquium in Messina the following definition of the term "Gnosticism" was proposed: "a certain group of systems of the Second Century A.D." (Le origini dello Gnosticimo, 1967). According to A. F. Losev, "gnosticism was a form of connection between the new, Christian religion and the mythology and philosophy of Hellenism" (Losev, 2009). This connection was so close that it was also called the "dark counterpart of Christianity," although the numerous sects of the Gnostics sometimes differed greatly from other philosophical and religious systems as well as from each other.

The basis of Gnosticism is the dualistic view, which is characterized by the opposition of the divine world, "the hidden and unknowable principle that manifests itself in emanations" (Losev, 2009), and sinful material world, which should be denied, according to the symbolists. The demiurge (Ialdabaoth), whom some Gnostics identified with the Old Testament Yahweh, recognized as the creator of this material world. Devoting their treatises to the fight against the chaos, adherents of Gnosticism saw the main task of man in freeing himself from the power of the demiurge who created the earthly world through philosophical knowledge. To achieve this goal, the supreme deity sends its messengers to the people. In the Ophite sect (from ὄφις – the serpent), one of the eons, Sophia, becomes such a messenger, who appears before Adam and Eve in the form of a biblical serpent and tempted them into eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It is recognized by Christianity as the original sin, but is regarded positively by the Gnostics, since it becomes the first step on the path of salvation of man and a guarantee of his reunion with the true God.

Vladimir Solovyev suggested that the Ophites inherited the Mysteries of the most ancient phallic serpent cult, which was "especially common in Egypt in connection with the ancient

worship of that divine serpent, which the Greeks called *the good god*" (Solovyev, 1897). Helena Blavatsky, who was the founder of the Theosophical Society (1875), and was known for her passion for occult, esoteric teachings, spiritualism, mysticism, oriental and ancient Egyptian mythology, interpreted the symbolism of the serpent in her article on the Ophites slightly differently. According to Blavatsky, the serpent represents "the Christos-principle (i.e., the divine reincarnating Monad, not Jesus the man)", borrowed from the Egyptians and "reverenced as a symbol of wisdom, Sophia", and in the Old Testament he appears as the Brazen Serpent of Moses (Blavatsky, 1892).

The Gnostic tradition has its roots in the Enlightenment, when Masonic lodges begin to appear in Russia, following the example of Western Europe, and "the triumph of humanistic doctrine is accompanied by an unprecedented flourishing of occultism and spiritualism" (Abramovich, 2001). According to some scholars, Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry of the 18th century was "associated with the revival of the Gnostic tradition" (Rodin). Being dissatisfied with church doctrine, the most prominent representatives of the Enlightenment joined the ranks of the "free masons". Such prominent figures of Russian culture as N. I. Trubetskoy, I. P. Turgenev, A. M. Kutuzov, N. I. Novikov belonged to them. They developed such Masonic-Gnostic concepts as "self-improvement", "truth", "knowledge", etc. Novikov's and Kheraskov's works laid a solid foundation for the whole development of 19th-century literary, as N. V. Gogol, L. N. Tolstoy, F. M. Dostoevsky and V. S. Solovyov.

In the work, devoted to the refraction of the ideological paradigm of Gnosticism in Russian culture, I. Evlampiev emphasized that "the original Gnostic anthropocentrism acquires its logical conclusion in Dostoevsky: the human personality becomes the main measure of being" (Evlampiev, 2009). The anthropological model of the universe considers human creativity as a necessary condition that promotes the liberation of the world from the inert matter and brings humanity closer to its cherished goal - unity with the deity.

It is known that the views of F. M. Dostoevsky on the contradiction of good and evil as the main ontological problem, on the relationship of man with God, on the place and the role of man in the world history were assimilated by his friend and admirer of his artistic gift V. Solovyov, whose gnostic intuitions largely determined the further

development of philosophical, religious and literary searches of the Silver Age. According to Solovyov, man as the only possible instrument, which is able to transform the earthly life, to eradicate sinfulness and imperfection. His views embodied in the doctrine of God-manhood were "unconditionally gnostic in nature" (Solovyov, 2007).

