THE LAND OF THOUGHT: INDIA AS IDEAL AND IMAGE IN KONSTANTIN
BAL’MONT’S OEUVRE

DISSERTATION

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A NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

All original quotes from Russian have been transliterated with translations immediately following. The transliteration is done according to the Library of Congress system. All translations are done by the author unless otherwise indicated.
ABSTRACT

Russian writers have grappled with the notion of Russian identity between East and West and have mostly looked to Europe for answers since Peter the Great’s reforms. The discussion of Russia’s identity and historically ordained mission in the world came into sharp focus with the Slavophile-Westernizer debate in the first half of the nineteenth century, the resonance from which have informed Russian cultural philosophy since. Dostoevsky’s “Pushkin speech” in 1881 introduced the notion of Pushkin as a “Universal Poet” who could transcend national boundaries as a result of his universal cultural receptivity and yet could at the same time remain quintessentially Russian.

The Russian Silver Age (1890’s-1910) witnessed a revival of the debate over Russia’s mission in a crisis-ridden fin-de-siècle Europe and Russia. Russian Symbolist writers looked to other cultures – in particular classical antiquity, and renaissance Italy – for cultural models that would provide an insight into solving the crisis of positivism and naturalism. The symbolist poet Konstantin Bal’mont – who was a much feted poet in the first decade of his oeuvre and perhaps unjustly ignored later – differed from his contemporaries in his quest for solutions both in sheer breadth of cultures studied and in his unusual choice of an ideal.

This dissertation revisits Bal’mont’s oeuvre in order to examine his cultural philosophy – hitherto largely unexamined by critics – and discussed the poet’s choice of
India as a cultural partner in the synthesis of Russian elemental spirit and Indian wisdom that he envisioned for the future.

While Bal’mont studied a wide variety of cultures – Mayas and Aztecs, ancient Egypt, Japan and Scandinavia among others, India remains the Land of Thought an ideal country that is universal and all-encompassing, where wise men possess the secret of Universal pantheism, a secret that resonates with Bal’mont’ innate poetic pantheism. In his role as cultural philosopher Bal’mont also locates in Kalidasa, the ancient Indian playwright, the ideal solution to the crisis in European theater brought on by the prevailing aesthetic of naturalism. Finally, Bal’mont sees himself as Pushkin’s heir: the Universal poet, who would expand the cultural horizons of Russia far beyond his illustrious predecessor did.
Dedicated to the memory of my Father
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INTRODUCTION

Where are you, unknown God, where are you, o future Rome?

Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, “Future Rome”

Under the Himalayas, whose peaks are in the splendor of Heaven, I understood the clarity of the muses, amid the valley mists.

Bal’mont, “Fire”

One of the major questions that has faced Russian culture since European romantic nationalism found an outlet in the Slavophile movement is this: what is the ontological status of Russia -- is it Eastern or Western in its essence? One answer was that it was neither, or both, or perhaps even a unique amalgam that transcended both alternatives. A corollary to this question that soon emerged was that of Russia’s cultural and spiritual mission in the world. Being unique, Russia perhaps had a singular destiny as well, a mission decreed by History itself. The responsibility of formulating and defining this Russian mission, to spread this “Russian idea” in both Russia and beyond its borders fell on Russian writers, at least those who did not take a liberal Westernizing stance. Especially the poets among those writers who embraced the notion of a special mission
for Russia were often regarded as “prophets,” and the source text that had defined the Poet as such was of course Aleksandr Pushkin’s “The Prophet” (1828). Later in the nineteenth century, when the Slavophile – Westernizer debate seemed to have already died out, Dostoevskii’s “Pushkin speech” (1880) revitalized the notion that Russia had a spiritual mission in the world. In this speech the novelist who undoubtedly felt that he himself had donned “the prophet’s mantle” that had fallen from Pushkin’s shoulders also developed the notion that it was the universality of the Russian national character that destined Russia for its historical lead role.¹ This quality had manifested itself for the first time in all its fullness in Pushkin – this genius who could don any national identity when dealing with international materials, while remaining profoundly Russian – and it was this quality that destined Russia for becoming the initiator of and agent in a future European spiritual revival.

Defining Russianness as “universal receptivity” (“vsemirnaia otzychivost”)² and making Pushkin into its first true incarnation, Dostoevsky, as it were, opened up a competition for who would become the next Pushkin and the next reincarnation of “Russian universality.” It was acknowledged by the proponents of the “Russian idea” that there had been previous universal geniuses in the arts before, such as the painter-engineer-alchemist Leonardo da Vinci and the poet-dramatist-scientist-ethnographer-linguist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, but Pushkin was seen as their successor and further development on the scale of that evolution that was measured by the criterion of “Universality.” Certainly Symbolism and many of its modernist offshoots created a “cultural myth of Pushkin” that resurrected the image of the most Russian and most
universal of poets and invited the poets of the fin-de-siècle and of the new century to contend for Pushkin’s throne.³

The Russian Silver Age was marked by a strong interest in the philosophy of culture. I.S. Prikhod’ko in her article, “‘Vechnye sputniki’ Merezhkovskogo (K probleme mifologizatsii kul’tury)” (“Merezhkovskii’s ‘Eternal companions’ [Towards the problem of mythologization of culture”]) draws attention to what she perceives is the dominant feature of Russian symbolism, i.e., a “conscious orientation towards culture, a striving to assimilate within themselves and transform what art, philosophy, history, religion and mystical teachings, the literature of the East and the West, of antiquity and the middle ages . . . gave them.” (Italics are mine)⁴ As is well known, Russian symbolism was very receptive to the Western cultural heritage from antiquity to contemporary cultures, while also proclaiming – at least in some sectors of the symbolist movement – that Western culture had reached its peak in the Renaissance and since then had been on the decline. The logical conclusion to be drawn in the “neo-Slavophile” and Dostoevskii inspired sectors of symbolism was that the time had come for Russian culture to replace the declining West. Dostoevskii’s “testament” had made the identification of universality with Russianness and of Russianness with universality, a cornerstone of the national mythologies that the symbolists developed. The Dostoevskian idea of “Russian universality,” once absorbed into symbolist aesthetics, thus encouraged the examination of a broad variety of world cultures; it also envisioned a Russian historical task of synthesizing the best elements of these into a new culture that, under Russian spiritual guidance, would solve the current “crisis of culture” in all spheres, but especially in that of literature and the arts.
Symbolists of both generations were deeply engaged in the study of a broad variety of cultures, most often of the European past, in their quest for valid inspirational models. Since contemporary European culture was seen as being in decline, it was natural for symbolists such as D. S. Merezhkovskii, V. Ia. Briusov, K. D. Bal’mont, Viacheslav Ivanov, Andrei Belyi, and A. Blok to search for viable cultural models for a new Russian Renaissance in the European past, or in cultures beyond the borders of Europe, past or present. These writers wanted to study the rise and fall of great civilizations (particularly ancient Rome and Greece) for the lessons they could provide for the crisis-ridden fin-de-siècle culture prevalent in Western Europe and in Russia, to the extent that it was part of this same Western Europe in the culture of its upper classes. One of the seekers of the new Russian universal culture of the future, Konstantin Bal’mont, whose quest for a new synthesized culture of the future is the topic of this dissertation, noted the trajectories of the quest of some of his fellow symbolists in the following terms, replete with the exuberant imagery so characteristic of his style:

Poèt stal’nogo stikha, Valerii Briusov, leleet v dushe brannye kliki vsekh vekov, i blizok chrezvychaino k Latinskomu Geniiu vremen Rima-Miroderzhtsa i k nezhno-iadovitomu Parizhu nashikh dnei, okutannomu izumrudami predvechernei dymki. Pasechnik Russkoi Rechi, Viacheslav Ivanov, vladeet kak nikto, postizheniem Drevne-Èllinskogo mira i oblachno-lesnymy sostoianiami Russkogo stikha.5
Briusov, the poet of steel, cherishes in his soul the martial cries of all ages and is extremely close to the Latin Genius of the time when Rome was a world power as well as to the gently poisonous Paris of our days that is enveloped in the emerald-like twilight mist. The Master of Russian language, Viacheslav Ivanov understands better than anyone else the world of ancient Greece and the misty woodsiness of Russian Verse.

This dissertation deals with Bal’mont’s own exploration of cultural philosophy and with his quest for valid cultural models – which he found in non-European realms such as Mexico and India – as well as with his vision of a new Russia leading the world to a new universal culture. It presents Bal’mont as one of the contenders for Pushkin’s throne, as one of those who embraced Dostoevskii’s message of the Russian-universal poet being the creator of a new culture that would rejuvenate Europe and the world. Specifically, it deals with Bal’mont as the symbolist who sought models for Russian universal culture creation, not in the past cultures of Europe, nor in fashionable contemporary settings such as Paris, but in the Far East where it was India that became the focus of his attention. The specific topic of the dissertation is the image and functions of both ancient and contemporary India in the oeuvre of this symbolist poet, whose contribution to the symbolist philosophy of culture has been underestimated.
CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL EVALUATION OF BAL’MONT

Konstantin Dmitievich Bal’mont (1867-1942) enjoyed considerable fame as a decadent poet in the late 1890s and the first decade of the 20th century, together with the self-styled leader of the symbolist movement, Valerii Briusov. The latter wrote of the important influence of Bal’mont on him: “His [Bal’mont’s] ecstatic love for poetry, his refined feeling for the beauty of verse, his entire, unique personality made an exceptional impression on me. Much, very much, became intelligible for me only through Bal’mont. He taught me to understand other poets, taught me to really love life. I mean that he revealed in my soul what was slumbering there, and without his influence might have slumbered longer . . . those evenings and nights, when we talked de omni re scribi will remain forever among the most significant events of my life. Before meeting Bal’mont I was one person, but I became another after meeting him . . . ”6 The two poets met in 1894 and their close friendship continued for more than a decade before Briusov initiated the tradition of negative assessments of Bal’mont’s poetry.

Briusov – always a discerning critic – acknowledged Bal’mont’s influence not only on himself but on the Russian literary scene as well. For example, in the following letter to a friend he wrote of an entire “school” of writing poetry that had formed under the Bal’mont influence: “Have you noticed that quite recently a school of poetry has begun to form among us? . . . I am prepared to rejoice with all my heart. Have you guessed what school I am talking about? About the school of Bal’mont . . . the most accomplished of contemporary poets. (Emphasis in the original)7 In 1903 Briusov wrote
that, “[S]tikh Bal’monta èto stikh Pushkina, stikh Feta, usoovershenstvovannyi, utonchennyi, no po sushchestvu vse tot zhe” (“The poetry of Bal’mont is the poetry of Pushkin, the poetry of Fet, but perfected, more sophisticated but in essence it is the same”).

Bal’mont had, by the time Briusov began promoting him, already achieved modest fame as translator of such writers as P.B. Shelley, Edgar Allen Poe and Calderon. His collection of verse Under Northern Skies (Pod severnym nebom, 1894) was published in 1894 and brought him fame as a poet. Critics invariably noticed the musicality of Bal’mont’s verse, its mellifluous quality. Upon reading Under Northern Skies, Briusov wrote, “He [Bal’mont] is the first to have discovered “deviations” in our verse, whose existence was unknown before him; he discovered unique resonances of vowels, that flowed from one vowel to another, like dew drops, like the sounds of crystal.”

Bal’mont’s next volume of verse, V bezbrezhnosti (In Boundlessness, 1895) led Briusov to label him the “harbinger of a new period in Russian poetry.” The literary critic and editor of the journal Severnye tsvety (Northern Flowers) that played a significant role in bringing the symbolists’ to the attention of the public, Akim Volynskii saw Bal’mont’s mellifluous poetry as superior to that of Merezhkovskii and Minskii. The poet’s third collection Tishina (Silence, 1898), which was written under the influence of Theosophical ideas and the writings of the Orientalist Max Müller, was well received by critics. G. Adamovich wrote that in these poems could be heard the first sounds of a “poetic renaissance.” The religious thinker and writer Pavel Florensky saw in Bal’mont’s poem, “Zveda v tishine” (“A Star in Silence”) from the collection as,
“a signal to awaken from slumber, a call to leave the dead-end path of our spiritual desert and search for new paths to renew and heal life.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus Bal’mont appealed to both “aesthetes” and philosophically oriented critics.

Bal’mont’s poetic career continued its upward trajectory as his subsequent volumes, \textit{Goriashchie zdaniia (Buildings on Fire, 1900)} and \textit{Budem kak solntse (We Will be Like the Sun, 1903)} appeared, winning wide critical acclaim, as well as negative attention. Prince Aleksandr Ivanovich Urusov, who was a close friend and early mentor of Bal’mont was shocked at the new lyrical persona of these collections who seemed to be in the grips of a “mania grandioza.” Urusov was a brilliant lawyer and orator who was widely read; he had subsidized the publication of two volumes of translations by Bal’mont of Edgar Allen Poe’s works in 1895. His attitude towards Bal’mont’s work that he had characterized earlier as original and talented underwent a change when \textit{Buildings on Fire} was published. In a letter to A.A. Andreeva, Urusov wrote that Bal’mont’s work showed “ . . . mania grandioza, bloodthirsty grimaces,” and that “[A]rt has been replaced by cackling.”\textsuperscript{13} Fellow symbolists thought otherwise: Briusov characterized the collection as “the apogee of Bal’mont victory march over Russian poetry.”\textsuperscript{14} The poet and critic Ellis [L.L. Kobylinskii] wrote about \textit{Buildings on Fire}: “From the first pages of “Burning of Buildings” it is clear, that we have the most wonderful phenomenon of soulful life . . . Very few poets have experienced on themselves the entire horror of this secret drama, this mystery of the spirit, whose roots extend into the endless deep, the measure of suffering is difficult to compare. Verhaeren in the moment of creation of ‘Soirs,’ ‘Debacles,’ and ‘Flambeaux noirs,’ Nietzsche in the moment of change from positivism to symbolism, in the time of creating ‘Zaratustra,’ the
secret metamorphosis of O.Wilde during the long years of imprisonment – these are the
most important examples of almost miraculous transformation of the soul . . ."15
Bal’mont also found an unlikely supporter in Maksim Gor’kii, who took it upon himself
to defend the poet against what he felt was one-sided criticism. Placing Bal’mont higher
than Briusov in talent, Gor’kii declared that Bal’mont was the undisputed leader of
contemporary Russian symbolism. Gor’kii primarily valued Bal’mont for his innovations;
more particularly he sided with Bal’mont’s poetic innovations – both thematic and
stylistic – that challenged the traditional approach to poetry. 16

It is customary to regard both Briusov and Bal’mont as belonging to the
“decadent” first generation of the symbolist movement, but Bal’mont is arguably closer
to the second generation (the so-called mladosimvolisty) in his “romantic” quest for an
Absolute and Ideal to serve. This is one reason why Bal’mont appealed to them. Certainly
Andrei Belyi, a second-generation symbolist, cites Bal’mont among his early influences
and other symbolists of the second generation, such as Viacheslav Ivanov and Aleksandr
Blok acknowledged Bal’mont’s importance in Russian literature of the Silver Age, as did
later poets such as Osip Mandelshtam and Maksimillian Voloshin. Viacheslav Ivanov felt
that he shared with Bal’mont a strong concern for the “separation from the universe” of
contemporary humanity and an “empathy for the universal.”17

Nevertheless, Bal’mont’s meteoric fame of the early 1900s proved indeed
meteoric since it not only rose steeply (after the collection of poetry Pod severnym
nebom, 1894) but also declined abruptly in the second half of the 1910s. Bal’mont’s sixth
volume of poetry, Tol’ko liubov’ (Only Love, 1904) marked the beginning of the decline
of the poet’s fame. While Belyi characterized it as the “best” of Bal’mont’s collections,
others like the symbolist writer and critic Ellis, detected a “fall in the creative powers” of
the poet in this work. This opinion began to prevail. As Bal’mont left for Mexico in 1905,
Briusov, “with an increasingly evident urge to put a final period after Bal’mont’s career,”
wrote to the critic P.B. Pertsov, “It is strange: everyone suddenly felt emancipated when
Bal’mont left . . . When he left it was as though a period of sorts had ended in our
literature. He had reigned regally for ten years over our poetry. But now the staff fell
from his hand. We had gone far ahead; he had remained in one place. Perhaps he is a
giant among us . . . but he is in the past . . . we are going ahead.”18 This notion of
Bal’mont’s time being over continued to dominate critics’ evaluation of Bal’mont’s
subsequent work, although public favor did not wane as quickly.

New directions within symbolism, its crisis in 1910, the appearance of new
literary schools, Bal’mont’s self-imposed exile (in Paris 1905-1913), his travels and final
emigration all contributed to Bal’mont’s name being relegated to increasing oblivion. His
once-admired breaking of taboos in both thematics and poetics was increasingly
perceived as being in bad taste and he was for a long time classified as a mediocre poet
who had sacrificed semantics to musicality to the point of absurdity as for example, the
infamous passage from the poem “Cheln tomleniia” (“Barque of Langour”).

Chuzhdyi chistym charam schast’ia, A stranger to the pure charms of joy
Cheln tomleniia, cheln trevog, The barque of langour, barque of
distress,
Brosil bereg, b’etsia s burei, Has abandoned the shore and battles the storm,

Ishchet svetlykh snov chertog. And searches for the palace of brilliant dreams.

REHABILITATING BAL’MONT

A gradual rehabilitation of Bal’mont’s reputation has since taken place, as well as a discovery of many facets of his oeuvre that had hitherto been marginalized, or simply not seen. The steadily increasing recent scholarship – both in the West and in Russia – on various aspects of Bal’mont’s works and biography provides added evidence of his importance in Russian literature and cultural history. During Soviet times, the writer Il’ia Ehrenburg was one of the first to question the existing negative views on Bal’mont. Bolstering his argument with the infallible authority of the founder of Socialist Realism, he stated: “Gor’kii wrote enthusiastically of Bal’mont and advised editors of journals to publish his poems… Hundreds of criticisms of Bal’mont’s works were written; new editions of his works came out every year; you could not gain admission to his lectures . . . Can it be true that all this was neurosis and self-deception? Can Gor’kii’s or Briusov’s recognition of Bal’mont’s talent be explained away by the fact that the Russian reading public shared his ‘desire to hide from reality’ . . .?”

In émigré circles the critic K. Mochuls’kii noted that Bal’mont’s works had been unjustly forgotten; another noted literary scholar, Gleb Struve, argued that Bal’mont’s writing during his life as an émigré was in no way inferior to his work during the peak of his fame. In the words of American Slavist and Bal’mont scholar, Vladimir Markov,
“[A]nyone with a moderate interest in Russian poetry knows that Balmont was one of the first Russian modernists, if not the first, and one of the earliest Russian symbolists to win popular acclaim. His success with his contemporaries was unique and was approached only by that of Alexander Blok.” Markov was one of the leaders in the campaign to reassess Bal’mont’s contribution to the Silver age; his article, “Bal’mont: A Reappraisal” (1968) went beyond the mandatory treatment of Bal’mont in histories of Russian symbolism and laid the foundation for a more substantial analysis of Bal’mont’s oeuvre that he felt had been given short shrift by the critics. Markov’s work on Bal’mont also includes detailed commentaries on all of Bal’mont’s poetical works up to 1917 that were published as a two-volume series.

Markov’s analysis of Bal’mont’s poetry suggests that the poet’s contemporaries were perhaps somewhat hasty in writing him off around 1905-1910 as a poet who had written himself out. According to this scholar, the quality of Bal’mont’s poetry improved with each successive collection and that the somewhat uneven quality of some of the cycles within collections should be seen as part of the poet’s creative process, where, “decline and stasis usually signify the beginning of a new period and must, therefore, be given special attention.” Markov suggests that one of Bal’mont’s strengths lay in widening the thematic boundaries of Russian poetry by venturing into other Slavic cultures, as well as into non-traditional European cultures such as Spain and Scandinavia. Also, Bal’mont’s greater interest in the origins of his poetry, rather than in the end product, explains the lack of finish in some of his works. Markov also observes that for Bal’mont, his poems were “hymns” and that “[a]ll his poetry can be summed up in the image of a man walking among “mysteries,” – mysteries that, however, were always
clear to him and which “intoxicated” him.” Markov portrays him as “one of the last fighters against poetry’s inevitable descent from the “language of the gods” to the conversational idiom” of everyday life. This distinguished American Slavist (and former student of V. Zhirmunskii) extends an invitation to future readers of Bal’mont to “discover” his poetry with its “cosmic consciousness” with “Indian overtones” – an invitation to which the present study attempts to respond.

Markov’s initiative in reassessing and adding depth to the image and reputation of Bal’mont was followed by the Soviet scholar Vladimir Orlov, in his introductory article to a Biblioteka poeta edition of Bal’mont’s poetry (in 1969); the selection of Bal’mont to this prestigious Soviet series and Orlov’s Introduction initiated the process of “rehabilitation” of the poet in his former homeland, to which unlike Belyi and Kuprin, Bal’mont never returned and which was notoriously hostile to those who had abandoned it.

The American Slavist and Bal’mont scholar Rodney Patterson continued the geopolitical “dialectics” of Russian-American rediscovery of the poet. He contributed to the process or reassessment with his introductory article to a volume of selected poems published in Germany with conmenatries by Vladimir Markov in 1975. In this article, Patterson implores a new generation of critics and readers to put aside the misconceptions and half-truths” about Bal’mont and pay attention to the poet’s superb poetry in his over nine collections. He cites several arguments for rehabilitating Bal’mont, the most important of which is that he was a “master poet.” Patterson contends that Bal’mont’s “poetic accomplishments taken as a whole surpass those of poets long thought to be superior to him – Belyj, for instance.” According to this critic, Bal’mont’s place is in
the same “pantheon” that enshrines Akhmatova and the poetic geniuses of Annenskii, Blok and Mandel’shtam; he calls attention to the fact that the “most telling praise of his abilities came from Annenskii, Blok and Pasternak and that Maiakovskii considered him a worthy enemy.”27 Another factor Patterson deems to be to the poet’s credit is the extraordinary musicality of his verse; at least 279 of his poems are set to music by some of Russia’s leading composers such as Prokofiev, Stravinskii and Taneev. Even Bal’mont’s translations should be re-examined and rescued from the negative criticism of Kornei Chukovskii and some others, Patterson argues.

The year 1980 saw the publication of a collection of Bal’mont’s prose and verse in the Soviet Union with an introductory article by L. Ozerov, who raised similar issues as Markov and made a case for reinstating Bal’mont and according him his just place in Russian literary history. The contradictory nature of the poet’s reception – some called him a genius, others ridiculed him – was in itself enough reason to re-investigate Bal’mont’s work, argues Ozerov. The symbolist poet was an important part of fin-de-siècle Russian culture and must be studied to create a complete picture of the time. Ozerov, as may be expected from a Soviet critic, also stresses Bal’mont’s rejection of the Tsarist regime and his initial support of the new one, pointing out that the poet’s civic concerns form an important part of his oeuvre. Ozerov gives the example of Bal’mont’s poem, “The little Sultan” (1901) ostensibly set in Turkey and directed against the Turkish sultan but was in fact an indictment of Tsar Nicholas II. The poem was very popular with the public and resulted in Bal’mont being banished from the Russian capital and other large urban areas for a period of three years.
It is not just the civic themes in Bal’mont’s oeuvre that interest Ozerov, however. The Soviet critic notes that while it was true that Bal’mont had written many weak poems, his best ones had stood the test of time and declared that these poems and their musicality would undoubtedly attract new generations of readers with the diversity and richness of their poetics. Bal’mont was not only a poet of striking originality, but also a protean experimenter in and practitioner of many genres, Ozerov emphasized, -- he was a translator, essayist and a historian of literature and all these roles merited attention.

Since these scholarly works reassessing Bal’mont’s poetic oeuvre, there has been a steady increase of publications dealing with specific aspects of his works. The following are the some of the most recent works on various specific aspects of the poet’s oeuvre and biography. The central concern of Vladimir Markov’s student, Victor Dmitriev’s monograph, Serebriannyi gost’: o liricheskom geroe Bal’monta, (The Silver Guest: About Bal’mont’s Lyrical Hero, 1992) is the lyrical hero in Bal’mont’s early works.28 Dmitriev’s five chapters examine the lyrical hero in: 1) Russian symbolism in general 2) Bal’mont’s essays, 3) Bal’mont’s fictional prose, 4) Bal’mont’s early poetry, and 5) Bal’mont’s lyrical hero in critical articles of the time. Dmitriev’s work is the first to deal with Bal’mont’s prose – the “cosmic” persona of Bal’mont’s early poetic works is to be seen in his prose works as well. The critic notes that in Bal’mont’s prose “[p]oetry is one of the manifestations of Bal’mont’s lyrical hero, this is one of the faces of his lyrical hero. In it is a synthesis of man, and luminescence, and stellar space and love . . .” (emphasis in the original)29 Dmitriev contends that the lyrical hero of Bal’mont’s early poetry was a truly “Celestial” figure completely divorced from earthly reality; with later
works, the lyrical persona became more and more grounded in historical reality and, according to Dmitriev, lost some of his essentially symbolist character.

The most comprehensive and most recent research project on Bal’mont is the collaborative work of two scholars from the Ivanovo State University (Ivanovskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet), P.V. Kuprianovskii and N. A. Molchanova. As a result of several years’ work the two scholars have published a very full biography and detailed analysis of the poet’s oeuvre in their Poët Konstantin Bal’mont (The Poet Konstantin Bal’mont, 2001). While Kuprianovskii deals with the biographical account of the poet’s life, Molchanova analyses the various stages in the poet’s creative development. The two scholars are also supervising the ongoing series entitled Konstantin Bal’mont, Marina Tsvetaeva i khudozhestvennye iskaniiia XX veka. The project is intended as a forum for current scholarship on Konstantin Bal’mont and Marina Tsvetaeva; five volumes have been published so far.

Kuprianovskii and Molchanova see their task in answering a question Briusov posed in the title of his unfinished article of 1921, “Who is Bal’mont?” Citing Vladislav Khodaseevich’s claim that Bal’mont’s works must be studied as a whole, the two scholars trace the evolution of themes in his works, approaching Bal’mont’s entire oeuvre as a single body of work in progress. They characterize their work as the first attempt to provide a “more or less complete picture of the biography, work and fate of this ‘truly great Russian poet’ in its historical and literary context.”

In his numerous articles on Bal’mont, the American Slavist and comparativist, Martin Bidney credits Bal’mont for having been a poet-ethnographer and poet-translator par excellence, who has contributed greatly to Russian literature and culture.
regard to Bal’mont’s translation of Spanish folk poetry, for example, Bidney concludes that the “favor Bal’mont has done for Russian readers compares with the boon that Emanuel Geibel and Paul Heyse conferred on German literature when they brought out their predominantly folk-oriented collection Spanisches Liederbuch . . .”34 His scholarship has shed light on such neglected aspects of Bal’mont’s oeuvre as his translation (the first into Russian) of the Mayan scripture Popol Vuh that the poet-translator “rendered into Russian with musicality and verve forty years before anything comparable was attempted in English.”35 It is not only Bal’mont’s pioneering spirit, such as his venturing into areas few of his fellow Russians – or fellow Western Europeans – had done that Bidney lauds. He also highlights the “kaleidoscopic, cross-generic record” of the poet’s “spiritual pilgrimages” into Mexico and other countries, usually deemed culturally unimportant in Eurocentric times.

Bal’mont’s two-week visit to Japan in 1916 and the enthusiastic reception of the poet there is the subject of K. A. Azadovskii and E.M. D’iakonova’s monograph, *Bal’mont i Iaponiia* (*Bal’mont and Japan 1991*).36 Bal’mont was accorded a very warm and enthusiastic welcome by the press and public in Japan, much to his own surprise: “I feel like I am in a dream. I did not expect Japan would be so beautiful; to be honest, I did know that but I did not expect that I would be so completely captivated by the country. I must also add that I am well known in Japan (this was a complete surprise for me) and I have been held hostage by various newspapers that will be publishing several articles about me today. Isn’t it wonderful that people recognize me on the streets?” 37

The authors note Bal’mont’s unique contribution as the translator of Japanese classical poetry into Russian, many of which were done for the first time. “Bal’mont’s
attraction to Japan, his articles about this country, his work as a translator of Japanese poetry – are a bright, unique phenomenon the like of which is unknown in the history of Russo-Japanese relations.38 The “Knight of Poetry”39 noted the virtuosity and talent of Japanese poets and concluded that no European nation – except perhaps for Spain – had produced such delicate poetry, that was able to employ such economy of means to convey a wealth of meaning.

In the Georgian scholar Liia Andguladze’s recent book *Bal’mont i Gruziia* (*Bal’mont and Georgia, 2002*), the subject is Bal’mont’s long and fruitful literary-cultural relationship with Georgia.40 The cornerstone of this relationship was Bal’mont’s translation of the XII-century Georgian poet, Shota Rustaveli’s epic masterpiece, *The Knight in Panther’s Skin* (*Vitiaz’ v barsovoi shkure* in Russian, *Vepkhistkaosani* in Georgian). Bal’mont first came to know of this epic during his world cruise in 1912, where he met Oliver Wordrop, the brother of Marjorie Scott-Wordrop, the British translator of *The Knight in Panther’s Skin*. Oliver Wordrop showed the manuscript of the translation to the Russian poet, who was fascinated by it: “To touch gently this Georgian rose in the wide expanse of the ocean, with the auspicious participation of the Sun, the Sea, the Stars, Friendship and Love, of wild whirlwinds and ferocious storms – this is an experience that can never be forgotten.”41 Bal’mont’s fascination led him to undertake the first Russian translation of the Georgian poem in answer to the admonitions of the leading Russian journal, *Vestnik Evropy* (*European Herald*) in 1915: “‘The Knight in Panther’s Skin’ has been translated into all European languages except Russian and this is unforgivable.”42
Andguladze’s chief concern is to acknowledge Bal’mont’s contribution as cultural ambassador: Bal’mont’s translation forged closer ties between Georgia and its northern neighbor. On each of his three visits to the Caucasian nation, Bal’mont was greeted with great enthusiasm and admiration by both the public and the critics. Andguladze cites valuable evidence of both personal letters from young fans, who attended Bal’mont’s public performances to Georgian poets as well as of critics who welcomed the “singer of solar hymns” in their midst. The Georgian scholar contends that inspite of several subsequent Russian translations of Rustaveli’s masterpiece; Bal’mont’s version continues to be the one to attract the most attention in Georgia.

The theme “Bal’mont and India” has also attracted scholarly attention. The most significant scholarship on Bal’mont and India belongs to the Russian/Soviet Indologist and historian, G.M. Bongard-Levin. His chief contribution lies in republishing Bal’mont’s translations of the ancient Indian playwright, Kalidasa’s dramas and the Life of Buddha written by the Buddhist poet Ashvaghosha along with an introductory article and several other articles in the book, Ashvagkhosha. Zhizn’ Buddy. Kalidasa. Dramy. Perevod K. Bal’mona, (Ashvashosha. The Life of Buddha. Kalidasa. Dramas. Trans. K.Bal’mont, 1990) Bongard-Levin’s focus is mainly on Bal’mont’s work as translator of Kalidasa and Ashvaghosha. In his introductory article on the function and place of India in Bal’mont’s oeuvre, the Russian Indologist presents a brief historical overview of the appearance of various Indian motifs in the poet’s works as well as points to the central position of India, a conclusion common to almost all scholars of Balmont’s works.

Bongard-Levin’s contribution to research on the theme “Bal’mont and India” does not attempt to interpret the role and function of India in Bal’mont’s entire oeuvre. Nor does it
link the writer’s interest in India to his philosophy of culture or his vision of a Russo-
Indian cultural synthesis.

This dissertation, thus, attempts to continue and expand Bongard-Levin’s work
firstly by analyzing and interpreting Bal’mont’s Indophilia that began very early in his
literary career and continued till its end. Unlike previous scholarship (cf. Bongard-Levin)
I will assess the place of India in Bal’mont’s philosophy of culture and describe India’s
organic connection to it. In particular, my dissertation investigates Bal’mont’s oeuvre
beyond his poetry and translations – the primary focus of previous critics – and examines
his essays on the crisis in contemporary European and Russian theater that occupied the
minds and writings of most fin-de-siècle writers: Bal’mont saw in ancient Indian drama a
solution to this crisis and envisioned a future Theater of Youth and Beauty in which the
Indian model of theater would be central. Thus the purpose of this dissertation is twofold
– to recreate Bal’mont’s philosophy of culture based on his entire œuvre and to establish
the role and function of India within it.

ORGANIZATION

The pervasive yet varied nature of the “Indian” theme in Bal’mont’s works
dictates the organization of the dissertation into six chapters, including an introduction
and conclusion. The central section of the dissertation (excluding the Introduction,
Conclusion and a Chapter on the background and history of the “Eastern” Question in
Russian literature) is divided along generic lines. Bal’mont is represented in three
hypostases here: 1) as a poet engaged in a “self-other” dialectics with India, 2) as a
participant in the debate on the future of Russian/ European drama for whom the ideal
drama is Kalidas’a’s Sakuntala and not the “European” dramas of Ibsen, Maeterlinck, or
even Shakespeare and finally, 3) as a philosopher of culture, who in his various essays
employs India as a polysemantic metaphor in enunciating his world view.

Chapter 1: Ideological Background. This chapter gives a survey of those ideas
on Russian identity that Bal’mont linked with his poetic investigation of Indian culture,
past and present: the idea of a Russian messianic mission as originally conceived by the
Slavophiles, the definition of the universal Russian genius as outlined in Dostoevsky’s
1880 Pushkin speech, the apocalyptic anxieties of the Russian fin-de-siecle linked to the
idea of a culturally degenerating Europe and a renewed affirmation by Russian writers to
help fulfill their country’s manifest spiritual destiny of the salvation of European and
ultimately world culture.

Chapter 2: Samoutverzhdenie: India in the Search for a (National)
Self in Bal’mont’s Poetry. This chapter introduces the lyrical persona's admiring
engagement with Indian philosophical thought and beliefs and then traces the change in
the persona's perception of India from admiration to exasperation: the poet contrasts his
own impulsive, elemental Scythian Slavic nature to what he feels is the unattainable ideal
calm repose of the characteristic Indian divinities, such as Brahma.

Chapter 3: Strana Mysli: India in Bal’mont’s Prose and his Philosophy of
Culture explores the use of India by Bal'mont as a polysemantic metaphor of spirituality
and universality in his essays. It presents the poet's characterization of a series of literary
and cultural figures: that either were influenced by Indian culture or were classified by
the poet as “Indian” in spirit. For example, Bal'mont characterizes the English poet
Shelley as a “Vedic” poet and in Goethe's universality, Bal’mont visualizes an underlying Buddhist spirituality; this chapter also takes a look at Indian themes and motifs in the formulation of the poet's creative projects in such mythopoetic essays as Svetozvuk v prirode i svaetovaia simfoniia Skriabina (Light-sound in Nature and the Light Symphony of Scriabin, 1917).

Chapter 4: From Shakespeare to Kalidasa: Bal’mont and the crisis in European theatre deals with the poet's reading of “famous” and established playwrights (in Europe): Ibsen, Calderon, Maeterlinck, and Shakespeare. Bal'mont discusses the merits and shortcomings of each of these playwrights before finally settling on the – in his view – ideal play and playwright of all times: Sakuntala, and its author, the ancient Indian playwright, Kalidasa.

The Conclusion summarizes the poet’s contribution to Russian cultural philosophy in a variety of genres followed by a discussion of Konstantin Bal’mont’s specific place in the history of the Russian cultural debate on Russian national identity in the Silver Age. It assesses the role that the East and his exploration of it and India in particular played in his quest for Russia’s “true” national identity and how the synthesis of Indian-Russian culture was seen as a task for him as the heir to Pushkin’s throne and as the new universal artist.
NOTES

1 The term “the prophet’s mantle” was used by Joseph Frank as the title of one of his five books on Dostoevsky. See Frank, J. Dostoevsky, The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881, Princeton N.J.: Princeton U P, 2002.
4 In D.S. Merezhkovskii: Mysl’ i Slovo (Moscow: Nasledie, 1999) 198 – 206, 198. This and subsequent translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
5 Bal’mont, K.D. Gimny, pesni i zamysly drevnikh. (St.Petersburg: Pantheon, 1908) 10.
7 Patterson 24.
8 Valerii Brusov, “Bal’mont,” Mir Iskusstva 7-8 (1903) 29-36, 35.
10 Kuprianovskii et al 53.
11 Kuprianovskii et al 89.
12 Kuprianovskii et al 94.
13 Kuprianovskii et al 106.
14 Kuprianovskii et al 107.
15 Ellis. (Russkie Simvolisty. Moscow: Musaget, 1910) 95.
16 Ellis 114-115.
17 Ellis 138.
18 Patterson 34-35. Translation in original.
19 Patterson 66.
23 Markov Bal’mont: A Reappraisal” 226.
24 Markov Bal’mont: A Reappraisal” 264.
25 See note 5 for bibliographic details. Here 21-22.
26 Patterson 66.
27 Patterson 66-67.
29 Dmitriev 97.
32 Kuprianovskii et al 434.
37 Azadovskii et al 76.
38 Azadovskii et al 146.
39 Kuprianovskii et al p.6.
41 Andguladze 41.
42 Andguladze 37.
CHAPTER 1

IDEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

… one must understand, firstly, that India, in its essence, is a country of the ideal.

Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase”

My light India, my virgin mother.

Bal’mont, “Tri Strany”

In his article, on the ancient Indian poet-playwright Kalidasa (IV Century A.D) “Slovo o Kalidase” (“About Kalidasa”)1, Bal’mont wrote:

V Indii poèt Kalidasa, byvshii utonchennym, kogda ia eshche, na utre moikh stoletii, byl skifom, uvidav menia, totchas skazhet: ‘Tsvetok mozhet vynesti tiazhest’ pchely, no ne ptitsy.’ I ia srazu poimu, chto v ètoi strane strashnykh chudovishch, vysochaishikh gor, bezmernykh bogatstv i tonikh sootvetstvii –
moia mera legkosti est’ mera tiazhesti, moia voda plotna, kak zemlia, po moemu vozdukh zdeshnie dukhi mogut khodit’ svobodno.  

In India the poet Kalidasa already possessed all the sophistication of an advanced culture, when I was still but a Scythian witnessing the dawn of my country’s history and he would say on seeing me, ‘A flower can only bear the weight of a bee, but not that of a bird.’ And I would understand instantly that in this country of awesome monsters, dizzyingly high peaks, immeasurable wealth, and subtle correspondences, my measure of lightness was in fact, a measure of weightiness, that my water was even as the earth and the resident spirits could walk on my air freely.