Sophia as the eternal Femininity and the Wisdom of God becomes the central image crowning the philosophical system of Solovyev. Of course, his sophiology does not come down to Gnosticism. It represents "a complex synthesis of the Orthodox veneration of Christ as embodied Divine Wisdom, European mystical teachings, Kabbalah, Romanticism, German philosophy and other teachings" (Kozyrev, 1992). Paradoxically, the gnostic elements are the most obvious and at the same time rather strongly encrypted in the works of the philosopher. Nevertheless, they trace the connection with those Gnostic teachings, whose adherents identified Sophia with the serpent, as was typical for the Nassen or the Ophites. Analyzing the French manuscript of Vladimir Solovyov *Sofia*, A. P. Kozyrev notes such a significant detail as the clearly distinguishable inscription "snake" under the word "Sofia" (Kozyrev, 1992). Why such an inscription appeared, becomes clear after reading the philosopher's article on the Ophites in the Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Brockhaus and Efron, which says that in this gnostic sect they believed that Sophia left the high world in the form of a serpent, which Demiurge wanted to keep in child's ignorance" (Solovyov, 1897).

Interest in various mystical religious and philosophical systems intensified in Russia at the turn of the 20th century. It was explained, on the one hand, by the crisis of Christianity and attempts to renew it, and on the other hand, by the desire to find a worthy alternative to the official religious system. The teachings of the Gnostics attracted many writers of the Silver Age, especially decadents and symbolists. Z. Gippius mentioned about obsession D. S. Merezhkovsky's "all-destroying spirit" Ahriman, personifying the forces of evil in Zoroastrianism (Gippius-Merezhkovskaya, 1951). Bryusov at a certain moment of his life seriously played the role of the Scandinavian deity Loki. This life-creating conflict that arose in the relationship between Bryusov and Andrei Bely and turned into a metaphysical duel between Scandinavian deities Lokki and Baldrom, was considered in the article by S. Grechishkin and A. Lavrov (Grechishkin, Lavrov, 2004).

An indication of the special influence of the theoretical constructs of V. Solovyov on the Symbolists became a common place in literary criticism. Solovyev's sophiology reflected in the work of the younger generation of the Symbolism (Sergey Solovyov, Alexander Blok, Andrey Bely) with particular force (Harmash, 2014). And the Gnostic cosmogony largely determined the ideological and artistic attitudes of the older Symbolists – Fedor Sologub, Konstantin Balmont, Zinaida Gippius and Valery Bryusov.

According to O. Hanzen-Leve, for the Symbolist poets of the 1890s, “the world from the point of view of diabolism is a creation or artifact of the demiurge, whose negativity and ontological non-being oppose the positive omnipresence of the god-creator” (Hanzen-Leve, 1999). The conviction that the creator of the world is the evil Demiurge leads them to theomachistic attempts to overcome the inertness of dark material chaos with the energy of creativity.

Analyzing the poetry of V. Solovyov, Bryusov noted that the worldview of the great Russian philosopher is based on a “deep, hopeless dualism” between two opposite spheres – time and Eternity (Bryusov, 1975b). This view is extremely close and understandable to Bryusov as a symbolist: “The first is the world of Evil, the second is the world of Generosity. He believed that finding a way out of the world of Time into the world of Eternity is the task facing every man. To conquer time so that everything becomes Eternity – this is the last goal of the cosmic process” (Bryusov, 1975b).

Materials and methods

The methodological basis of the article is motivic analysis. This method of studying text was borrowed by literary scholarship from musical theory and now is one of the most effective ways to analyze literary texts, both poetic and prosaic. The concept of a literary work as “a unity of images, actions and positions” which correlate with utterances of a writer, a narrator and characters was expressed in 1876 by L. N. Tolstoy, who compared the literary work to the “maze of linkages” (Tolstoy, 1984). His position corresponds to the understanding of the literary text as a complexly organized system of semantically meaningful elements – motifs. There is widely known an observation which A. Blok made about lyrics: “Every poem is a veil stretched on the point of several words. These words shine like stars. And the whole poem exists for these words” (Blok, 1965). Such

words, which have a special meaning, form the thematic core of the literary text and at the same time compose the system of key motifs.

The motif as one of the most important categories of poetics is the subject of scientific attention of many literary scholars from the beginning of the 20th century to the present. O. Freidenberg, V. Propp, and other scientists developed the theoretical basis of motivic analysis (Freidenberg, 1986; Propp, 1997).

Despite the fact that the concept of motif is widely used in modern literary criticism, there are many different definitions of motif. Perhaps the only thing in which the views of all researchers coincide is the recurrence as a characteristic feature of the motif. Scientists distinguish motifs defining features of an individual style of one or another author, characterising a certain literary trend, an epoch or, especially if it is about mythological motifs, the human culture as a whole.