Some elements typical for Bal’mont’s discourse are readily discerned in this statement replete with idiosyncratic and pantheistic imagery namely, a retrospectivism that was characteristic of the Silver Age as a whole, and the quest for cultural models to be emulated by a crisis-ridden modern civilization. The latter feature too was typical of the Silver Age, but Bal’mont made a fairly unusual choice of his model culture: India. Not only did Bal’mont choose a culture that was not at the center of attention in the Euro-centric symbolist movement (the interest in India would come later with acmeism) but he also idealized it. Bal’mont’s journey to the past features a return to a mythical Russian past that operates on the idea of the Scythians as the pagan ancestors of the Slavs, in particular of the Russians, but it includes the vision of a dialog between a pagan Russia’s “Scythian” past and India’s ancient past. This imagined cross-cultural dialog is conducted
between the Russian poet Bal’mont in his Scythian avatar with the ancient Indian poet playwright Kalidasa. The Indian poet already possesses sophistication as he lives in a “refined world” (“utonchennyi mir”) of subtle correspondences at a time when the “Scythian” poet is just beginning his evolution, and yet the two poets can communicate. The Scythian-Russian poet realizes, however, that he has not yet achieved the “measure of lightness,” i.e. the sophistication that the Indian poet already achieved long ago; thus Kalidasa is presented as an Ideal that the modern poet strives towards.

Bal’mont’s idealizing of India, when seen in the context in which the above-mentioned passage is written reveals a comparative factor. More specifically, comparing India with Western Europe, Bal’mont contends that the latter has little to offer when compared to the former. India does not merely embody a past ideal: its contemporary life, in Bal’mont’s view, has kept alive the ethos of Idealism. Providing examples of contemporary European nations, Bal’mont indicates that their cultural status differs greatly when compared to contemporary India. Present day Spain, for example, conjures up for Bal’mont images of “vulgar coolies, resembling bandits,” as well as of unlimited cruelty. Spain’s famous bull-fights do not evoke Bal’mont’s enthusiasm – he only saw bulls let loose on defenseless horses and people who trifle with life – their own and that of others. Contemporary England does not fare any better in Bal’mont’s works: Pervoe vpechatlenie ot Anglii budet tuman, kholodnoe molchanie . . . i otvratnyi vid miasnoi lavki (“The first impression of England would be fog, cold silence . . . and the disgusting sight of a meat shop”).

Contemporary India emerges as a complete contrast: there the poet would see young men with lithe bodies resembling the stems of plants and women who were like
fairy tales with eyes that would “reflect the song of silence and lakes of countless lotuses.” In this country of poets and beauty, Bal’mont sees himself as one with the Universal spirit, the one termed Brahma, and accepts the pantheistic belief of the upanishads that Brahma is manifested in every phenomenon, especially in human speech and poetic hymns and also, conversely, that every phenomenon is part of Brahma. Bal’mont concludes, “Esli ia sverkaiu drogotsennym izrecheniem, i esli ia poiu, ia v boge, ia bog” (“If I shine with a priceless saying, and if I sing, I am in god, I am god”).

CONTEMPORARY EUROPE IN CRISIS

Bal’mont’s retrospective impulse to seek idealized pasts is related to the long-standing perception in Russian culture that Western Europe was undergoing a spiritual crisis. This notion can be traced back to at least the nineteenth-century writer and philosopher of Russian Romanticism, Prince Vladimir Odoevsky, if not to even earlier representatives of this cultural debate. But it was the members of the Society of the Lovers of Wisdom, Odoevsky and his contemporaries, who clearly formulated the anti-enlightenment and romantic nationalist stance that was to exalt Russian culture above most of its Western European counterparts. Odoevsky voiced the conviction that Russia, as a “young” nation, had preserved the intuitive and creative powers lost in an overly analytical Western Europe and that Peter’s reforms had helped Russia absorb European achievements without losing its native, Russian, freshness. Russia, Odoevsky argued, had the lofty mission of rejuvenating an old, fossilized European culture.
Russia’s mission was closely related to his concern about the ill effects of the “materialistic and industrial civilization of bourgeois society.”

The debate on Russia’s national identity and what the country’s messianic mission vis-à-vis Europe might be intensified in the mid-nineteenth century in the polemics between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers. The Slavophiles formulated a “comprehensive and consistent ideology centered in their belief in the superior nature and supreme historical mission of Orthodoxy and that of Russia.” According to the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev, Slavophilism was “our first attempt at self-knowledge, our first independent ideology. Russia had been in existence for a thousand years, but Russian self-knowledge began at the moment that Ivan Kireevsky, and Aleksei Khomiakov had the audacity to ask what Russia is, how to define her essential qualities, her destiny, and her place in the universe.” While there were differences between individual Slavophiles, they were in agreement that European nations had lost their cultural vitality and, in the formulation of Ivan Kireevsky, therefore had already “fulfilled their mission.” Basing their cultures on individualistic principles -- Western European nations had inherited the classical Roman legacy of the cult of reason and rationalism that had resulted in a loss of “inner wholeness” -- they had disintegrated culturally and spiritually. They needed a new focal point, a rejuvenating force.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the philosopher and writer Vladimir Solov’ev (1853-1900), furthered the notions put forth by Kireevsky, namely that the Western philosophical tradition was characterized by an excessive emphasis on rational analysis (“rassudochnyi analiz”) and therefore culturally “dessicated.” For Solov’ev the apogee of Western philosophical thought was the positivist worldview of August Comte;
he firmly rejected the French philosopher’s system that denied the need and validity of
metaphysical speculation as well as the existence of a personal God. Solov’ev pointed out
that Comte offered his system as the only possible solution to a long-standing spiritual
crisis in the civilized nations, a notion he found absurd, strongly disagreeing with
positivism’s “atomistic” and fragmented thinking. Comte’s relegation of all religions –
including Christianity – to the first two imperfect stages of human intellectual evolution
while seeing his own philosophy as a marked improvement, was symptomatic of the
European spiritual crisis. His “strange” observations on Christianity – such as for
example, the notion that Christ was a “political opportunist – was irreconcilable with
Christianity’s dogma of the Trinity, the hope of resurrection and its moral code.

As a counter-force to Comte’s positivism, Solov’ev posed the question about the
“meaning of the existence of Russia in world history” and answered it in traditional
Slavophile terms. Thus the question that was posed at the beginning of the century had
lost none of its actuality as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Solov’ev declared that
with Europe at the brink of total spiritual crisis, the deliverance could only come through
the mediation of Slavs, specifically of Russians, a people of divine potential
(“bozhestvennoi potentsii”). Russia and its people would serve as conduits between
human and divine realities; they would be the source of the life force that the world
lacked. This religious mission of the highest order (prizvanie religioznoe v vysshem
smyshle etogo slova”) was not of Russia’s own design but divinely pre-ordained. Russia
was the chosen nation, as it was above the petty interests of the Europeans and by its
example, would alleviate their spiritual malaise.
Vladimir Solov’ev’s philosophical and poetic legacy decisively impacted the Russian Symbolists. They largely accepted the by now long-standing notion that tended to perceive Europe in a state of irredeemable crisis. In fact, they further developed the idea of the Russian messianic mission to revive Europe’s waning cultural creativity by revitalizing Fedor Dostoevsky’s notions of the universality of the Russian spirit. Thus the first generation symbolist and cultural philosopher D.S. Merezhkovskii (1886-1941) saw this crisis of European culture as a result of its mediocrity – one that he linked to the rise of the bourgeoisie and gave the bizarre term “Chinesefication” (“kitaizatsiia”). 17 The second-generation poet Aleksandr Blok saw the decline of the humanistic tradition of the European Renaissance into impotent individualism as the prime cause of the decline and concluded that contemporary European culture had lost its “musicality,” wherefore it was experiencing a fatal fragmentation of its culture into disconnected, narrowly defined, branches of art and science. The result was a hyper-individualistic and culturally fragmented society.18

This perceived crisis in terms of a fin-de-siècle mood of despair in contemporary European civilization was best captured by Merezhkovskii in the travel account of his journey to Greece, entitled “Akropolis”:

nelepoi roskoshi, sredi grandioznykh izobretenii sovremennoi tekhniki; my odichali v nashikh bezobraznykh gigantskikh gorodakh – êtikh tverdnyiakh iz kamnia i zheleza, vozdvignutykh protiv stikhiinykh sil prirody. . .

Thus in the Parthenon, remembering with sadness our trivial lives, I thought: we are no longer capable of creating in accordance with nature. It has been twenty centuries now since we distanced ourselves from nature. We are so foolish! We are so powerless! What are we looking for? Where are we going? . . . Our souls have neither heroism nor joy. We are proud of our knowledge and are losing our human image, we are beginning to resemble savages amidst despondent and absurd luxury, amidst the grandiose inventions of contemporary technology; we have become alienated in our deformed giant cities – in the stronghold made of stone and iron, built against the elemental strength of nature. . .

Merezhkovsii’s words are one of the best expressions of the prevailing mood of the Russian fin-de-siècle. He mourns the lack of “heroism” and joy in contemporary European life, whose preoccupation with empirical knowledge and technology had resulted in a loss of man’s connection with nature.

WESTERN EUROPE IN BAL’MONT’S OEUVRE

The idea that contemporary Europe was incapable of providing creative inspiration for its artists and intellectuals is voiced in strong terms in Bal’mont’s works.
The English, for example, were “seafaring bandits, who strictly followed the rules of the marine charter created by themselves,” and the French were “tireless fabricators of human banalities, touchingly convinced of their originality.”20 The “Germans were mere publishers of books -- all their feelings and thoughts were contained in a three-volume research work” and the Scandinavians had made it their specialty to be “mysteriously silent,” “for silence is always mysterious even if there is nothing behind it.”21 The Russians alone had mastered the art of constant self-renewal – all the other European nations merely repeated themselves monotonously: “Russkie . . . No Russkie . . . esche ne skazali svoego slova Sud’be i zhudt svoego prigovora ot nee s medlitel’nost’iu poistine tsiklicheskoj” (“Russians . . . But Russians . . . have not yet told their word to Fate and are awaiting their sentence from it with a slowness that is truly cyclical”).22

Contemporary European drama offered a particularly clear-cut manifestation of cultural decline demonstrating many examples of the fragmented condition of the European psyche. Henrik Ibsen, Maurice Maeterlinck, Gerhart Hauptmann – all these were playwrights who practiced the poetics of death and despair in their works. It was not the depiction of death and human isolation in individualistic cultures per se that disturbed Bal’mont in these playwrights’ works, but above all the lack of balance and harmony – negative aspects needed to be balanced against hopeful ones. The reason these European playwrights focus on negativism alone Bal’mont ascribed to a lack of vital organic contact with the Universal whole that was accessible to the pantheistic poet, in for example, a culture such as India’s. Europeans were in general unable to understand and appreciate true poetry in any genre, whereas the opposite was the case in Indian culture. The rational European mind would not even comprehend the definition of the authentic
Poet given by the ancient Indian poet and playwright, Shudraka (2nd and 1st century BC), as one who “walks the Earth proudly with a gently illuminated face and a beautifully sculpted body.” The European mind that had become “unbound from Nature” had lost its harmony and would be indifferent to the gracefulness and subtlety of Shudraka’s poetry. Even the most discerning of Europeans would only be able to respond to his mastery of the poetic craft but offer a deprecatory smile at their lack of comprehension.

In Bal’mont’s view only those cultures that had retained a connection with Nature could have a genuine understanding of poetry. Such were the people of India and, to some extent, medieval Spaniards, who in the playwright Calderon had demonstrated an intuitive and organic vision of life. Contemporary European literature and culture had clearly lost this connection with Nature. Both Kalidasa and Calderon could compare a beautiful woman to a white heron, but that was an image alien to contemporary French and German poets, leading Bal’mont to conclude that: “I am glad that the German and the French [poet] finds such a comparison comical. It is very pleasant to know that in the opulent Indian gardens and in the exquisite reveries of Seville we are not burdened by the presence of ignominious European mediocrity.”

CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY AND “THREE COUNTRIES”

Declaring that contemporary European philosophy was fragmented and “contemptible,” Bal’mont suggests that the solution to this “dull, fragmented and ugly” contemporary life was to transport oneself “joyfully” to “other places and other times.” His fellow Russian Symbolists looked to classical antiquity to observe the patterns of
“rise, decline and fall” to find solutions for what they perceived as a fall of contemporary Europe. Valerii Briusov, a leading symbolist of the first generation chose classical Rome, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii drew his inspiration from Ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy, Viacheslav Ivanov was deeply immersed in classical antiquity. Whatever the culture of choice, its chief function was to provide a model to be studied, a model to aid Russia in its quest for its true national self.

Unlike other symbolists, Bal’mont turned away from classical antiquity. For him ancient Rome and Greece had lost their relevance to the present day and had, in the first place, been but mere reflections of older, more authentic cultures of antiquity. It was time to turn to the contributions of other ancient cultures – cultures that furthermore had not ceased to contribute to humanity’s cultural wealth. In his reply to his close friend and well-known publisher, M. Sabashnikov’s request to translate ancient classics, Bal’mont asked him to “clarify” whom he meant by “ancient”:

. . . Chto kasaetsia tvoego predlozheniia perevesti chto-nibud’ iz Drevnikh pisatelei, ia okhotno otklikaius’ na ètot prizyv, no dliia menia ne sovsem iasno, kogo razumeesh’ ty pod Drevnimi. Esli ty govorish’ o pisateliakh Grecheskikh i Latinskikh, ia dumaiu, chto nikogda ne priblizhus’ k nim, ibo Drevnimi ikh ne schitaiu, a vizhu v nikh vestnykh, pereizvestnykh, povtornost’iu beznadezhno zatertykh, davno voshedshikh v Evropeiskuiu zhizn’ i bezvozvratno ischerpannykh, ne privelikikh talantov i geniev i nesovremennykh èpigonov, podrazhatelei, prodolzhatel’ i povtoritelei (soznatel’nykh ili bezsoznatel’nykh, vse ravno) takikh pervorodnykh
As regards your proposal to translate something from the Ancient writers, I will happily agree to it, but I am not sure I understand what exactly you mean by Ancient. If you mean the Greek and Latin writers, I think I will never work on them for I do not consider them Ancient. Instead, I see in them well known, in fact overly so, epigones and dubious talents, who have been a part of European life and whose works have been irrevocably depleted by repetition. They are imitators and repeaters (and it does not matter whether they do this consciously or not) of authentic values such as Egypt, Chaldea, the Jews and India . . . All this is doubtless much more interesting and more worthy of translation than the Greeks and Romans. . .

Bal'mont offered his complete participation in the project if Sabashnikov would agree to include translations of masterpieces from unexplored literatures, such as the Indian one, that he considered not only more interesting but also "more necessary" ("kotorye sut' ne tol'ko liubopytnosti no i neobkhodimosti") than the classical Greek and Roman ones. Bal'mont was working on a translation of *The Life of Buddha* written by the ancient Indian poet Ashvagosha at the time of writing this letter and he offered it as one of his contributions to Sabashnikov’s planned series, *Pamiatniki mirovoi literatury* (Masterpieces of World Literature).
There were “three countries,” Bal’mont declared, which invited eternal returns because they offered revitalization of tired cultures. These were Assyria, Egypt and India. In his poem, “Tri strany” (“Three countries”) Bal’mont delineates their characteristics in these terms:

Stroit’ zdan’ia, byt’ v gareme, vykhodit’ na l’vov,
Prevrashchat’ tsarei sosednikh v sobstvennykh rabov,
Op’ianiat’sia povtoreniem iarkoi bukvoi ia, –
Vot, Assiria, doroga istinno tvoia.

Prevratit’ narod moguchii v voskhodiashchest’ plit,
Byt’ sozdatelem zagadok, sfinksom Piramid,
I, dostigshi granei v tainakh, obratit’sia v pyl’ –
O, Egipet, ètu skazku ty iavl kak byl’.

Mir oputat’ svetloi tkan’iu myslei-pautin,
Slit’ dushoi zhuzhanie moshki s grokhotom lavin,
V labirintakh byt’ kak doma, vse poniat’ priniat, -
Svet moi, Indiia, sviatynia, devstvennaia mat’.

To build, visit harems, to attack lions,
To transform neighboring rulers into your slaves
To get inebriated by the repetition of the bright syllable “I”

Here, Assyria, is your true path.

To transform powerful people into rising tombs,
Creating secrets, the sphinx of the Pyramids,
And, having achieved the peak of mysteries, to become dust,
O, Egypt, is your lot of bringing fairy tales to life and turn to dust.

To envelop the world in the bright fabric of a web of thoughts
To synthesize in your soul the buzz of an insect and thunder of avalanches
To be at home in the labyrinths, to understand all, to accept all, –
This, India, my light, my holy shrine, my virgin mother – is your task.27

Thus, for Bal’mont, the answer to the “dullness” of contemporary life was not in classical antiquity venerated by Europe, but in the more ancient cultures of the East, especially India’s. While he noted that each national culture had its unique place in the “World Theater” of History, it was “Indian Thought” that was all encompassing and universal, Bal’mont wrote. India was the incarnation of all that was eternal, universal and all encompassing.
INDIA IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

Bal’mont is not the first writer to introduce the image of India into Russian literature – it can be found there from medieval times onwards. For example, in the *Primary Chronicle*, “Indian space” was used to indicate the geographical boundaries of the territory of Noah’s sons. Medieval Russian literature encountered India as the land of fantastic riches in its oral literature (the “byliny”) or as the realm of the mythical Prester John\(^2\) and also as the land in close juxtaposition to heaven as seen in such apocryphal tales as “Zosima’s Journey to the Rakhmans.”

Themes related to India reappear in the eighteenth and nineteenth century largely in the form of translations of ancient Indian literature and some commentaries to the translations. R.H.Stacy’s work, *India in Russian Literature* as well as the Soviet publication *Bibliografiia Indii* provide comprehensive surveys of the presence of Indian themes in Russian literature (and press).\(^2\) Thus Russia shared, to some extent the Indophilia of Western Europe that began with the “rediscovery” of India by the British Orientalist William Jones in the eighteenth century. There was a gap between the physical incorporation of India into the British Empire and the discovery of its spiritual riches, but Jones began the process of bridging this gap by translating for the first time ancient Indian classics from Sanskrit into English including a translation of *Sakuntala* in 1789. This was the “first complete text translated from Sanskrit . . . and the first Sanskrit drama available to the European reader.”\(^3\)

A much-translated figure in various European cultural contexts as well in Russia was the ancient Indian playwright Kalidasa (approximately IV century A.D). Kalidasa’s
Russian reception began with the sentimentalist Nikolai Karamzin, who translated four acts of *Sakuntala* in 1792 from a German version, thus adding to numerous translations of this drama in other languages. Tiutchev and Fet paid tribute to Kalidasa during the nineteenth century as did the writers of the Silver Age. Thus Merezhkovskii translated Kalidasa’s play, *Vikramaurvasiyam* from Western European sources. Another line of translations was Vasilii Zhukovskii’s who translated tales from the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, and in particular, *Nala Damayanti*. This line was continued by Viacheslav Ivanov who translated an excerpt of this tale for his collection *Cor Ardens*; later the Acmeist Nikolai Gumilev employed motifs from this tale in his poem, “Piatistopnye Iamby” (“Five-foot Iambs”).

The examination of the role and function of Indian imagery in the works of these authors is, however, beyond the scope of the current investigation. The subject of this dissertation, the function of India in the oeuvre of the Russian symbolist writer Konstantin Bal’mont, dictates the content of the following sections.

**INDIA IN BAL’MONT’S OEUVRE**

Bal'mont's introduction to ancient Indian literature most likely occurred in 1897, the year of his first trip to Oxford. Bal'mont’s interest in India arose when was invited to Oxford University by the British Slavist, Professor William Morfill, to deliver a series of lectures on Russian Literature at the University. Bongard-Levin asserts that among the listeners at these lectures was the famous German Indologist and Orientalist, Friedrich Max Müller, himself an emeritus professor at Oxford at the time of Bal'mont's visit. The
Indologist deduced that a meeting between the two must have taken place. Whether or not a personal meeting took place, it is clear that Bal'mont was familiar with Max Müller’s research.