There are usually quite a number of individual motifs that interact with each other in a novel. The motif as a structural unit is able to function at different levels of literary text – chronotopic, ideological, thematic, compositional, narrative and so on. It is associated with many other literary concepts, primarily with theme and idea of a literary work. Motifs can perform a certain local function, for example, act as a characteristic of a particular character, create a certain atmosphere in a literary work, represent the leading theme of a novel, serving as a means of its development.

The model “motivic invariant – motivic variant” is presented in the works of Yu. V. Shatin (Shatin, 1996). The dichotomic conception of motif received its theoretical formulation in the works of I. V. Silantsev (Silantsev, 2004). The scientist formulated the most complete definition of motif as one of the essential concepts of narrative poetics: motif is “a narrative phenomenon which is an invariant in its belonging to the narrative tradition and a variant in its realizations. Motif is intertextual poetical category and it acquires aesthetically significant meanings within the framework of the plot. It correlates the predicative meaning of the action with actants and certain chronotopical attributes” (Silantsev, 2004). So, according to the dichotomic theory of motif, its structure is made up of an invariant (*motipheme*) and variants (*allomotifs*) (Silantsev, 2004).

In this paper, the method of motivic analysis is used to consider the system of motifs from which forms the neo-mythological structure of Bryusov's novel. Connections between separate motifs which represent different mythological systems are revealed. The correlation between ancient myths and the new literary mythology in the Russian novel of the early 20th century is established.

Results and discussion. Incorporation of Ancient Myth in Bryusov's Novel

The Altar of Victory, the events of which take place in the Roman Empire of the 4th century, was printed during 1911-1912 in the *Russian Thought Journal*. It was noted in one of the critical articles published after the publication of the novel, that the episodes devoted to one of the Gnostic sects, the Ophites, occupy a significant place in the work: "The author has weakened the drama of the action in the second part of the "Altar of Victory", adding unnecessary details about the sect of serpent worshipers (Ophites) that the hero encountered. The antiquarian side, however, was considered very carefully, including the communist way of life of the sectarians, partly prevailed over the artistic one here" (Malein, 1930).

A rather extensive list of scientific and popular literature about antiquity used by the author during the creation of *The Altar of Victory* and published in the notes to the novel, became an invaluable gift for the researcher of Bryusov's work. However, according to M. Gasparov, "the main sources were no more than a dozen" (Gasparov, 1975), and this list included primarily works on the history of the Roman Empire and only two books on the history of the religious systems. There are "*The Church and the Roman Empire*" by A. de Broglie and "*The Fall of Paganism*" by G. Boissier (Gasparov, 1975). Bryusov noted that he also used the Brockhaus and Efron dictionary, which, as we mentioned above, contained Solovyov's articles on Gnosticism and Ophites (Bryusov, 1974).

But when we tried to find out the list of the literature on the Ophites, we discovered only the book of E. Renan "*Marcus Aurelius and the end of the ancient world*", where in the eighth chapter this Gnostic sect was characterized very ironically and with great skepticism, as well as the four-volume "*From the Life of Ideas*" by F.F. Zelinsky, in the third volume of which there are articles on Hermes the Threefold-Greatest and the Gnostics. We think that the range of literature

about the Gnostics, including the Ophites, available to Bryusov, was wider than indicated in his list. In addition to the works of V. Solovyov, including his *Three Conversations*, the well-known works of Helena Blavatsky, published at the end of the XIX century, could be used as a source of information about gnostic sects, and the second volume of the "*Lectures on the History of the Ancient Church*" by V.V. Bolotov, published in 1910. Very likely, Bryusov knew about the "*Five Books Against Heresies*" by Irenaeus of Lyons, which were published in Russian translation at 1868 and then reprinted several times. Another version of the Ophitic doctrine could be found in *Denial of All Heresies of Hippolyt of Rome*, translated by an archpriest P. Preobrazhensky and published in the "*Orthodox Review*" (1871-1876), and the works of Epiphanius of Cyprus (publication years 1863-1886).

Agreeing with M. Gasparov that the general compositional principle of the novel is *specularity* and *symmetry* (Gasparov, 1975), we specify that it did not become absolute, since several hostile forces operate in the novel. First, it is paganism, secondly, Christianity and, thirdly, numerous Gnostic sects, which in some positions are close to Christianity, but also have a number of significant differences that do not allow them to be considered as a single religious-philosophical phenomenon. The scientist draws attention to the fact that in *The Altar of Victory* death serves as one of the key categories used for demonstration the philosophical foundations of a particular dogma: "after a vivid contrast of the old and the new culture in their attitude to death (on the one hand – suicide Remigy and the slaughter of a slave by conspirators, on the other hand, Merakubd's suicide and the death of Christian fanatics" (Bryusov, 1975a). However, in the light of the foregoing, we consider as "fanatics" not Christians, but Gnostics.

The protagonist of *The Altar of Victory*, Decimus Junius Norban, is involved in the struggle between the ancient Roman traditions and the emerging Christianity, forced to defend their dogmas from the attacks of many Gnostic sects. Junius becomes an unwitting accomplice to the conspiracy against the Christian emperor Gratian. Details of the historical background of Bryusov's novel are set in the works of M. Gasparov and N. Khachatryan. In the novel Gratian is trying to overthrow not only the adherents of the ancient Roman pagan cults, but also two Gnostic sects which united to fight him (Gasparov, 1975; Khachatryan, 2004). The leader one of them was a girl named Rea,

confident in her prophetic gift and convinced of the imminent arrival of the Messiah, the members of the second sect were the serpent worshipers – Ophites.

The protagonist fell in love with Rea and their relationship contributes to his acquaintance with the basics of the Gnostic teachings. Their first date takes place in the thanatological topos, on the Appian Way – the “Queen of the Roads” (Stadius), which had a great cultural, commercial and military significance for Ancient Rome. There was a custom to build magnificent monuments along the road in honor of the fallen heroes. When Junius came to the appointed place, he saw that “the faces of long-dead men looked at him from the magnificent ancient tombs,” reminiscent of the glorious Roman past (Bryusov, 1975a). Describing Rea, the author points to the presence in her appearance and behavior of the thanatological features: “she was clothed in her white clothes and she looked in the dark like a ghost caused by a necromancer from the grave” (Bryusov, 1975a). Rea draws everyone into the space of death. She tries to convince the hero that in his name Decimus, which means the tenth, the omen of his tragic fate is hidden - he will be “killed when the heavenly punishment befall the tenth one” (Bryusov, 1975a). In the notes to the novel, the author points out that the name Decimus contains “an allusion to the custom of the execution of every tenth man from the crowd or detachment” (Bryusov, 1975a). And in the end, her prophecy comes true, but Rea will be killed and those who followed her call and rebelled against the power of the Roman emperor, not Decimus.

With the help of hints and coincidences, the heroine tries to persuade Junius Decimus that he should join the members of one of the Gnostic sects. Its members are convinced that the end of the world is soon, as Junius is “called upon to prepare the way for the one who is to come” (Bryusov, 1975a). Junius was not familiar with the teachings of the Gnostics and Rea relies on the apocalyptic prophecies of the Revelation of John the Apostle. Her speech resembles a *cento* (a work wholly composed of passages taken from other authors) made up of gospel quotes. At first, Junius believes that Rea is a Christian, but she soon realizes that her beliefs are very different from the tenets of orthodox Christianity. Their first date reminds the scene of Adam and Eve’s temptation. Bryusov persistently emphasizes in the image of the heroine the features inherent in the serpent-tempter. Her voice sounds to the hero like the hiss of a snake. She simultaneously pushes away and attracts Junius, who feels her

magical attraction. She subordinates his will to hers, just as “other snakes bewitch a victim with their glance” (Bryusov, 1975a).

Thus, Rea for Junius appears in the form of a snake and dedicates the hero to the basics of gnostic wisdom, which she considers true knowledge. Similarly, Sophia the Wisdom appeared in front of the first people in the guise of the Serpent and convinced them to taste the forbidden fruit, so they can get the knowledge (gnosis) and rebel against the Demiurge. The leitmotif of this episode of the novel, containing one of the most important Gnostic propositions, is Rea’s statement: “It would not be a man’s merits before God if the Serpent had not seduced Eve” (Bryusov, 1975a). The symbol of the hero’s communion with the sacred secrets of the Gnostics becomes the purple colobium – the emperor’s gown. The hero was threatened with the death for making or keeping it. As evidence of this, Bryusov cites the testimony of Ammianus Marcellinus, who told the story of two Apollinaris (father and son) and deacon Maras. They were sentenced to death in 353 on charges of “involvement in a dark case of making purple imperial vestments in Tíre (indumentum regale)” (Bryusov, 1975a). As we see, it happened shortly before the events described in *The Altar of Victory*. In this way, Bryusov emphasizes that his novel is historically reliable, based on real facts and events that actually took place.