Bongard-Levin's examination of Bal'mont's archives reveals that the poet had studied the works of the German Sanskritologist. Max Müller (1823-1900) was a leading Indologist of his time; among his most significant contributions to the field of Indology and Sanskrit studies were his translations of ancient Indian religious and philosophical literature and in particular the Vedas and Upanishads. Max Müller also produced the serialized publication of Sacred Books of the East, which featured translations of religious and philosophical works from the East.32

Bal'mont consulted the Sacred Books of the East on several occasions during his work on the translation of the Indian poet Ashvaghosha's (approx. I-II AD) Life of the Buddha which he undertook in 1912 and his translations of Shelley's poems in which he also was engaged at the time. Bal'mont's translations of Shelley were published in three volumes and the Russian poet's commentaries to Shelley's poems were often refracted through the prism of his Indological studies. Another English Orientalist whose works Bal'mont seems to have consulted was Monier Williams, well known for his translations of ancient Indian literature. One of the poems from Bal'mont's cycle, “Indiiskie travy” (“Indian Herbs”) includes the poem, “Iz Upanishad” (“From the Upanishad”), a fairly faithful translation of Monier Williams' English translation of the Isha Upanishad from his book Hinduism (1877). 33 Bal'mont's interest in India eventually led him to start learning Sanskrit in 1906 when he was in Paris (during his self-imposed exile in France from 1903-1913).
Other cultural and literary figures who impacted Bal'mont's Orientalist studies were the founder of the Theosophical movement and notorious occultist Madame Blavatsky, her niece and translator Vera Johnston (who translated excerpts from the *Upanishads* and the Life of Shankaracharya), the Russian Orientalists I.P. Minaev (1840-1890) and S. F. Ol’denburg and the Director of the Ethnographic Museum in St. Petersburg, D.N. Anuchin (1843-1923). All these left clear traces on Bal’mont’s thought and works – for example, in his essay on Calderon, Bal’mont quotes large sections from Helena Blavatsky’s Theosophical treatise *Voice of Silence* (1889). It should be pointed out perhaps that to Bal’mont, Calderon was an “Indian” writer.

One of the most serious influences on Bal'mont's vision of the Orient was the French Indologist, Sylvain Levi (1863-1935). Levi was well respected in Europe as an Orientalist, Sinologist and Indologist and Bal'mont sought him out while in France and continued to consult with him for a long time. Levi's famous monograph, *Indian Theater* was published in 1890. In his book, Levi discusses in detail the works of ancient Indian playwrights Kalidasa, Shudraka, Bhasa and others. Indian drama soon came to occupy a prominent place in Bal'mont’s idea of a future new theater that he conceptualized as a “Theater of Youth and Beauty.”

This first phase of Bal’mont’s Indophilia was reflected in his poetry, his essays, in translations as well as in his commentaries to translations, particularly of P.B. Shelley and Calderon. As mentioned earlier, Bal'mont quotes large sections from Helena Blavatsky's Theosophical treatise *Voice of Silence* in his essay on Calderon. India appears in all of the following poetry collections: *Tishina* (*Silence*, 1898), *Goriashchie zdaniia* (*Burning Structures*, 1900), *Budem kak solntse* (*Let us Be Like the Sun*, 1903), *Liturgiia*
krasoty (Liturgy of Beauty, 1905), Gimny, pesni i zamysly drevnikh (Hymns, Songs and Thoughts of the Ancients, 1908) and Iasen': Videnie dreva (The Ash: Vision of the Tree, 1915); in his collections of essays, Gornye vershiny (Mountain Peaks, 1904), Belye zarnitsy (White Lightening Flashes, 1908), and Morskoe svechenie (Marine Phosphorescence, 1910) as well as in his creative projects in such mythopoetic essays as Svetozvuk v prirode i svetovaia simfoniia Skriabina (Light-sound in Nature and the Light Symphony of Scriabin, 1917).

Among the cultural figures that particularly interested Bal'mont were the Indian religious philosopher Shankaracharya and the Buddha, the ancient Indian playwrights Kalidasa and Shudraka, as well as the philosopher and linguist Bharatrihari. This phase is characterized by an inquiry into the Upanishads and the Vedas and in ideas of Theosophy though to a much lesser extent than in the case of Andrei Belyi, who would eventually become a faithful disciple of Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophy.

The dominant image in this first phase is of India as the Strana Mysli, a country Bal’mont idealized for its deep spirituality. His poems of this period reflect idealized spiritual personae that have found the key to the material world's existential problems and have been able to transcend them by renouncing this level of reality as unimportant. This is particularly characteristic of his collection, Goriashchie zdania and Gimny, pesni i zamysly drevnikh. However, in the collections Budem kak solntse and Liturgiia Krasoty, the poet's lyrical hero can be seen asserting his impulsive Slavic spirit in direct contrast to the spiritual perfection of the Indian figures that appear in his Goriashchie zdania.
As already stated, Bal’mont’s interest in India and other non-European cultures was linked to his intense concern with Europe’s and Russia’s current state and future destiny. Seeing the present as a parallel to the historical Time of Troubles, he believes that one way of getting out of “troubled times” is to learn from forgotten and neglected cultures. The ideas discussed above are closely linked in Bal’mont’s worldview with the “Pushkin myth” that owes its origin to the Slavophile Ivan Kireevsky.

Kireevsky was the first to put forward the idea of Pushkin as a Russian “national” poet. In his first article, “Random Thoughts about the Character of Pushkin’s Poetry” (1828), Kireevsky noted “national” features in Pushkin’s works and saw them as a “spontaneous manifestation of the spiritual essence of the Russian people, expressed for the first time in perfect poetic form.” But Pushkin remained uniquely Russian while assimilating European cultural traditions into his work i.e, the poet was able to absorb and employ in his works the best of both worlds.

Kireevsky’s formulation of the “Pushkin myth” was taken up by the late-nineteenth century group, pochvenniki. The members of this group (the two Dostoevsky brothers – Fyodor and Mikhail – and the writer Apollon Grigor’ev) advocated a “return to the soil”. Formally set up in the1860’s, the group’s position continued the Slavophile debate indicating that the issues of Russia’s national identity and its role vis-à-vis Europe continued to hold sway over the Russian cultural imagination. The position of the pochvenniki was a conciliatory one, advocating a rapprochement between the two
warring elements: Western ism and Slavophilism, people and intelligentsia, Russia and the West. Unlike the Slavophiles, Grigor’ev was not nostalgic for an “imaginary ancient Russia.” A return to the soil did not mean a rejection of “Europeanism”, which, according to him had already become part of the soil.

Apollon Grigor’ev saw the synthesis of Slavophilism and Western ism, of spontaneity and the European “personality” principle in the works of Pushkin. This synthesis would soon be part of the larger society, since “poets were always the most perfect spiritual organs of their people and infallibly foreshadowed their future.”

Broadening Kireevsky’s stance on Pushkin, Grigor’ev saw in him the ideal archetype of Russian national identity that was enriched and complemented by European elements. “I believe and know that only in Pushkin there has been a total and integral fusion of the powerful national spirit . . .” Pushkin had been able to strike roots in the Russian soil while creating such universal types as Don Juan, Onegin and Aleko as well as the meek Ivan Petrovich Belkin. Grigor’ev declared that this new principle would revive Russia and rejuvenate a declining European culture.

Grigor’ev’s fellow pochvennik, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky’s expanded Grigor’ev’s ideas on Pushkin in his famous “Pushkin speech” made in June 1881 at the meeting of the Society of the lovers of Russian literature (Obshestvo liubitelei rossiiskoi slovesnosti) and later published in his Diary of a Writer (1881). The speech opens with a statement of Gogol’ – Pushkin’s successor and Dostoevsky’s predecessor: “Pushkin est’ iavlenie chrezvychainoe, i, mozhet byt’ edinstvennoe iavlenie russkogo dukha . . .” (“Pushkin is an extraordinary phenomenon and, perhaps, a unique example of the Russian spirit.”) The statement that sets the tone of the entire speech underscores Pushkin’s
Russianness; Dostoevsky added to the ideas of synthesis and reconciliation an emphasis on Russian universalism.

Dostoevsky explicated the nature of this Russianness by claiming that the phenomenon of Pushkin had prophetic meaning for all Russians. Having come at the beginning of a new century (Pushkin’s dates are 1799-1837) and at the end of a hundred years of Petrine reforms, Pushkin illuminated the way for future generations. Comparing Pushkin to – and placing him above – European masters such as Shakespeare, Cervantes and Schiller, Dostoevsky argued that Pushkin was unique in his universal sensibility and sensitivity (“vsemirnaia otzyvchivost’”); the poet shared this capacity with the Russian people and hence was a “people’s poet” (“narodnyi poèt”).

According to Dostoevsky, none of the great European writers had Pushkin’s ability to empathize so strongly with other nationalities, to “embody in one’s self the genius of the other, perhaps, the neighboring people, its spirit, the entire hidden depth of this spirit and the entire agony of its calling, as Pushkin could do it.”41 Instead, European writers, on encountering other cultures, very often re-presented them in their own likeness. For example, Shakespeare’s Italians were thinly disguised Englishmen. Not only did Pushkin have a protean sensibility, it was remarkable in its depth and its extraordinary capacity to recreate the “self” in the “other.”

Dostoevsky believed that the Russian of the future, “will comprehend that to become a genuine Russian means to reconcile all European controversies, to show the solution of European anguish in our all-human and all-unifying Russian soul, to embrace in it with brotherly love for all our brothers.”42 Dostoevsky’s “Pushkin speech” crystallized the notion of the universal Russian genius in the minds of Dostoevsky’s
contemporaries and began a tradition of the Pushkin myth that would find a central place in the cultural mythologies of succeeding generations of Russian intellectuals, including those of the Silver Age.

The Silver Age continued to “build upon” the Pushkin myth, whose foundation was constructed in the nineteenth century. Boris Gasparov notes that for the nineteenth century writers such as Kireevski, Apollon Grigor’ev and Dostoevskii “Pushkin was a historical figure – although idealized to legendary proportions – and even within the national pantheon he had a historical role, that of ‘founder’.” In the Silver Age, by contrast, Pushkin was seen “as present in all aspects of contemporary culture,” and the writers “created a multifaceted image of the poet to which it clung with mythological literalness.”

Pushkin permeated the Silver Age in this multifaceted mythological image, which was seen as a “sublime synthesis” of “the real and the transcendental, the ‘divine’ and the ‘human’.” Pushkin – who was seen as a combination of Dionysian and Appolonian principles – seemed to be everywhere in the life of the Silver Age. He was present in “the artistic monuments of the Modernist age, in philosophical and aesthetic debates, in historical events and in real-life situations, in the topographical signposts of the cultural scenery . . .”

BAL’MONT AS THE NEW UNIVERSAL (RUSSIAN) POET

In the letter to friend and publisher Mikhail Sabashnikov mentioned earlier, Bal’mont wrote of Russia’s readiness to engage in dialog with other cultures. Once again, Bal’mont indicated that Russia’s path lay not towards classical antiquity, but elsewhere:
Ia dumaiu, chto Rossiia bystro idet k polnomu peresmotru vsekh osnovnykh
tsennostei, chto ona uzhe vpolne vstupila v poru takogo mnogogrannogo
rassledovaniia i sopostavlenii i chto dlia vozmozhnosti osushchestvit' takie
umstvennye paralelli . . . nado dat' Russkomu chitateliu ne sozdaniia Ellady i
Rima, k kotorym v naibolee napriazhennye i trudnye momenty vnutrennei bor'by
Russkii dukh vovse ne ustremliaetsia i kotorymy on ne mozhet utolit' svoiu
zhazhdu, - a sozdaniia, kotorye rasshiriaiut ego i vvedeniem v nego sovershенно
novykh elementov, obogotiat pochvu, dadut novye puti, novye ugly zreniiia,
vidiat neozhidannost'iu i cherez udivlenie probudiat glaz dlia bolee ostrogo
zreniiia. Oveiannye vekami chuzhezemnye legendy khraniat v sebe svet dlia
nashikh dnei . . . 47

I think that Russia is quickly moving towards a total re-evaluation of all
fundamental values that Russia has completely moved into a period of such multi-
dimensional investigation and juxtaposition and that for the possibility of
realizing such intellectual parallels . . . one must give the Russian reader not the
creations of Greece and Rome, towards which in moments of extreme tension and
difficulty of inner turmoil the Russian soul does not strive and by which it can not
appease its thirst – but [instead they must be given] the creations that expand the
Russian I with the introduction of new elements, will enrich it, will give new
direction, new points of view, would unexpectedly and with surprise would open
their eyes for sharper vision. These age-old foreign legends contain in themselves the light for our days . . .

Offering himself as the intercultural mediator that Russia clearly needed, Bal’mont obviously seems to have envisioned himself as Pushkin’s heir. Unlike Pushkin, however, he would bring to Russia the true wisdom of ancient India and avoid the false Western antiquity. Bal’mont, who continued to call upon the “Pushkin myth” in his work, nevertheless pointed to one lacuna in the life and works of his illustrious predecessor. Pushkin lacked the organic connection to nature that the poets Fet and Tiutchev evidently had and celebrated in their works. Pushkin’s descriptions of nature lacked “mystery” and everything in them was “simple, clear, definite,” unlike those of Fet and Tiutchev.

According to Bal’mont:

Pushkin and Pushkinians relate to the visible world directly, more as observers than as thinkers. They see parts of the world, not the whole; they see its visible meaning, not its hidden mysteries. In their very essence they are representatives of artistic naturalism . . . They live by facts that have not been philosophically examined, they live in finite reality that governs them. The other sphere – the lofty sphere of abstraction, of the universal symbolization of every living thing – is closed to them . . . Pushkin lives in the temporal [world], Fet and Tiutchev [live] in the eternal [world] . . .

Bal’mont would synthesize in his universal (literary) persona Pushkin’s harmonious nature with the philosophical pantheism of Tiutchev and Fet, he would express in the universal Russian language the subtlety of Kalidasa, he was the poet that Shudraka described. He would draw upon his mythical, pagan, Scythian past and synthesize it with the wisdom of the Indian Universal being, Brahma.

Bal’mont saw himself as a universal figure in all respects: he was able to “talk with each in his language,” he drew his inspiration from a variety of sources: his teachers were “the estate, garden, forest, rivulets, marshy lakes, the whispering of leaves, butterflies, birds and horizons.” Among illustrious predecessors he counted, “Russian folk songs, all Russian poets, the inspired English language, all seeing Goethe, the sophisticated Dante, stubborn Scandinavian poetry, the self assertion of the Spaniards of the 16th and 17th centuries, and the pantheistic hymns of the Hindus…”
NOTES

2 Bal’mont “Slovo o Kalidase,” 574.
4 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 574.
5 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 574.
6 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 574.
7 Walickij discusses the role of German philosophers such as Schelling and von Baader who placed hopes on Russia and its rejuvenating mission. In fact, Odoevsky met Schelling in 1848 and the German philosopher told him that Russia was “destined to do something great.” Franz von Baader also believed in the special role of Russia, in particular, Russian Orthodoxy that he expounded in his essay with the significant title, “The Mission of the Russian Church in View of the Decline of Christianity in the West.” In Andzej Walickij, The Slavophile Controversy. History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) 75.
8 Walickij 75.
12 “Polozhitel’naia filosofiia, – govorit Og.Kont, - mozhet sluzhit’ edinstvennoi tverdoi osnovoi dlia sostoiania krizisa, v kotorem tak dolgo nahodiatsia naibolee razvitye tsvilozavannye strany” (“The teachings of Schopenhauer and Hartmann share the limitation of Western philosophy – a one-sided domination of rational analysis that confirms abstract concepts in their isolation and in the ensuing result”). Vladimir Solov’ev, “Krizis Zapadnoi Filosofii” 23.
13 Vladimir Solov’ev, “Krizis Zapadnoi Filosofii” 130.
16 Vladimir Solov’ev, “Filosofskie nachala tsel’nogo znaniia” 173.
20 Konstantin Bal’mont, “Rdianye Zvezdy” 44.
21 Konstantin Bal’mont, “Rdianye Zvezdy” 43-44.
22 Konstantin Bal’mont, “Rdianye Zvezdy” 44.
23 Konstantin Bal’mont, Morskoe svechenie 23.
24 Konstantin Bal’mont, Morskoe svechenie 24.
28 Prester John is the name of the legendary eastern priest and king, who had a Kingdom of fabulous riches allegedly located in India. Vasco de Gama had even carried a letter to the legendary ruler.
34 Bongard-Levin provides excerpts from some correspondence between Bal’mont and Oldenburg, Minaev and Anuchin.
36 Walickij 123.
37 Walickij 532.
38 Walickij 535.
39 A series of articles on national and international politics, literature and aesthetics published under the heading of “A Writer’s Diary” (Dnevnik Pisatelia, 1871-74, 76-77 and one issue in 1881).
42 Walickij 555.
44 Gasparov 6.
45 Gasparov 6.
46 Gasparov 8.
49 Konstantin Bal’mont, “O russkikh poètakh” 71.
50 Bal’mont draws on the example of Lomonosov here, who is supposed to have said that Russian language was eminently suitable for every type of human communication: with God, with a lover, for official purposes etc. The universality of Russian language differed from the more narrow suitability of each of the other European languages: Spanish was appropriate for communication with God, French was suitable for conversing with friends, German was the right language to engage an enemy and Italian was fit for


53 Bal’mont, “O poëzii Feta” 396.
CHAPTER 2

SAMOUTVERZHDENIE: INDIA IN THE SEARCH FOR A (NATIONAL) SELF IN BAL’MONT’S POETRY

I know that Brahma is more intelligent, than

all the countless named Gods

But Brahma is an Indian and I am a Slav.

Do our paths meet?

K. Bal’mont, “Samoutverzhdenie”

INTRODUCTION

In her portrait of Bal’mont, Marina Tsvetaeva wrote that his immense love for Russia notwithstanding, the poet embodied Russia’s longing (“toska”) for the foreign. According to Tsvetaeva, “[I]n the Russian fairy tale, Bal’mont is not Tsarevich Ivan, but the foreign guest who showers the Tsar’s daughter with all the treasures of the seas.”¹ Bal’mont was a Russian poet by accident of birth, but in fact he was a poet belonging to the entire world and perhaps even the universe. A nation was a material phenomenon (“natsia v ploti”) and Bal’mont, even while speaking of the Himalayas or the Andes, was “captivatingly ethereal.” “Speaking of Bal’mont,” she wrote, one meant “water, wind and
the sun.” In a similar vein, the acmeist poet Osip Mandel’shtam felt “there stood an ocean between [Bal’mont] and Russia,” so absorbed was he in other cultures.

Tsvetaeva and Mandel’shtam rightly pointed to some essential characteristics defining the Russian Symbolist’s poetic persona, namely, a striving towards dialog with other world cultures, a poetic pantheism expressed in a cult of the elements and a desire to transcend material reality. What both perhaps failed to see was that Bal’mont’s “yearning for world culture” (as Mandel’shtam would later put it) was, as he himself saw it, his most archetypal Russian feature, since universality was the hallmark of the Russian national spirit and a Russian was the more Russian the more universal he was. Pushkin, it will be remembered, showed the path.

Bal’mont was indeed an obsessive traveler, translator and discoverer of alien cultures and his “toska” extended far and wide around the globe. Perhaps the most interesting feature of Bal’mont's absorption in the world around him, was the range of cultures taken in by his inquiring and exploring gaze. In a Eurocentric world and member of a Eurocentric literary movement as he was, he extended his purview to the very “peripheries” of the globe, to "cultures, hitherto not much examined by Russian poets."

Vladimir Markov, Bal’mont’s rediscoverer, rightly notes that the poet’s “most important contribution to Russian poetry was to widen its bounds. He looked beyond Russia to other Slavic lands, beyond Europe to other continents (and even in Europe he explored such relatively neglected areas as Spain and Scandinavia, ignoring the traditional France and Italy). He introduced entire new civilizations into Russian poetry.”
One such culture was India, and it was one that interested Bal'mont very early on in his career as a poet and would continue to do so almost till the end of his writing days. It is true that ancient Russian literature demonstrated a certain interest in India and Bal’mont may have been inspired by medieval texts to pursue his interest in India. Nevertheless, it was Bal’mont who ‘discovered” India for the Silver Age, since apart from occasional poems by Merezhkovsky and some other symbolists, India drew little literary attention.

Vladimir Markov notes that Bal’mont’s interest in India may be traced to the first ever collection of poetry published by him. Generically titled *Sbornik stikhov* (Collection of Poems, 1890), the collection was destroyed later by the poet except for one poem that was republished in later collections. The collection was divided into two parts: Part I consisted of original poems by the poet and Part II had translations of French and German poets. One of the poets whose poetry was translated by Bal’mont for this collection was Jean Lahor (also known as Henri Cazalis, 1840-1909), who might have been an early source of Bal'mont's Indophilia. Lahor's book from which Bal'mont chose poems to translate, was entitled *L'Illusion* and was a reference to the ancient Indian philosophical concept of *maya*. The term *maya* is used to denote the notion of “the (physical) world as illusion" and it was to become a theme in Bal'mont's cycle, "Indiiskie travy" (“Indian herbs”) included in his collection, *Goriashchie zdaniia: Lirika sovremennoi dushi* (Burning Buildings: Lyrics of the Contemporary Soul, 1900). Lahor had lived in India and had written *Historie de la littérature hindoue* (History of Hindu Literature, 1888) and was even referred to as a “Hindu Parnassian.” Raymond Schwab
describes Lahor as “pantheist and pessimist haunted by India.” It is very likely that Lahor’s works drew Bal’mont’s attention to India at the very onset of his career.

India as a theme in Bal'mont's poetry remains relatively unexamined as does the important theme of his search for a new national "self" that would also define his role as the universal Russian poet. Although the relationship between these elements may not be obvious at first glance, this chapter posits that they are in a complex both complementary and polemical relationship. Thus, the following pages investigate Bal'mont's poetry for the purpose of: (a) delineating the image of India, (b) comparing Bal'mont's treatment of Russia and India, (c) fixing the features of "Russian-ness" that emerge as a result of Bal'mont's treatment of Russia, (d) the significance of India and Indian religious-philosophical thought for Bal'mont as a symbolist poet and its place in Bal'mont's emerging concept of a national and individual self.

Bal’mont’s poetry is voluminous and comprises more than thirty collections and the task of studying all of them is a daunting one. For the purposes of this dissertation, most attention will be focussed on his poetry before his second and final exile (Bal’mont left Russia for France in 1920 never to return). One reason for this selection is that the poet in many ways abandons the task of creating a national self in exile, and hence India as a complementary, yet opposed counter-part to Russia ceases to be a major theme as well. Russia instead becomes a lost land, the object of a hopeless yearning for an irrevocable past; in fact, Bal’mont comes to embrace the entire register of émigré thematics: loss of identity, nostalgia, and longing to return to familiar and unreachable shores ("rodnye berega") are the dominant mood and themes of his Parisian poetry collections.
**GORIASHCHIE ZDANIIA: THE POETICS OF DIALECTICS**

This section examines Bal'mont's fifth collection of poems, *Goriashchie zdaniia: Lirika sovremennoi dushi* (1899, henceforth GZ) for the purposes mentioned above. GZ represents a significant phase in Bal'mont's reception as a poet. His four earlier collections, *Sbornik stikhotvorenii* (1890), *Pod severnym nebom* (*Under Northern Skies*, 1894), *V bezbrezhnosti* (*In Boundlessness*, 1895) and *Tishina* (*Silence*, 1897) although well received by literary critics, did not match GZ in regard to the enthusiasm of its reception. With GZ, and its marked turn towards “flamboyant” themes, Bal'mont had arrived as a poet, however. According to Bal’mont scholar Vladimir Markov, "It is generally agreed, and the poet himself held the opinion, that *Burning Buildings* opens a new period in Bal'mont's poetry . . . the book was a triumph for the poet . . . and made Bal'mont the most popular poet of the decade."

Most poems of this collection appeared at least three times before being published as an entire collection. The first time some of Bal'mont's poems from GZ appeared was in the collection, *Kniga razdumii* (*Book of Thoughts*, 1899) which was published by *Skorpion*, one of the leading publishers of symbolist works at this time. Here Bal'mont's poems appeared together with those of three other poets, including Briusov. The collection began with Bal'mont's poems that were divided into two cycles. The first cycle was entitled "Lirika myslei" (“Lyrics of Thoughts”) and contained poems that would form part of the cycle, "Indiiskie Travy" (in GZ) and some other poems. The second cycle was called, "Simvolika nastroenii" (“Symbolism of moods”) and featured his famous poem, "Angely opal'nye," (“Fallen angels”) among others.
The second set of poems that eventually were to be part of GZ appeared in the journal Zhizn' (1899/11) under the title, "Stranitsy iz knigi 'Lirika sovremennoi dushi'. Dnevnik poeta" (“Pages from the book, “Lyrics of the contemporary soul. Diary of a poet”). One of the poems Bal'mont included in this collection was "Skify." The third set of poems appeared in the same journal (Zhizn' 1900/2) under the title, "Iz mira legend: Venok pesnopenii" (“From the World of Poems: Wreath of songs”). Several of these poems deal with events from Russia's history.

These poems were later incorporated into the larger collection, Goriashchie zdaniia which was to appear in five editions because of its immense popularity. It first came out in May 1901 in Moscow. The second edition was published in 1904 by Skorpion; the third and fourth editions appeared in Bal'mont's Polnoe Sobranie Stikhov (Complete Collection of Verse, Skorpion) in 1908 and 1914 respectively. The fifth edition of GZ appeared in 1917 in Moscow, and was published by V.V. Pashukanis as part of Sobraniie liriki (Collection of Lyrics).

Starting with GZ, the poet is becoming increasingly conscious of the principles of constructing a collection. This section will consider the construction of the collection on a macro level to illuminate the relationship(s) between the cycles that constitute the collection. According to David Sloane, Bal'mont, along with Briusov, was one of the first poets to introduce cyclization in poetic collections in Russia during the symbolist era (1895-1910). Unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors, the Symbolist poets chose descriptive titles for their collections (instead of the conventional, "Sobranie stikhovtvorenii") and introduced their collections with an epigraph as well as a
programmatic poem (particularly Bal’mont). Also, symbolists cultivated the idea of intra-contextuality between cycles in a collection and between various collections.

Reading GZ as a collection of carefully arranged cycles is productive in examining the relationship between Russian and Indian cultures in the poet's poetic imagination. GZ is the first collection of Bal'mont's where the poet devotes an entire cycle to the Indian theme. This is also the earliest evidence of Bal'mont turning to historical themes from Russia's past. GZ, thus, represents a good starting point for examining the place of India in Bal'mont's lyrical oeuvre and the connections between the Indian and Russian themes.

GZ is composed of ten cycles with the two poems “Krik chasovogo” and “Smert'iusmert’” forming the prologue and epilogue to the entire collection. “Krik chasovogo,” the prologue, highlights the poet-persona's concern about the future of his nation and people. The epigraph to “Krik chasovogo” (“Call of the Guard”) is taken from an ancient Spanish folk song (“Starinnaia Ispanskaia pesnia”) – one is reminded of the fact that medieval Spain to Bal’mont was a still valid culture untouched by cultural disintegration:

Moi narod - brannye dospekhi, My people are martial warriors
Moe otdokhnoven'e - gde bitva i beda, My rest is where battle and
misfortune reign
Moia postel' - surovye utesy, My bed is found on the harsh cliffs
Moe dremat' - ne spat' nikogda My sleep is never to sleep

These qualities of the ancient Spanish people given in the epigraph resonate with Bal'mont's poem, “Skify” ("The Scythians") that appears in the first cycle, "Otsvety
zareva." GZ, then, right away introduces a picture of a fighting, fearless people, much like the Scythians, these alleged nomadic ancestors of the Russians whose presence is still felt. The image of fighting hordes is echoed in the poem itself: "Krik chasovogo" describes an attack. The poet’s persona stands guard as the warriors of his horde lie down to sleep after conquering foreign towns (“zavoevav chuzhie goroda”). He describes the soldiers as thieving and destitute (“nishchie, vory”), who have traveled ceaselessly over fields and forests, mountains and swamps (“proidia luga, lesa, bolota, gory”). Just as the warriors seem to have settled into sleep, however, the persona spies an approaching enemy making ready for attack:

No chu! Vo t’me - chut' slyshnye shagi   But hark! In the darkness barely audible footsteps can be heard

Ikh tysiacli. Vse blizhe. A! Vragi!     There are a thousand of them. Oh! The enemy!

Tovarishchi! Tovarishchi! Prosnites’! 17    Comrades! O comrades! Awaken!

The poet-persona in his self-appointed role of guardian of his people is able to sense the great danger approaching them. The "footsteps" of the enemy are barely discernible in the dark and yet the poet with his acute sensitivity (reflected in the use of the interjection, "chu" that is euphonically linked with the verb “to feel” “chuvstvovat’) can hear thousands of them approaching. This opening poem of GZ can be read allegorically-symbolically as the poet's understanding of the impending changes that Russia will inevitably face as it enters into the new century. The warriors guarded by the poet are the simple Russian people on whose side the poet is (Bal’mont was, like most of
his fellow-symbolists at the time for a revolution and a new order) and the thousands that are approaching his people refer to tsarist soldiers. It is around the same time (1900) that Bal'mont wrote his poem, "Malen'kii Sul'tan" and read it before an audience of pro-revolutionary sympathizers. Ostensibly set in Turkey and containing a scathing description of an oriental despot, it was nevertheless clear that the object of the poet's attack was Tsar Nicholas II. In Bal’mont’s symbolic system, the “Scythians” are to be seen as the Russian revolutionary masses, the “guard” as the poet who sides with them and the “foreign towns” captured as tsarist strongholds.

**BAL'MONT'S RUSSIA: A NATION OF RESTLESS WARRIORS**

In the first cycle of GZ, "Otsvety zareva," (“Reflections of the Dawn”) Bal'mont not only develops a politically colored symbolic system, serving a national myth, but also turns to Karamzin's *Istoriia Gosudarstva Rossiskogo* (History of the Russian Government) to support his own version of Russia's history. Among the events Bal'mont chooses to bring into lyrical form are: the death of Boris Godunov, Ivan the Terrible’s guard, the “Oprichniki,” and the Death of Dmitrii the Beautiful. As already discussed, Scythians are presented as the ancestors of Russians whose spirit has survived in the simple Russian people. There is in this cycle a constant shift between Russia's past and present – the past illuminates the present and thus addresses contemporary problems in Russia.

The first poem of “Otsvety zareva,” "Kinzhal'nye slova" (“Dagger-like words”) highlights the dominant mood of the cycle: the poetic persona, tired of “sweet lullabies,”
wants to set “buildings on fire” and be part of “shouting storms” (“Ia khochu
goriashchikh zdanii,/ Ia khochu krichashchikh bur’”). He declares that he has had enough
of “delicate dreams” and “harmonious celebrations” (“Ia ustal ot nezhnykh snov/ Ot
vostorgov ètikh tsel'nykh/ Garmonicheskikh pirov”). In short, he is keen on fanning the
flames of revolt.

Delicate moods represent the temptation of giving in to the seduction of stasis, to
the status quo and to habit – to automatization, to speak with the formalists. To be in a
state of inner calm means a “ecstasy of peace” and “resting of the mind” (“Upoenie
pokoia /Usyplenie uma”). It must be said however, that this is merely the dominant mood
of this first cycle and that there are others; also, the poet-persona changes his stance later
on in other cycles. These shifting moods can be seen as representing antithetical concepts
that the poet is dialectically dealing with. Whether the poet is able to or has a need to
resolve the tension between these antithetical positions is a question the poet answers
elsewhere.

In his notes to the second edition of GZ, entitled "Iz zapisnoi knizhki," (“From my
diary”) Bal'mont declares that he is aware of two gods: the “god of peace” and the “god
of movement” (“bog pokoia i bog dvizheniia”). The poet points out that he loves both of
them, yet does not linger too long with either. He also employs the metaphor of a
pendulum, swinging backwards and forwards when describing himself: a pendulum that
swings between the two opposing states of contemplation and passionate impulses. "I
swing from rational thought to passion and I swing from passion to thought. Pendulum to
the left, pendulum to the right.”¹⁸ These statements offer a clue to understanding the
principle behind the construction of GZ: it is the tension between a culture of thought and
a history of passion, the cultural models of India and “Scythian” Russia. Both are equally celebrated in his “cult of the moment” that he embraced then; his poetic persona gives himself over completely to the state of the moment irrespective of whether the moment is dominated by thought or passion.

In "Otsvety zareva" the poet-persona is at one end of the pendulum's trajectory. All the poems in this cycle contain imagery of movement, particularly of fast-moving nomad-warriors. This leitmotif of the cycle, movement, is developed in the poem "Kak Ispanets" (“Like a Spaniard”) as well. Several images from this poem resonate with those in "The Scythians." The poet draws upon the Arabic heritage of the Spaniards in his imagery of them as equestrian warriors traversing burning hot deserts on Arabian steeds destroying enemies on their path. Much like the Scythians, the Spaniards find happiness in destroying the enemy. The poetic persona draws a self-portrait in this cycle by presenting himself in a variety of guises; here he is a Spanish conquistador and his Arab steed at the same time. All of his masks, however varied, are united by the idea of restlessness and movement.

I, stremias' ot schas'tia k schast'iu, ia proidu po okeanam,
I v pustynniakh raskalennykh ia ischeznu za tumanom,
Chtoby s zhadnoi bystrotoiu Araviiskogo konia
Vsiuudu mchat'sia za vragami pod bagrianoi vspyshkoi dnia.19

And, advancing from happiness to happiness I will cross the oceans,
And in the burning-hot deserts I will disappear behind veils of mist,
So that, with the greedy speediness of an Arabic steed,
I may tear along after the enemy under the red explosion of daylight.

The motif of the "avenger," the executioner of the enemy, is central to the next poem in the cycle, "Krasnyi tsvet" ("The Color Red"). Here the poet-persona is tracing his lineage back to an “honest executioner”: byt' mozhet, predok moi byl chestnym palachom ("It is possible that my ancestor was an honest executioner"). There is a reason for the use of this startling epithet. The poet is on the side of those who rejuvenate history, he is a revolutionary eager to topple the establishment and therefore fully capable of “executing” class enemies who are halting the revitalization of life (a common theme at the time); this is why he is simultaneously establishing a link with a mythical and imaginary ancestor and rediscovering his legacy in the present. His blood is “singing” ("I krov' poet vo mne") and in this ecstasy he is oblivious of all ethical barriers in his path in the well-known Nietzschean tradition: “Nam vse pozvoleno…Nam v mire net izgnan'ia…” (“Everything is permitted to us . . . There is no [threat of] exile for us in the world . . .”). The poem ends on a triumphant note: “Ty slyshish' predok moi? Ia budu palachom!” (“Do you hear, O ancestor of mine? I will be an executioner!”) The old world awaits its destruction and is his to conquer once again, like it was for his ancestors; destruction is the guarantee of rejuvenation -- everything will be novel and fresh for the poet and his generation: “Moi razum chuvstvuet, chto mne, pri vide krovi/ ves' mir otkroetsia, i vse v nem budet vnove” (“My mind feels, that to me at the sight of blood/ an entire new world will open and will be new in it”). They are -- once more – fighting for a “new world.”
The central poem of the cycle is "Skify." Bal'mont's treatment of the Scythian theme anticipates that of Viacheslav Ivanov, Aleksandr Blok and Valerii Briusov and the ideology of “Scythianism” that Ivanov-Razumnik, the leader of the Skifstvo movement, would later develop. These poets portrayed the Scythian barbaric tribes as a metaphor for the Russian people presented as a both destructive and rejuvenating force that would transform Russia’s current cultural and political stasis. Bal'mont's Scythians are fearless nomadic hordes that cherish their freedom above everything else. Always accurate in their lethal aim, they invariably conquer: I vsegda na vraga tetivu bez oshibki natianem/Napitavshi strelu smetronesnoiu zhel'ch'iu zmei (“And always at the enemy we will draw our bows precisely/ having doused our arrow in the deadly poison of snakes”).

As noted above, the prologue poem “Krik chasovogo,” introduces a warning of impending danger. What this danger consists of is indicated symbolically through the historical motif of Boris Godunov's death, which was followed by the time of troubles. His foray into this page of Russian history indicates the poet's concern over the political situation of his own time. His description of the time of troubles in the poem, "V glukhie dni: predanie" (“In Days of Trouble: A Legend”) is clearly applicable to Russia at the turn of the century as well. The people are hungry and homeless, "Tolpy liudei skitalis' bez krova/ I vopl' protiazhnyi: Khleba! Khleba! Khleba!/Iz t'my lesov stremilsia do tsaria" (“People had no roof over their heads/ And the drawn-out cry of “Bread! Bread! Bread!/ Was carried from the dark forests to the Tsar’s throne”). A call for battle against this state of affairs is issued by nature and the heavens as well: “I nebesa,…/ Vnezapno krasnym svetom ozarilis'/ Iavliaia bitvu voinstv nezemnykh” (“And the skies, . . . / Were suddenly illuminated by red light/ Revealing the battle of unearthly warriors”). This call
for battle echoes that of the Scythian warriors of the earlier poem and shows the heavenly host to be on their side.

Bal'mont thus emerges as a creator of national myths full of dynamics and movement towards a goal, implied to be the Revolution that will usher in a new culture. From this end of the pendulum, associated with Russia, past and present, and her pagan gods of war, the poet moves to the God of Peace, to the other end of the pendulum; he does so in the penultimate cycle of the collection, "Indiiskie travy."

**INDIA IN GORIASHCHIE ZDANIIA – A COOL PLACE AMIDST BUILDINGS ON FIRE**

The epigraph to the cycle "Indiiskie travy" is taken from the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Indian philosopher Sri Shankaracharya: "Poznavshii sushchnost' stal vyshe pechali" ("The one who knows the essence of all things, is above grief"). This idea underscores the Indian philosophical (Upanishadic) belief that the material world is an illusion, <em>maya</em>, and that the one who understands and accepts this is able to free himself from pain and suffering that is inherent in life here, on earth. Vladimir Markov sees in Bal'mont's choice of this epigraph a new phase in his artistic evolution. For his first collection <i>Pod Severnym Nebom</i> Bal'mont had chosen the words of the German poet, Nikolaus Lenau (1802-50): "Ohne das Gefolge der Trauer ist mir das Göttliche im Leben nie erschienen" ("Without the accompaniment of grief, the Divine never appeared to me in life"). In the later cycle, <i>Goriashchie zdaniia</i>, Bal'mont seems to have found in the words of the Indian philosopher a potential solution for the German poet's struggle with existential despair.