During the rite of initiation into the Ophitic sect, Rea and Decimus find themselves in a sanctuary where a copper statue was installed: “The Bronze Serpent on the altar seemed to bend and straighten its rings and raise its flat skull with the stinger sticking out of its mouth. Two emeralds inserted into her head at the place of the eyes sparkled ominously at each flash of fire” (Bryusov, 1975a). Here, as if in the presence of a deity, the high priest Managim expounds to the heroes the essence of the Ophitic beliefs: “Find out, however, that it was not the One who created this world. The son of the eternal Chaos, Yaldabaoth, created the sun, the moon and the stars, and the spirits of the planets, obeying him, created, in his own image and likeness, a man to indulge in him, as a toy of his pride. Then Jehovah, in his mercy, breathed divine spirit into man. In anger, Yaldabaoth sent Omimorph, the spirit of the Serpent, but not the genuine Serpent, to forbid people with crafty speeches to eat from the Tree of knowledge. But the Supreme Sophia, having assumed its true appearance as the Serpent, revealed the cunning of the eternal Enemy. Adam tasted of the forbidden, became wise as gods and grasped the spirit of the divine

and immortal spirit. Fearing from that moment of his own creation, Yaldabaoth drove the people out of the paradise and brought them to the earth, the lowest of the heavenly bodies. And in order to bring them back to self-worship, he raised up among the people a Messiah, who was to teach about the greatness and glory of the son of Chaos. However, he did not leave the good Protector of the human race on earth, but he fulfilled the Messiah with the spirit of truth, so that he became the Christ, the teacher of truth. Crucified on the cross with his body, Christ ascended to heaven in spirit and is now leading a great struggle with the evil demon, so that at the end of time he can be deprived of his dominion and completely confounded. The people created by Yaldabaoth to perdition must, through Christ, find the path of the last Knowledge and return to merging with the first celestial Aeolus, the supreme Wisdom. <...> We will worship the Serpent and Christ, brothers, because the eternal Sofia appeared to us through them” (Bryusov, 1975a).

The Ophitic doctrine, as the author himself describes it, is a bizarre mixture of Gnostic ideas about the Pleroma and the Aeons, Christian apocalyptic prophecies described in the final part of the New Testament, and the revelations of Hermes Trismegistus. It is necessary to add that in biblical literature, for example, in Isaiah and other prophets, there is always a motif of the end of the earthly world. In some periods of history, which are considered to be borderline, eschatological expectations increase, as was the case in the first centuries of Christianity in Western Europe and in Russia at the turn of the 20th century. At the dawn of Christianity, the promises of the apostles about the imminent arrival of the Messiah and the advent of the Kingdom of God were often taken literally. *The Altar of Victory* heroine Rea imagined herself such a prophetess of the end of human history. She told Decimus on the first date that “the groom is coming and will soon hit the gate. Woe betide whom He will find asleep” (Bryusov, 1975a). Her words are an allusion to the initial lines of a *troparion* (a short hymn in the religious music of Eastern Orthodox Christianity), which is sung at the beginning of an orthros (a canonical hour of Christian liturgy) in the first three days of Holy Week: “Behold, the Bridegroom comes at midnight, and blessed is that servant whom He shall find watching...”. In the image of Ray Bryusov embodied fanatic, confident in the truth of her visions. In accordance with the Gnostic doctrine, she is convinced that “the Good cannot come into the world except through Evil” (Bryusov, 1975a), therefore, none other than the Antichrist should act in the role of the Messiah.

The litany, in which Rea and Junius were present, is reminiscent of serving Satan, since the adherents of the gnostic sect are convinced that in this way they sacrifice themselves for the salvation of all mankind. As E. Trubetskoy noted, “the evil that has reached its utmost strain, must be a blasphemous parody of the most precious, holy, and sublime things in the world” (Trubetskoy, 1913). The same parody is the orgy that ends the litany. It reminds of the Khlysts⁽¹⁾ rites described by Andrey Bely in the novel “The Silver Dove” (1909). The immoral behavior of the Gnostics is consistent with their teachings: “Let us be sinful, fall into filth, lie and commit adultery, kill to blaspheme, destroy our souls!” – such a call sounds at the end of the litany, after which they “marry”, as the author says (Bryusov, 1975a). This scene in the novel does not contradict the reproaches of the Gnostics in libertinism. For example, Epiphanius “directly attributed to Vasilid the preaching of debauchery” (Posnov, 1917), “Irenaeus (I 13) wrote about the immoral behavior of another famous gnostic – Mark” (Losev, 1998) and even modern Russian philosopher A. F. Losev believed that libertinism is “a monstrous symbol of the whole of ancient philosophical and aesthetic death” (Losev, 1998).