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Befittingly, Bal'mont's first poem in this cycle is called "Maia." This poem offers the poet's lyrical interpretation of the *Katha Upanishad* that appeared in Russia in 1897 in the Russian translation of Vera Johnston in the journal, *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii* (Issues in Philosophy and Psychology). Although related to the theosophist, Madame Blavatsky, Vera Johnston does not seem to have shared her interest in theosophy. Instead, Johnston set herself the challenging task of translating Hindu religious-philosophical texts albeit from already existing translations in European languages. Her best-known translations are of the *Upanishads*, a section of the *Vedas* dealing with broad philosophical problems.

"Maia" deals with the questions raised in *Katha Upanishad*, the first one that Johnston translates in her "Otryvki iz Upanishad" ("Excerpts from the Upanishad"). *Katha Upanishad* represents a dialog between a mortal, Nachiketas and the Lord of Death, Yama. Nachiketas, who is dead and hence able to enter into dialog with the Lord of Death, has only one question for him: what lies on the other side, what does death mean? In spite of all his exhortations to the contrary, The Lord of Death is unable to distract Nachiketas from his quest for the truth. Finally, Nachiketas poses the essential question: "Is it possible for us to want riches, having once known you? Is it possible for us to desire life, knowing that you are the master?"

The first part of *Katha Upanishad* ends with this question that the Lord of Death answers in the second part. He points out the difference between the wise choice that mortals can make and the pleasing choice they want to make. He says: "Luchshe odno, milee drugoe" ("One alternative is better, more pleasing the other"). The one who chooses wisely and not in favor of pleasure alone, makes the right choice, freeing himself
from the desire for fleeting pleasures. The wise choose that which is good more willingly than that which is merely pleasant – and short-lived.

It is such wise people that attain the cave, the “peshchera” (a metaphor for harmony with the Supreme Being). Bal'mont's poem “Maiia” presents one such wise man, a “mudrets,” a yogi. His face has otherworldly features, “sverkhzemnoe litso:”

V temnoi peshchere, zadumchivyi iogi  In a dark cave, a thoughtful yogi
Mag-zaklinatel’, blednei mertvetsa  Magician and sorcerer with a deathly pale face
Chto-to sheptal, i vlastitel’no-strog  Whispered something, and powerfully austere
Byli cherty ego litsa.26  Were the features of his face.

The yogi conjures up visions of hundreds of creatures – gods, ordinary mortals, animals – still caught in the web of desires and ignorance, rushing around at great speed, "besheno mchatsia i liudi i bogi." (“both gods and men are rushing about wildly”). These are evidently the ones who chose in favor of what is more pleasant than what is better and wiser and hence will not attain the "peshchera," (“cave”) or paradise of wisdom. The key to choosing wisely is to understand that the world is illusory, since maya is nothing but a “phosphorescent delusion” ("Maia! O Maia! luchisty obman!") ("Maia! O Maia! phosphorescent illusion!") The "zadumchivii iogi" (“thoughtful yogi”) has made the right choice of the two mentioned above: he has understood the illusory nature of earthly
existence and hence has transcended it. The poet clearly juxtaposes the two categories –
the wisdom of the yogi and the ignorance of those caught in the web of illusion:

Besheno mchatsia i liudi i bogi…
Maia! O Maia! Luchistyoi obman!
"Zhizn' dliia neznaiushichikh, prizrak - dlia iogi,
Maia - bezdushnyi nemoi okean!"

Both men and gods are in a mad rush…
Maya! O Maya! Phosphorescent illusion!
“Life for the ignorant is an apparition – for the yogi,
It is Maya – a lifeless silent ocean!”27

Johnston points out that the "peshchera" is not a real place that one may go to. What it
represents is rather an internal state, "Only one thing is true – that heaven, hell (the world
of sin) and the earth (the world of man) are not real places, they are only spiritual states,
which a person may inhabit."28 The yogi from Bal’mont’s poem has clearly understood
that mind controls matter if you make the wise choice and that spiritual control enables
you to be where you should be.

The wisdom of the yogi in the cave is a state that the lyrical hero in Bal’mont’s
first collection Under Northern Skies actually was striving to attain, but in vain. In a
poem from this cycle entitled “V peshchere” (“In the Cave”) the lyrical persona is
trapped in a cave where the sun never shines and where he is finding his way as if
blindfolded using his sense of touch alone. He is suffering deeply from his sense of
isolation and ignorance, when he hears whispers in the cave. The voice tells him to keep moving and yet, when the lyrical persona wonders where the destination is, the voice answers “Nowhere!” (“Nikuda”). Soon the poetic persona realizes that the voice belongs to his own suffering (“stradanie”) and that his lot in life will be to wander in the darkness of ignorance forever. In this poem the “cave” resembles the Platonic cave of delusion and the reason why there is no way out of it, is that it is not the yogi’s cave of inner harmony that the poet would discover later.

The second poem in the cycle “Indiiskie travy” is entitled "Krugovorot" (“Rotation”) and it is a continuation of the first poem. The term of the title encapsulates the idea of Brahma as all-knowing and all-encompassing. Bal'mont combines the fates of ordinary people, heroes and gods into one category that he juxtaposes to that of Brahma's total existence. Ordinary people and heroes are only slightly worse off than gods; while humans - both ordinary and heroic ones – are shown in constant struggle with everyday life, gods are also shown as trembling at the threshold of uncertainty and change:

Ne tol'ko liudi i geroi, Not only men and heroes
Volnen'e dum taia, Hiding their troubled thoughts
Tomiatsia zhazhdoi v dushnom znoe Suffer from thirst in the sweltering heat
Zemnogo bytiiia. Of earthly life.
No dazhe tsarstvennoe bogi But even the powerful gods
Nesut tiazhelyi plen, Suffer a difficult entrapment
Vsegda vitaia na poroge Always hovering at the threshold
Vsekh novykher peremen. Of ever new changes.
The antipodal state to this is presented by *Brahma* who is featured in the next poem. He is calm—“nichem ne utomlen” (“unburdened by anything”) and unlike the humans and gods, he is unaffected by the transient nature of earthly life.

> Lish' tol'ko On, vsegda blazhennyi, Only He, always blissful,
> Nichem ne utomlen, Is unburdened by anything
> I zhizn' s ee igroi mgnovennoi And life with its momentary play
> Pred nim skol'zit kak son.30 Glides before him like a dream.

*Brahma* in these poems offers the answer to the lyrical persona’s queries from his earlier collection, *Under Northern Skies* (*Pod severnym nebom*, 1894). *Pod Severnym Nebom* is generally considered as the poet’s first collection and marks the beginning of his literary biography – the one that he would consciously cultivate when adding new collections to his poetic oeuvre.31 Here the “poet’s life” begins – in “endless grief.”32 The neo-romantic lyrical hero of this collection expresses a longing to break away from earthly fetters and uncover “higher aesthetic and ethical values.” 33 The collection, dominated by an elegiac tone, begins and ends with poems about death. The “celestial” soul of the lyrical persona who is fettered to earthly existence, in true symbolist fashion seeks “other worlds” as is seen in the poem, “Zachem?” (“Why?”)

> Gospod', Gospod', vnemli, ia plachu,
> Tebe molius' v vechernei mgle.
> Zachem ty daroval mne dushu nezemnuiu –
I prikval menia k zemle?
Ia govoriu s toboi skvoz' t'mu tysiacheletii,
Ia govoriu tebe, Tvorets,
Chto my obmanuty, my plachem, tochno deti,
I ishchem: gde zhe nash Otets?
Kogda b khot' mig odin zvuchal tvoi golos vniatno,
a byl by rad siian'iu dnia,
No zhizn' liubov' i smert' - vse strashno, neponiatno,
Vse neizbezhno dla menia.
Velik ty, gospodi, no mir tvoi nepriveten,
Kak vse velikoe, on nem,
I tysiachi vekov naprasen bezotveten
Moi skorbnyi krik: "Zachem? Zachem? . . . 34

Lord, O Lord, listen, I weep, I grieve,
I pray to you in the twilight haze.
Why did you give me a soul not of this earth –
And bound me to the earth?
I speak with You through the darkness of centuries
I tell You, O Creator,
That we are deceived, that we weep, like children
And search: where is our Father?
If your voice would be heard clearly even for a moment

I would have been happy at the brilliance of the day,

But life, love and death – all this is terrifying, unclear,

All is inescapable for me.

You are great O Lord, but your world is uninviting,

As everything great, it is silent,

And for thousands of centuries, unheeded, unanswered,


Here the poetic persona is unable to fathom the mystery of living, loving and dying: "No zhizn' liubov i smert' - vse strashno, neponiatno" ("But life, love and death – all is terrifying, difficult to understand"). He is likewise unable to establish contact with the Creator: "gde zhe nash Otets?" ("where is our Father?") and his cries for help remain unanswered: "I tysiachi vekov naprasen bezotveten/ Moi skorbnyi krik: ‘Zachem? Zachem?’" ("And for thousands of centuries is unheeded, unanswered, / my anguished cry: ‘Why? Why?’") These themes continue in the next two collections of poetry as well, V bezbrezhnosti (In Boundlessness 1895) and Tishina Silence (Silence, 1897). In Tishina Bal’mont uses a statement from Helena Blavatsky’s treatise Voice of Silence as an epigraph to the first cycle (which also seems to owe its title to her work) of the collection entitled “Mertvye korabli” ("Dead Ships"): “Prezhde chem dusha naidet vozmozhnost’ postigat’, i derznet pripominat’, ona dolzhna soedinit’sia s Bezmolvnym Glagolom – i togda dlia vnutrennego sluha budet govorit’ Golos Molchaniia” (“Before the soul discovers the ability to transcend, and dares to remember, it must become one with the
Silent Word – and then for the inner ear will hear the Voice of Silence”). 35 Thus in *Tishina* there is an attempt by the poetic persona to answer the questions posed in the previous collection by delving into the answers offered by Eastern wisdom. Here the persona attempts to decipher the “voice of silence” that Madame Blavatsky offered as a solution; later, however, Bal’mont admitted that the form of syncretism presented in the Theosophical doctrines of Blavatsky was alien to him.36 He would seek his answers at the very source, in the Upanishads and other sources of wisdom.

The poem "Krugovorot" (“Rotation”) from the cycle “Indiiskie travy” does provide possible answers to the questions posed in *Under Northern Skies*. Earthly life is perceived in this poem as a journey originating from *Brahma* and ending in him. The intermediate period between earthly birth and death is a life in the material world with its darkness and ignorance, a "bezdna mgly" (“an abyss of shadows”). For world-weary mortals who are the subject of the poet-persona's contemplation, a re-union with *Brahma* represents a return to a state of peace and eternal harmony. The poet-persona, speaking not as an individual but for all of humankind, yearns for this state of peace – and it may be noted, he does so in a way that is completely alien to a “Scythian”:

I vnov' – k Nemu, v sviatom pokoe,    And once again – to Him, in holy peace
I vot my snova – s Nim!37       And once again we are with Him!

An important theme in Bal'mont's poetic works in general is the attempt to uncover the true meaning of death. In an earlier poem entitled “Death” from his collection *Under
*Northern Skies*, the poetic persona exhorts himself and his readers to believe that death is not an end but the beginning of a new life:

Ne ver' tomu, kto govorit  
Do not believe those who says
Chto smert' est' smert': ona -  
That death is death: it is the
nachalo zhizhni,  
beginning of life,
Togo sushchestvovan'ia nezemnogo,  
Of that unearthly existence,
Pered kotorym nasha zhizn' temna,  
Before which our life is dark,
Kak mig toski – pred radost'iu bespechnoi,  
Like a moment of grief – before
carefree joy,
Kak chernyi grekh – pred detskoi chistotoi.  
Like black sin before a
child’s purity.

The poetic persona goes on to say that humans were not given insight into life after death. Bal'mont's engagement with Indian philosophical thought marks a continued quest to uncover the truth about death as the beginning of a true life. He takes Christian notions of an afterlife and develops these further with the help of Indian thought. Indian religious thought forms an organic part of his poetic world, and as can be seen from the above examples, often offers the answers to the questions sought in his earlier poems.

The next two poems of the cycle, "Indiiskii motiv" and "Zhizn" are short, lyrical variations on the theme of "Maia," or the world as illusion; they suggest that earthly is to be renounced without regret. These are followed by the poem "Kak pauk," (Like a Spider) that is both centrally placed in the cycle and can be seen as a turning point for the
lyrical persona. Here, he juxtaposes the individual, himself, to *Brahma*, to the
disadvantage of the former:

Mir odin, no v ètom mire vechno dvoe: - The world is one, but in it are
eternally two
On, Nedvizhnyi, On Nezhazhdushchii - i ia.³⁹ He, who is Unmoved, He, who
is Non-Seeking – and I.

By placing himself in opposition to the *Brahma* (or *Atman*, according to Johnston⁴⁰) the
poet is indicating that he is not yet the wise man (“mudrets”) of "Maia" who has
understood that ultimately the individual selves will attain one level of being with the
universal soul, the *atman*. But even if he has not yet reached the highest stage of wisdom,
he knows where it may be found.

This poem is followed by "Iz Upanishad", a more or less faithful translation of a
Upanishadic hymn from the book *Hinduism* by the British Indologist, Monier Williams.
This poem-translation develops the theme of the previous poem. The poet states that
everything that exists in the universe is wrapped in ethereal material like the cocoon of a
butterfly and cared for by one Supreme Being, the *Brahman*. The central theme of this
poem is the delineation of the characteristics of a wise person who embraces this vision.

According to the poet, a wise person is one who understands that there is one
universal force and power that controls everything and that all people and creatures are
part of a universe where none is better or worse than the other. Realizing this, a person
would then not look down upon a fellow human being, or any creature for that matter:
Togda, poniav, chto slitna èta tkan',
Then, having understood that everything is one
Ni na kogo ne vzglianet on s prezren'em.\(^4\)
He will not look down upon anyone with contempt.

In the next poem, "Indiiskii mudrets," the poet-persona envisions the perfectly wise person – an Indian of course. This wise man has internalized the state of the *yogi* in the cave ("peshchera") from "Maia." He is focused on his meditation and is unaffected by the sounds and movements around him. This state is clearly the result of his maturation, for the "wise man" – is it possibly the poet himself? – compares himself with a ripe fruit of autumn.

Kak zolotistyi plod, v osennii den' dozrevshii,
Like a golden fruit, having matured in the autumn,
Na zemliu padaet, sredi steblei travy,
Falls on the earth, amidst leaves of grass,
Tak ia, kak by glukhoi, slepoi i onemevshii,
So do I, as if deaf, blind and dumb,
Idu, ne podnimaia golovy.
Idu, not lifting his head.
Odno v moikh zrachkakh, odno v zamknutom slukhe;
One in my eyes, one in my closed ears;
Kak by izvaiannyi, moi dukh navek zatikh.
As if exhausted, my spirit forever silent.
Ni gromkii krik slona, ni blesk zhuzhzhashchei mukhi
Neither the roar of the elephant, nor the flash of the burning eyes
Ne vozmutiat nedvizhnykh chert moikh.\(^4\)
Could not disturb the immobile features of me.

Like a golden fruit, having matured in the autumn,
Falls on the earth, amidst leaves of grass,
So do I, as if deaf, blind and dumb,
Walk, without raising my head.

There is but one matter in my eyes, but one in my restrained hearing,

As if my soul, sculpted, had fallen silent forever.

Neither the loud shrieks of the elephant, nor the brilliance of the buzzing fly

Can disturb the still features of my face.

The poet traces the sage’s spiritual evolution in the next stanza: he begins by engaging in a dialog with earlier times. The second stage of his development is a return to primordial simplicity. Finally, he is able to become one with Brahma and more importantly, immerse himself in the world of eternal beauty.

Sperva ia, kak mudrets, besedoval s vekami,

Potom svoi dukh vernul k pervichnoi prostote,

Potom, molchal'chikom, ia priobshchilsia k Brame,

I utonul v bessmertnoi krasote.43

At first, I, like a wise man, spoke with the ages,

Then I returned my soul to primordial simplicity

And then, in silence, I became part of Brahma.

And immersed myself in eternal beauty.

The examination above of the poems from GZ allows for the following conclusions: the two states – the state of Scythian elemental Russian-ness and the state of contemplative Indian-ness, co-exist in dialectical tension in this collection. The former can be seen as
the theme of involvement with outer reality, as the struggle for a new world, and protest against iniquity; the latter involves an inner withdrawal, renunciation of the fleeting delusions offered by *maya*. Indian wisdom provides a solution to the lyrical hero’s quest for a state in which all existential anxiety has ceased. On the other hand, the “Scythian” Russian is valorized as a restless warrior whose attempts to “set the world straight” has its own truth.

“I DO NOT WANT TO LIVE IN HEAVEN …”

GZ was followed by the collection, *Budem kak solntse* (*Let us be like the Sun*, 1903) that was considered by most critics as “the peak of Bal’mont’s achievement.” According to Markov, “[*Let Us Be Like the Sun*] remains a milestone of Russian poetry in this century . . .” The lyrical hero in this collection has abandoned his earlier quest for metaphysical solutions to his existential angst – at least the solutions that Christianity has to offer, wherefore he declares:

Ia nenavizhu vsekh sviatykh, I hate all saints,
Oni zabotiatsia muchitel’no Their excruciating concern
O zhalkikh pomyslakh svoikh, For their pitiful problems,
Sebia spasaiut iskliuchitel’no.45 They save themselves alone.

The poetic persona also notes that these “saints” are worried about saving their souls, while in actuality they are afraid of the “precipice of dreams” (“propast’ mechtaniia”) – i.e. death. He further declares that he would have despised Heaven amidst “shadows with
meek smiles” and that he would not have liked to live in Heaven, a place peopled by “ecstatic idiots” (“mezh tupoumtsev èkstaticheskikh”); he would rather be on earth, a place he has loved since childhood.

The Nietzschean theme of rejection of meekness and saintliness resurfaces in another poem from the same collection entitled “Ne luchshe li stradanie?” (“Isn’t Suffering Better?”) Presented as a dialog, the poem pits the lyrical persona of the previous collections against the newly emerging poetic overman persona. The earlier lyrical hero (from Under Northern Skies) was, it will be recalled, in a permanent state of suffering; the reasons for it were rooted in his search for Christian answers to his existential angst, and its doctrine that suffering leads to heavenly rewards. The newly emerging poetic persona of Let us be like the Sun rejects suffering in favor of an active – read “Scythian” -- life and he looks forward to savoring all that is in store.

“Ne luchshe li stradanie, Isn’t suffering better,
Glukhoe, odinokoe, Desolate and lonely,
Kak bezdny mirozdaniia. Like the abysses of creation
Neponiatno-glubokoe? Unfathomably deep?
Ne luchshe li muchenie Isn’t torment better
Chem iasnyi, zvonkii smekh? Than clear resounding laughter?
Poliubim otrechenie, Let’s love renunciation,
Razliubim sladkii grekh.” And stop loving sweet sins.”
- O, net, moi brat edinstvennyi - O no, my only brother
Dusha moia smushchaetsia, My soul is troubled [about such prospects],
Thus, the new lyrical persona is prepared to renounce saintliness and meek
suffering and embrace everything earthly. This credo is likewise declared by the poetic
persona in another poem, “Khudozhnik” ("The Artist"), who cries out that he knows only
“the whims of dreams” and that he will give everything for the happiness of creative art.
The raw material for his artistic creations is earthly suffering, but not of the saintly kind,
but rather of the kind that inspires manliness and determination and the poetry of bravery
and resolve:

Ia znaïu tol’ko prikhoti mecht,  I know only the whims of dream
Ia vse predam dla schast’ja sozidaniia, I will betray all for the joy of
creating
Roskoshnykh izmyshlenii krasoty. Luxurious fabrications of beauty.
Mne nравится, chto v mire est’ stradan’ja, I like that there is suffering in the
world
Ia ikh spletau v skazochnyi uzor… I weave them into magical patterns…

This daring lyrical persona challenges not only Christian doctrines, however; the Indian
ideal of Brahma found by the lyrical persona in GZ (for example, in the poem
“Samoutverzhdenie” [“Self-expression,”]) also seems challenged. In the later collection
of poems entitled A “Liturgy of Beauty. Elemental hymns” (Liturgiia Krasoty. Stikhiinye
Gimny, 1905), this antagonism is expressly stated, even though Brahma meets with more respect than Christianity:

Ia znaïu, chto Brama umnee, chem vse
beskonechno-imiannye bogi.

No Brama – Indiets, a ia – Slavianin. Sovpadaiut

Li nashi dorogi?

O, Brama – Indiets, a ia – Skandinavets,
a ia – Meksikanets zhokstokii,

Ia Èllin vliublennyi, ia – vol’nyi Arab,

ia zhadyi, bezumnyi stookii.

Ia – zhadyi, zhit’ khochu ia bez kontsa, ne mogu ia

Nasytit’sia laskoi.

Ne razum liubliu ia, a serdtse svoe, ia plenen

Mnogozvuchnoiu skazkoi.

Vse kraski liubliu ia, i svet Belizny ne est’ dlia

menia zavershenie.

Liubliu ia i samye temnye sny, i alyi tsvetok

prestuplenia. . .

I esli ty vikinga schast’ia lishish’ v samom

Tsarstve Valgally rubits’ia

On skazhet, chto Nebo bednee Zemli, iz Valgally
On proch’ udalitsia.

I esli pevtsu iz Slavianskoi strany ty skazhesh’,

Chto um est’ merilo,

So smekhom on molvit, chto sladko vino,

i pesni vo slavu Iarila.⁴⁸

I know that Brahma is wiser than all the

Countless named gods.

But Brahma is an Indian and I am a Slav. Will

Our paths meet?

O, Brahma is an Indian, but I am a Scandinavian

And a cruel Mexican,

I am a Greek in love, – I am a freedom loving Arab,

I am greedy, mad and have a hundred eyes.

I am greedy, and I want to live endlessly, I am never

satiated with love.

It is not reason I love, but my heart; I am a captive

of many-sided happiness.

I love all colors, and the light of Whiteness is

not the measure of perfection for me.

I also like the shadows and the scarlet flower

of crime. . .

And if you deny the happiness of a Viking
to fight in Valhalla,

He will say that the Skies are poorer than the Earth

and he will go far away from Valhalla.

And if you tell a singer from a Slavic land, that

wisdom is the measure,

He will say, that sweet are the wine,

and the songs praising Iarilo.

Thus in this poem, the poet-persona in his various guises presents himself as an antipode of the “wise Indian,” who worships Brahma. He rejects everything that Brahma stands for – renunciation of material pleasures, rejection of all that is fleeing and illusory – in short, of maya. Instead he embraces the “scarlet flower of crime” (echoing, of course, the Baudelairean fleurs du mal) along with the beauty of an earth that the senses embrace. He is no longer striving for the “ideal state” of becoming one with Brahma: he is instead a brave Viking, a cruel Mexican, a Hellene in love and a freedom loving Arab. All these states are antipodal to Brahma’s nature: they are elemental, spontaneous and are open to human passions and will not renounce them.

The Slavic theme is continued in the next poem, “K Slavianam” (“To the Slavs”) in which the poet praises his countrymen for the openness of their hearts, and the merry youthfulness of spirit. Hailing their souls, vast like the steppe, the poetic persona notes that in spite of being tough on their enemies, the Slavs are ready in the next moment to befriend them. They fight their battles spontaneously (“ponevole”) and as soon as they
are done, they will once again escape to their pantheistic dreams of being one with nature:

I snova mechtoi rastvechivaias’,
Vy – gde-to, zabyvshi ob uzkom,
I svetiat sozvezdiia, kachaias’,
V soznanii Pol’skom i Russkom.⁴⁹

And again blossoming in your dreams
You are far away, having forgotten the mundane,
And the stars shine, gently rocking
In the Russian and Polish consciousness.

The dialog between reason and wisdom on one hand and feeling on the other is continued in other poems of the cycle as well. In the poem, “Prizyv” (“Call”) the poetic persona once again declares that reason is unnecessary since Beauty cannot be encapsulated by reason and that feelings alone are true. In “Vino minut” (“The Wine of the Moment”) the poet introduces a debate between Buddha, Brahma and Christ:

Buddha’s testament exhorts his followers to “guard the doors” of their feelings” and to kill feelings to be able to enter the domain of Brahma. But, “I have opened all doors,” sings the poet and “have let in Beauty and suffering.” Contrary to his usual scale of values, Buddha and Brahma are wrong and Christ has a greater portion of the truth. The persona in fact disagrees with those who say that Christ asks his followers to “be afraid of life.” “This is not the will of Christ,” he states, asserting that the Christian Savior embodies a more vibrant Beauty than that of his competitors:

Net, v Khriste byla zhivaia Krasota.
On liubil, On Vechnost’ vli v odno mgnovenie,
Dal nam khleb, i dal vino, i dal zabvenie,
Bol’ ukrasil, Smert’ ubil, prizvav na sud.
Budem zhit’, budem pit’ vino minut.  

No, in Christ there was living Beauty.
He loved, He fused eternity and the moment,
He gave us bread, and wine and oblivion,
He glorified pain, killed Death, by judging it.
We shall live and drink the wine of the moment.

The tension of the dialectics between Indian wisdom and the Slavic/ Russian elemental nature in the poet’s mind is not resolved in this collection. It ends with four lengthy poems dedicated to the elements – fire, water, earth and wind that underscore the pantheistic nature of the poet persona. In the hymn to fire, entitled “Fire” (Ogon’) the poetic persona “reclaims” his Indian heritage (“My Indian thinking is replete with the diversity of dusk and dawns”) and declares that he was a fire-worshipper once and would always be one, referring to the Vedic practice of fire worship. The persona finds himself “once again in India,” but he is no longer a “sogliadatai nichtozhnyi” (“lowly outsider”) in this culture. He is now “v otchizne sviatoi” (“in the holy fatherland”) that is accessible to everyone; this holy fatherland was whole (“tsel’naiia”) and unchanged for centuries. He is among those who have glanced into the Other World (“Zapredel’noe”). Thus, the poetic persona seems to have once again made peace with ancient India that is the land of fire worshippers like himself, and holds the secret to eternal mysteries. *Brahma* is notably absent in this picture, however. Present, instead is “Rudra Siva,” the ancient Indian deity
who was both a destroyer and preserver (Rudra and Siva are recognized as two antipodal hypostases of the same deity).51

Rudra-Siva, Smert’-Liubov’  
Smert’ bessmertie, Plamia-Krov’   
Raduga nad Morem, 
Zmei molnii, tok dozhdei 
Vechnost’ zybkaia strastei, 
Zdes’ my gromu vtorim!52

Rudra-Siva, Death-Love, 
Death-Immortality, Flame-Blood 
A rainbow over the Ocean 
Snake of lightening, downpour of rains, 
The unstable eternity of passions 
Here we reply to thunder, imitating him!

Thus the calm repose of Brahma is replaced by the elemental Rudra-Siva who is at once a passionate destroyer and a compassionate lover. He can destroy life and yet love again. This deity is thus closer to the Slavic-Scythian-Russian lyrical persona of this and other collections.

The poet revisits the image of an ideal contemplative India in a later collection, Iasen’, Videnie dreva, (The Ash Tree: Vision of the Tree, 1916). Here, Bal’mont includes several poems devoted to the Indian theme. No other has so many poems devoted to India as this collection and the theme of Russia or Russian-ness does not even arise.53 In the poem entitled “India,” the poet presents an idealized image of India in which the wise Brahmins are able to “read different worlds;” India is the locus of total harmony with the World and cosmos.

S vershin nebes upal na zemliu Gang.    From the heights of the skies
Ganges fell on the earth
I bramany v nem cherpaiut otvagu    And brahmins draw strength from it
Chitat’ miry, smotria umom vo vlagu⁵⁴ To read worlds, peering wisely into the waters.

Bal’mont’s subsequent poetry delves into Russian folkloric themes in *Zlye chary* (Evil charms, 1906) and Slavic folklore in *Zhar ptitsa: Svirel’ slavianina* (The Firebird: The Slav’s Reed-pipe, 1907) children’s poems *Feinye skazki* (Tales of the Fairy, 1905) and finally, after his exile in 1920, he increasingly turns to Slavic themes and enters into a period of neo-pan-Slavism, which is marked by prolific translations from other Slavic languages, such as Bulgarian, Serbian and Polish. The poet also devotes a collection of poems to Lithuania, a country he had always been interested in and to which his close friend and symbolist poet Iurgis Baltrushaitis belonged. During this period, the poet is completely immersed in Slavic themes and does not return to India.

Bal’mont’s poetry, eventually however, continues to exhibit a dialectic relationship between “being an Indian” and “being a Russian,” as the Indian theme returns in 1924. In a long poem, *Dykanie Ganga* (The Breath of the Ganges) published in the émigré newspaper *Volia Rossii* (The Will of Russia) Bal’mont’s poet persona conducts a dialog with an Indian wise man, who embodies the wisdom of centuries.⁵⁵ The poet persona’s quest for the “truth” about the “oneness of all” (“odnoslitnost’ vsego”) leads him to “remember” that the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* directed the searcher to go to the solitude of places where freedom and purity were to be found. In such a place of repose, the Indian wise man shares the pantheistic wisdom of India, according to which “the Sun, the fire, the dew and lightening” in his inner eye would lead the poet persona to
the Universal being Brahma. Once again, the poet finds answers to important
metaphysical questions in ancient Indian wisdom.

The Indian theme also reappeared during the last years of his life. In one the
letters to his second wife Ekaterina Andreeva, Bal’mont wrote that his preoccupation
with a neo-pan Slavism was like treading in shallow waters and that India and Egypt
were the only real authentic cultures: “Nedavnee moe uvlechenie slavianskimistranami,
uvy, ischerpalos’. Dliia menia èto – melkovod’e. Egipet i Indiia mnogo bogache i
krepche” (“My recent fascination with Slavic countries, alas, is over. For me this was
shallow water. Egypt and India are much richer and stronger”).56 This is reflected in part
in the cycle of four poems that Bal’mont wrote for the émigré newspaper Poslednie
Novosti in 1936 and that clearly mark a return to the Indian theme. Bal’mont’s cycle of
four short poems features the Indian philosopher and interpreter of the Upanishads,
Shankaracharya, a translation of a “Spells against Coughing” from one of the four ancient
Indian Vedas, the Atharvaveda. The ancient Indian philosopher is presented by Bal’mont
as a poet, whose songs are his testament. Once again, the poet returns to the idealizing of
Indian wisdom. Perhaps, in these last poems, he actually reconciled the Indian and the
Russian themes. At any rate it is interesting to note that the “Spells against Coughing”
closely parallel Russian spells against various ailments (including the ailment of love).
Although Bal’mont offers a faithful translation, he may have been struck by the close
resemblance to Russian folklore and folk wisdom. Whatever the case, it is the pantheism
that was so dear to Bal’mont that most likely united the two cultures in the poet’s mind.
In those sectors of Indian culture that glorified the beauty of nature and the power of the
elements even a Scythian could feel at home.
NOTES

2 Tsvetaeva 135.
5 Markov, V. “Bal’mont: A Reappraisal” 263.
6 See Markov, V. Kommentar zu den Dichtungen von K.D. Bal’mont. 1890-1909 (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1988) for further details.
8 The texts of these poems and translations of Bal’mont’s first collection of poems have not been published and are extant only in archival records.
9 G. Bongard-Levin, a historian and an Indologist, has done most of the extant research on Bal'mont's Indological interests. However, Bongard-Levin, a historian, is mostly concerned with a historiographic approach to studying the influence of India in Bal'mont's works. He does not examine the theme from a literary-cultural perspective. Mythological aspects of Bal'mont's engagement with India remain beyond the scope of Levin's work.
10 As discussed in the Introduction, Bal'mont along with his contemporaries exhibited two important themes in their works (among many others) - the search for a Russian self; as well as the location of cultural models from earlier times as well as other countries for possible emulation/admiration/integration into the model of Russia for the future. An important part of the Symbolist aesthetic was myth-making, including creating myths about an ideal Russia.
11 While there are no comprehensive bibliographies of Bal’mont’s works – both Vladimir Markov (“Bal’mont: A Reappraisal”) and Kuprianovskii et al (P.V. Kuprianovskii and N.A. Molchanova, Poët Konstantin Bal’mont, Ivanovo: Ivanovskii Gosudarstvenniy Universitet, 2001) provide an exhaustive account of almost all of his known collections. Markov does not discuss the last (post-1932) few collections of the poet that the Russian authors do.
12 Dating Bal'mont's works is often problematic since the poet often indicated the date he finished writing a collection rather than the date of publication.
13 Markov, “Bal’mont: A Reappraisal” 228.
15 GZ is composed of the following twelve cycles:
  1 Krik chasovogo The Guard's Warning Call
  2 Otsvety zareva Reflections of the Dawn
  3 Angely opal'nye" Fallen Angels
  4 Sovest' Conscience
  5 Strana nevoli The Land of No-Will
  6 Vozle dyma i ognia Around Smoke and Fire
  7 Mimoletnoe Transitoriness
  8 Antifony Antiphones
  9 Progaliny Forest glades
  10 Indiiskie travy Indian Plants
  11 Bezvetrie Airlessness
  12 Smert'iu-smert' Death to Death
17 Bal’mont, “Krik Chasovogo” 222.

91
Bal'mont took these words from Lenau's letter to Sophie von Leventhal dated 5th June 1839. He wrote about Lenau: "Mne bol'she nravitsia Lenau kak sozdatel' "Fausta," kotoryi mne nravitsia bolee, chem Getevskii, i kak tonchaishii lirik pechali v Prirode" ("I like Lenau better as the creator of "Faust" that I like more than Goethe's, and as a sophisticated poet of the grief in Nature").


Both Vladimir Markov and Bongard-Levin suggest possible links between Bal'mont's works and Vera Johnston's translations of the *Upanishads* but neither goes into any detail.

The definition is from Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary.


Bal’mont, “Indiiskii mudrets” 326.

Kuprianovskii et al. 44.

Kuprianovskii et al. 44.


Bal’mont, “Krugovorot” 323.

Bal’mont, “Krugovorot” 323.


Bal’mont, “Indiiskii mudrets” 326.

According to one of the chief arguments of the *Upanishad*, there exists a universal soul, the *Atman* that is synonymous with the concept of Brahma, or the Universal God.


Bal’mont, “Indiiskii mudrets” 326.

Kuprianovskii et al. 44.


Kuprianovskii et al. 81.

K.D. Bal’mont, “K Slavianam” 675.

According to Markov, Bal’mont obtained information on ancient Hindu mythological deities from the Russian folklorist A. Afanas'ev. Rudra was also considered the father of the Marutas, who are deities associated with fast movement and with the element of the wind. The Wind, of course, is one of Bal’mont’s favorite symbols.

CHAPTER 3

STRANA MYSLI: INDIA IN BAL’MONT’S PROSE AND HIS PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE

. . . India [which] has lived for many thousands of years – several centuries – [and] will continue to live till the end of our earthly days.

Bal’mont, “Poeziia stikhii”

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, Konstantin Bal’mont was largely seen as a Poet par excellence – indeed as a poet with a capital P. His third (common-law) wife and companion till the end of his life, Elena Tsvetkovskaia, referred to him as Poèt in all her epistolary correspondence, and thus was he seen not only by an adoring inner circle. The symbolist poet Viacheslav Ivanov wrote about Bal’mont:
Poistine, Bal’montu prinadlezhat pobednaia pal’ma i del’fiiskii lavr, za to, chto on – poèt, tol’ko poèt, vsegda i vo vsem, i kazhdoe dykhanie ego zhizni – poèziia, i kazhdyi zvuk ego svireli – dykhanie zhizni; za to, chto ego stikh, pevuchii i ‘perpevnyi,’ ispolnen negoi i laskoi taiushchikh, legkikh, kak melodicheskii shelest’ trostnika, vnutrennih sozvuchii i otzvukov; za to, nakonets, chto ego bezumnaia, bluzhdaushchaia muza obrela volshebnye slova vostorga solnechnogo i buinogo khmelia, sdelayshie bodrymi nashi pervye shagi za porogom novogo stoletiia i prevrativshie, kak luch maiskogo solntsa, rodnuiu poëziiu v vesenii sad, v vertograd zelenyi.¹

In truth to Bal’mont belongs the palm of victory and the Delphic laurel for he is a poet, and nothing but a poet, always and in everything, and every breath of his life is poetry, and every sound of his reed-pipe is the breath of life; for his verse, sonorous and replete with resonances, is full of tenderness and melting affection; it is light, as the melodious rustle of the reed, of inner harmonies and echoes; and finally the laurel is his, because his mad, wandering muse acquired magical words of wonderment to express her joyful wonderment at the intoxication that solar and wild life gives, making our first steps across the new century confident, converting like a ray of the May sun [our] native poetry into a spring garden, a green paradise.
His fellow poet Marina Tsvetaeva saw in Bal’mont “the absolute poet, the pure embodiment of the lyric urge, a poet who is nothing but a poet,” and, if a visitor to the poet’s house were to ask one of the servants about his whereabouts, he may very likely hear the response, “The poet is asleep,” or “The poet has gone out to get cigarettes.”

Bal'mont’s fame has indeed rested on his poetic works – at the turn of the century he was Poetry incarnate.

It should be noted, however, that in addition to his numerous collections of original poetry, Bal’mont’s oeuvre includes many translations (of poetry, drama and prose works), as well as an original play and numerous prose works. He translated into Russian the complete poetical works of Shelley, and several works of William Blake, Oscar Wilde, Edgar Allen Poe and Walt Whitman, the plays of the Polish writer Juliusz Slowacki and some works of the Czech writer Vrkhlitskii, to name but a few. His translations go beyond the works of European literature – Bal’mont was the first to translate into Russian the medieval Georgian epic of Shota Rustaveli, The Knight in the Panther’s Skin into Russian and the Mayan epic Popol Vuh, Bulgarian, Serbian, Lithunaian poetry. And his translations were not for reading alone – thus, his translation of the ancient Indian drama by Kalidasa, Sakuntala, was used by Aleksandr Tairov for the opening of his Kamernyi Teatr (“Chamber Theatre”) in 1914. In all Bal’mont translated from the works of at least 70 writers from different countries. His creative work in this area, undoubtedly, constitutes part of his claim to being the Russian-Universal Poet par excellence.

Even less known than his translations are Bal’mont’s prose works; they include – but are not limited to – numerous articles, many of which were published in the following...
collections Gornye vershiny (Mountain Tops, 1904), Belye zarnitsy (White Lightening Flashes, 1908), Morskoe svechenie (Marine Phosphorescence, 1910), Zmeinye tsvety, (Serpent Flowers, 1910), Krai Ozirisa (The Land of Osiris, 1914) and Gde moi dom (Where Is My Home, 1924). Other non-poetic works include his meta-poetic-artistic monographs Poëziia kak volshebstvo (Poetry as Magic, 1915), Svetozvuk v prirode i svetovaia simfonia Skriabina (Light-Sound in Nature and Scriabin’s Light-Symphony, 1917), Revoliutsioner ia ili net (Am I a Revolutionary or Not, 1918), articles, poems and translations in émigré newspapers and several articles under the pseudonym Mstislav for the Russian émigré newspaper Rossiia i Slavianstvo (Russia and Slavdom) in the 1930’s. The writer’s oeuvre also includes an autobiographical novel in prose, Pod novym serpom (Under a New Sickle, 1923) and a book of short stories, Vozdushnyi put’ (Airy Path, 1923). Bal’mont has also written detailed commentaries to his translations of Shelley’s poems, which will be treated as part of his prose works for the purposes of this chapter. Like most of his prose, they offer valuable insights into his philosophy of culture and art and his vision of the Poet.