Ophites in *The Altar of Victory* literally follow the precepts of the Apostle Paul, whose words from the Epistle to the Romans Rea quotes: “I would like to be excommunicated from Christ for my brothers, who are my own kind in the flesh” (Bryusov, 1975a). She draws a parallel between the sacrifice of Christ, crucified for the atonement of the sins of all mankind, and the purpose of the Gnostics: “Who did not spare his only Son, but betrayed people for torment, did he not have the authority to kill us for others?” (Bryusov, 1975a). The similarities between the images of Rea and Renata from Bryusov’s *The Fiery Angel* have already been noted by M. Gasparov. In this case, Rea is in the power of her visions, it seems to her that, at the behest of the Spirit of God, the members of the sect “are set up to serve the King of Perdition and prepare him a way” (Bryusov, 1975a), and thus falling into sin is a necessary stage in the path of soul salvation. This idea echoes the idea which was expressed by V. Solovyov in his tractate *Sophia*: “the cosmic enmity must be repeated in the human world” (481). Solovyev also says about the preceding kingdom of Christ, the emergence of the monarchy of the Antichrist as the last stage of the historical path, its eschatological conclusion in his *Short Tale of the Antichrist*. Eschatological moods of the turn of the 20th century, which covered many contemporaries of the writer,

deeply experienced by Solovyov and his followers “in the form of the coming of the Antichrist” (Losev, 2009), in Bryusov’s novel projected onto similar events that took place at the end of the 4th century AD. The description of the Antichrist, as Rea sees him, resembles the fiery angel appearing to Renate: “A young man, with the face of an angel, meets us; his hair is like a flame, mouth, like a bloody wound, a benign look, like a lamb” (Bryusov, 1975a). Just before her dying Rea begins to realize that she was mistaken. With her death she affirms the triumph of Christianity, which replaced the pagan cults. The opposition of the Gnostics and Christians in the novel ends with the victory of the latter. The main character of Bryusov, Junius Decimus, is convinced that it is necessary to adopt a new religious teaching, since it was Christianity that became the spiritual and ideological foundation of the coming epoch. This is the ideological position of the author of *The Altar of Victory*, who wrote the following lines in 1918:

“Mne Gete – blizkiy, drug – Vergiliy,
Verkharnu ya daryu lyubov...
No vvyis vskhodil ne bez usiliy –
Tot, v zhilakh ch’ikh muzhichia krov...”

“Goethe is close to me, Virgil is my friend and I give my love to Verhaeren... That one came up not without effort, plowman’s blood flows in whose veins” (Bryusov, 1974). The death of the old culture is inevitable, so Bryusov sees the task of the Russian intelligentsia in preserving the best achievements of the past cultures and minimizing the losses accompanying the transition from one cultural and historical period to another.

Conclusions

At the time of writing the novel, there were a sufficient number of various sources from which V. Bryusov could have gathered information about the Ophites. The main Gnostic categories — the demiurge, Sophia, Christ, the serpent — received artistic expression in *The Altar of Victory*. As a result of the analysis, we concluded that in Bryusov’s work Gnostic teachings are closely intertwined with the eschatological prophecies of John the Theologian, which he set forth in Revelation after the visions he experienced on the island of Patmos. Even the love storyline reflects the biblical story of the temptation of the Serpent of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In turn, the image of the Serpent loses its canonical features and corresponds with the Gnostic ideas of the fallen Sophia Akhamot.

The constant references to the ancient religious myths are due to the general atmosphere of Russia at the end of the century, which was extremely tense with a premonition of catastrophic changes that were experienced as the approaching the Last Judgment. “This world is a lost world. Everyone dies here”, wrote Andrei Bely in the *Dramatic Symphony* (Bely, 1991). A similar attitude is embodied in *The Altar of Victory*. The death of the Roman Empire is projected in Bryusov’s novel to the present, he looks for answers to topical issues of his era in the past. The inevitability of changing one cultural and historical stage to another is shown, and a parallel between the tragic end of ancient history and the Russian reality of the beginning of the 20th century is drawn in one of the most important novel of the Silver Age.

Endnotes

(1) Khlysts is an underground sect, which existed from 1645 to the late 20th century in Russia.

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