While some scholars have noted his work as a poet-translator,4 his prose works remained largely unexamined until fairly recently. As mentioned above, Vladimir Markov’s Bal’mont scholarship signaled a revival of broader studies on the poet, first in the West and later in Russia. While most critical works that appeared after Markov’s campaign for a “Bal’mont revival” have tended to deal with his poetry, there are at least two scholars who have ventured into Bal’mont’s prose as well.

Martin Bidney, a prolific American Bal’mont scholar, has written extensively on his essays and essay collections.5 The comparativist has emphasized Bal’mont’s
“universal” scope, presenting him as an ethnographer, a psychologist, an anthropologist, a philosopher and an aesthetic thinker in his numerous articles. The scope of Bidney’s interest in Bal’mont’s oeuvre ranges from Bal’mont’s reception of Mayan and Aztec cultures, his presentation of Spanish folk lyrics and his appropriation of Shelley to his “reimagining” William Blake and Walt Whitman. Fully concurring with Vladimir Markov’s view that Bal’mont’s oeuvre needs to be re-examined, Bidney presents aspects of Bal’mont’s works that had hitherto gone unnoticed, namely his prose. Bidney’s aim in examining Bal’mont’s essays is to reconstruct aspects of his cultural myth-making; in his view Bal’mont essay “is a rhetorical construction presented by a constructed persona; when we speak of the Bal’mont who appears in an essay, we refer to the Bal’mont persona that is constructed,” and as already stated, Bidney views this persona alternately as an ethnographer, a psychologist, an anthropologist, a philosopher and an aesthetic thinker – united into one by the idea of the universality of culture.

In his reading of Bal’mont’s contribution to “Egyptological discourse,” Bidney characterizes him as a “poet-ethnographer,” who has carefully read a large amount of scholarly Egyptological works. The Russian symbolist poet then not only attempted to synthesize all the scholarly material he had read, but, in Bidney’s view, clearly transcended it. In particular, Bidney discusses Bal’mont’s “implied debate” with the famous German Egyptologist Max Müller, “on the nature and value of Egyptian love, particularly of the woman’s role.” This polemic deals with ancient Egyptian love poetry translated by the German scholar and later re-translated by Bal’mont from Müller’s version into Russian and included in the book, *Krai Ozirisa (The Land of Osiris, 1914).*
Bidney compares Müller’s version of the love lyrics with Bal’mont’s translations and points out that the Russian poet-ethnographer lauds the male-female equality that apparently was an essential feature of ancient Egyptian love poetry. In these lyrics, not only do women have a quantitatively stronger voice than the men – in one manuscripts of the translations, there are fifteen poems with female lyrical personae as opposed to four lyrics featuring the male voice – they are also very often the initiators of the process of love-making. Müller was therefore of the opinion that the “female Egyptian lyrical persona has taken over the man’s role to an excessive degree,” and that such verse exhibited a “good humored superficiality,” and was just “pretty but minor art.”

Bal’mont, on the other hand, saw the Egyptians’ “egalitarian enlightenment” as a unique and positive phenomenon. Bidney notes that the Russian poet in his role as translator and ethnographer was “determined” to “hold up the Egyptian lyrical achievement as not just an aesthetic treasure, but as a paradigm for human equality in love.” In Bal’mont’s view, the Egyptians were the only people who had “recognized the equal value of the Male and Female . . . ” The Egyptians’ celebration of love was to Bal’mont also a celebration of the “moment” of love, that coincided with the symbolist poet’s cult of the “eternal moment.”

Bal’mont’s role as “poet ethnographer” is further explored in Bidney’s article, “Ethnographic Self-Fashioning in Bal’mont’s Serpent Flowers: A Russian Symbolist Presentation of the Aztecs and Mayas.” Characterizing Bal’mont’s book Zmeinye tsvety (Serpent Flowers) as a “kaleidoscopic cross generic record,” of Bal’mont’s trip to Mexico undertaken in 1905, Bidney suggests that the book is an “unjustly neglected document of unusual interest from both the literary and ethnological point of view.”
The memoirs are, according to Bidney, a combination of “travel diaries, ethnographic notes, meditations, lyrics, and photographs.”

Bal’mont’s visit to Mexico resulted in a twofold “path-breaking” achievement: firstly, Bal’mont is the “unacknowledged precursor” in the expansion of modern cultural sensibilities along with others who chronicled Mexico in their works, such as D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene and Malcolm Lowrie. Secondly, Bal’mont’s Mexican piece is seen by Bidney as the work of a “scholarly translator of genuine empathetic skill.”

The first to translate the Mayan scripture *Popol Vuh* (*The Book of Council*), Bal’mont “rendered [it] into Russian with musicality and verve forty years before anything similar was attempted in English.” Bidney notes not only Bal’mont’s pioneering achievement in translating the Mayan work – albeit from a French translation – but also his attempt at creating a “universal East-West” (in this case, Mayan and Polish-Christian) mythology. In particular, Bal’mont attempts to reconcile his initial difficulty in understanding the Aztec practice of sun worship, which was tied up with human sacrifice. To find a parallel, the poet turns to the Polish mystic Juliusz Słowacki’s work, *Genesis from the Spirit* (*Genezis s ducha*, 1844) a “dramatic monologue of the Divine spirit working through evolving Nature by means of self-sacrifice.” Bal’mont quotes a lengthy extract of the Polish mystic’s text according to which the theme of sacrifice is traced from the “first slug” who asked the Creator’s permission to first rejoice in life and then to “be annihilated through death . . .” Bal’mont attempts to create a mythology that operates on a vision of “religious history as continual progress.”

100
Another American Slavist, Victor Dmitriev, in his recent monograph (and earlier dissertation) seeks to define the “lyrical hero,” and by extension, the aesthetic issues significant for the lyrical hero, in Bal’mont’s works.21 Entitled *Serebryanyi gost’: O liricheskom geroe Bal’monta* (*The Silver Guest: On Bal’mont’s Lyrical Hero*, 1992) Dmitriev’s work focuses on the “lyrical hero” in Bal’mont’s poetic works as well as takes an interest in Bal’mont’s prose, both fictional and non-fictional: two of his five chapters deal with Bal’mont’s prose works.

The theoretical basis for creation of the lyrical hero of poetry was rooted in his non-ficitional prose, Dmitriev argues, and hence it must be examined with greater seriousness than has been done before. The two essay collections *Gornye vershiny* (*Mountain Tops*, 1904) and *Belye zarnitsy* (*White Lightning Flashes*, 1908) are specifically discussed from the perspective of “the creation of the lyrical hero.”22 Dmitriev begins by noting that for the symbolists prose and poetry were inextricably interwoven. A symbolist poet usually considered himself not only a poet, but also a literary critic and a writer of prose, and dramatic works – writing in a variety of genres was the hallmark of symbolism, marking its preference for the “Protean” personality. Dmitriev notes that Bal’mont’s lyrical hero shared the characteristics of the “hero of the epoch” in this case, the lyrical hero of symbolism. The first of these was “zvezdnost’” (a “starriness” nature) by which Bal’mont meant that his lyrical hero was defined by “reaching out for the stars;” in other words, he demonstrated a neo-romantic dissatisfaction with the limitations of the material world. “Zvezdnaia beskonechnost’” (the “starry infinity” of the skies) was for the writer the guarantee that the beauty and diversity of the universe superseded the confines of earthly reality. He was horrified at
the rift between “the earthly and the heavenly” that in turn meant a betrayal of Earth’s
cosmic nature and her original belonging to the universe. Citing Goya’s paintings of our
terrifying earthly existence as an illustration of this rift between the Here and the There,
Bal’mont was concerned about overcoming the Evil that was causing this separation,
Dmitriev argues, also drawing some parallels between Baudelaire and Bal’mont and
seeing both of them as gripped by cosmic despair and yearning for the salvation that
could be brought about by a synthesis of the earthly and heavenly spaces (“zemnoe i
zvezdnoe prostranstvo”):

Thus for Bal’mont the overcoming of Evil, of the “most terrible
fantasies of Goya,” was the union of Earth and starry space. The poet
considered himself the singer of the “new world in the world.” . . . In
conclusion, in accordance with the philosophy of symbolism so clearly and
convincingly expressed by Bal’mont, man exists in eternity; hence, the criteria
created by the kind of consciousness that was divorced from all cosmic
perspective was inapplicable here. It had halved the very concept of “man,”
distorting it. In this concept was reflected only the material, visible side of
phenomena, something that was [in fact] only the shadow of the
absolute . . . 23

Another quality — in addition to the sense of cosmic perspective — that Bal’mont’s
lyrical hero must possess was a harmonious nature, Dmitriev contends, and he quotes
Bal’mont’s admiration for William Blake in this context; discussing Blake, he, however,
leaves out one of the main components of this feature of *tsel’nost* in the English poet’s make-up: Blake’s “*Upanishadic*” nature, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Dmitriev does discuss the fact that Bal’mont saw Blake as the forefather of the symbolists, because of his realizing “literally all the hypostases of a symbolist.” Blake was at once a child with the wisdom of an old man, a seraphim, a demon, prophet and sinner, Bal’mont believed, and therefore represented the best example of “*tsel’nost*” (“wholeness”).

Dmitriev points out that theme of “*zvezdnost*” continues in Bal’mont’s later collection *Belye zarnitsy* as well. The mystical notion of death as a return to one’s original and true home is added in this collection. Decrying historical Christianity with its focus on original sin, Bal’mont holds it responsible for the cult of reason at the cost of the cult of beauty; the “head” (the human mind) had become an independent monster that was ruling over the rest of human existence, bullying it and distorting it: “we have become almost incapable of understanding the beauty of the *living body*, that is beautiful in all its movements and motivations, healthy, complete . . . convincingly alive and passionate.”

While Dmitriev has uncovered important aspects of Balmont’s prose, one of its main themes remains beyond the scope of his purview: the role of the East, specifically India. This aspect can arguably be seen as a vital key to the full understanding of the concept of the lyrical hero and his aesthetic and metaphysical concerns. In *Belye zarnitsy* specifically, the notion of “*Strana Mysli*” (“Land of Thought”) is a predominant one. Bal’mont proposes a “cultural dichotomy,” represented by the “*Strana Mysli*” (India) and the “*Strana Mechty*” (Land of Dream [Mexico]); in this dichotomy he gives preference to
the former, since while there is eternal spring and sunshine in “Strana Mechty,” it is the “Strana Mysli” that is universal and all-inclusive. Including the dream aspect also, “India” and all it stands for is clearly the broader and richer cultural realm of the two.

Martin Bidney, mentioned earlier in this chapter, also leaves out India from his explorations, deferring to the expertise of the Soviet scholar G. M. Bongard-Levin’s works dealing with India in Bal’mont’s oeuvre, and seeing the topic as exhausted by him. It is true that this Soviet historian has dealt with the place of India in Bal’mont’s oeuvre, but his focus has mainly been the reception of ancient Indian drama (particularly the works of Kalidasa and Ashvaghosha) in the Russian poet’s works. More importantly, while the Soviet-Russian historian does refer to some of Bal’mont’s poetic works, he treats them from a historical perspective; the scholar virtually excludes Bal’mont’s prose works from his discussion.

Bongard-Levin’s book republishes in one volume Bal’mont’s translations of the plays of the ancient Indian playwrights Ashvaghosha (The Life of Buddha) and Kalidasa (Malavika and Agnimitra, Sakuntala and Vikramaurvasiyam). Bal’mont’s translations are interspersed with notes and commentaries by the scholar; Bongard-Levin provides information about the two playwrights, briefly traces the reception of Kalidasa in Russia and provides excerpts from Bal’mont’s correspondence (with his publishers, wife, friends) detailing various stages of his translations. The book begins with an introductory article entitled “Indian Culture in the Work of K.D. Bal’mont,” in which Bongard-Levin gives a broad overview of Bal’mont’s Indophilia.

The scholar notes that ancient India occupied a central place in Bal’mont’s oeuvre and that this aspect of the poet’s work had remained unexamined by Bal’mont scholars.
The symbolist poet’s correspondence with his publisher, friends and wife is quoted to demonstrate Bal’mont’s enduring interest in India; his diaries contain lengthy lists of scholarly books on the religion, philosophy and mythology of India read by him.

Bongard-Levin’s article surveys Bal’mont’s translations of hymns from the Indian religious and religio-philosophical texts such as the *Rig-Veda*, *Atharva-Veda* and the *Upanishads*; the article briefly describes the itinerary of the poet’s trip to and journeys in India in 1912. He provides several examples from Bal’mont’s poetry and some prose works, which demonstrate the pervasiveness of the image of India in the poet’s work.

Thus while Levin’s work notes that the “talented poet was striving to understand the secrets of his exceptional attraction to India,”26 and that he “believed in its great future,”27 it is mainly centered on Bal’mont’s Indophilia as expressed in his translations of ancient Indian classics. It does not offer a deeper analysis of the significance India had for Bal’mont’s literary creativity, his poetry and his philosophy of culture. It does not explain why India had such an “exceptional attraction” to the Poet, traveler and thinker Bal’mont.

Why, then, is it so important for the scholar of Bal’mont’s oeuvre to examine the Indian theme in detail, not least in his prose works? The answer lies in Bidney’s characterization of the Russian symbolist as a “myth-interpreter and myth-maker.”28 In his poetry, Bal’mont delivers and presents the “myths” he believes carry symbolic truths and clothes them in interpretative imagery – in his prose he explicates his cultural mythology.

Indian cultural values are omnipresent in the Russian poet's discussion of his artistic credo and this chapter attempts to present some of its key elements as they emerge in his essays. It seeks to accomplish the following goals: firstly it seeks to continue
Bongard-Levin’s line of investigation and look at Bal’mont’s reception of India.

Secondly, it seeks to continue the exploration by Dmitriev of the lyrical hero in Bal’mont’s prose works by linking the notion of India as a universal culture with Bal’mont’s own striving to become a universal – and hence archetypically Russian -- cultural figure, no less than Pushkin’s heir.

Bal’mont’s essays largely address literary and cultural issues; they bring portraits of writers, characterizations of literary movements, discussions of meta-literary ideas and techniques (such as the notion of light-sound – *svetozvuk* – a concept born out of the symbolist notion of synaesthesia), as well as thoughts on contemporary art and the future of culture in Europe and Russia. In these essays, the terms India and Indian include references to ancient Indian religious-philosophical works such as the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*, as well as the interpretation of Indian thought reconfigured by the Theosophical movement; they are also employed by Bal’mont as a poly-semantic metaphor. The use of this metaphor is organically linked with the cultural philosophy of the symbolist writer, some of the main features of which were: (1) universality on all levels – personal, cultural, national – as an ideal, (2) the centrality of a pantheistic world view (3) the primacy of the poetic word, spoken or written, and 4) the importance given to the transformative power of those who know how to wield the word, namely the poets, who ideally should be “seers” able to penetrate “Maya.” An underlying concern in Bal’mont’s construction of his cultural philosophy was the notion that contemporary European culture and philosophy had lost their vitality and were in need of rejuvenation.

Bal’mont was not the only symbolist to cultivate the genre of the philosophical-cultural essay in which “prophecies” about the European and Russian cultural future were
delivered together with portraits of those “universal minds” of the past that had a message for the present. Merezhkovskii, for example, called the beacons of mankind “eternal companions” and presented their spiritual legacies in a series of essays from 1888 onwards, finally collecting them in his famous *Vechnye sputniki (Eternal Companions, 1897)* that undoubtedly offered a model for Bal’mont to follow. Like his fellow symbolist, Bal'mont too created a pantheon of “eternal companions,” only in his case they were very often Indian, and even if they were not Indian in a literal sense, they were metaphorically so, as it were. Even the title of his first collection of essays *Gornye vershiny (Mountain Peaks)* is based on a metaphor he borrowed from the ancient Indian playwright Kalidasa – Bal’mont quotes the following lines from Kalidasa: “Great Minds, like mountain peaks shine from afar.” There is a universal dialog (“mirovaia klichka”) between the cultures of the world that cuts across space and time; the brilliance of each “mountain peak” transforms distances into closeness and makes the past contemporaneous with the present.

The “great minds” (mountain peaks) that would serve as guiding lights for humanity that Bal’mont selected embodied various “Indian” qualities, regardless of whether those selected were Indian by nationality, or not. Therefore Bal’mont’s Indian pantheon included persons like J. W. von Goethe, William Blake, P.B. Shelley, A.S. Pushkin, F.N. Tiutchev, S.T. Aksakov and Aleksandr Scriabin among others. The ideal qualities of these figures were defined by Bal’mont in essays dealing with each of these personalities, as well as in many of his other essays. The following sections of this chapter present Bal’mont’s “Indian” pantheon and define the qualities of the writers that were deemed worthy of being included in it. The essays discussed largely belong to the
two collections Gornye vershiny and Belye zarnitsy, along with some additional ones such as Morskoe svechenie, Svetozvuk v priode i svetovaia simfoniiia Skriabina, Slovo o Kalidase and Poeziia kak volshebstvo and have been selected on the basis of the centrality of the Indian theme in them and their importance in Bal’mont’s philosophy of culture. In other words, these essays feature Bal’mont’s “selected affinities,” all of whom, however different they might be, were in Bal’mont’s term “Indian.” Furthermore, the pivotal role of Goethe and Pushkin in this pantheon will be considered and Bal’mont’s construction of a universal-Russian self and the place of India in this myth-creation examined.

Prior to initiating the discussion of the figures of the pantheon, it might be useful to draw a model of the “Indian” from Bal’mont’s point of view. The “Indian” model has the following qualities: (1) the Indian spirit is poetic as is seen in its most ancient religious texts, the Vedas, which is made up of poetic hymns; (2) pantheism is the cornerstone of the “Indian” spirituality” as well as its religion, art, literature and way of life; (3) the Indian’s vision of existence is universal and is based on the Upanishadic idea of the primordial unity of the individual self and the Universal Whole; (4) Indians, most typically, worshipped the elements and accorded primacy to the Sun and Fire; (5) Indian literature (especially drama) employed imagery that was infinitely more intricate than that found in European literature; (6) synaesthesia was known to ancient Indians long before it was (re)discovered by Europeans; (7) the cult of “Reason” at the expense of other faculties was foreign to both the ancient (and modern) Indians; they exalted Beauty above Reason. Each of the figures discussed below represents some of the qualities and attitudes enumerated above – possessing them made their carriers “Indian” for Bal’mont.
The following section presents and examines Bal’mont’s “Indian” pantheon in no particular order – chronological or otherwise. This decision is motivated by several factors – one of which is that Bal’mont himself was not guided by any sense of historical chronology. Boris Gasparov explains this atemporal impulse of Russian Modernism that “eschewed historically oriented thought” as an attempt to totally transcend previous cultural experience.32 For the Russian Silver Age, cultural myth gained precedence over cultural tradition and “[t]he flow of historical time is brought to a halt by a messianic act of total renewal, and all previous epochs merge in a new ideal synthesis.”33 The figures in the pantheon created by Bal’mont had “mythological simultaneity” and the constituent elements of “Indian-ness” were present in each of them. Gasparov’s description of the “panchronic and atemporal”34 spirit of the Russian Silver Age is also well characterized in the following section: “Knit into a unique network of semantic resonance, each member of the mythological paradigm was reflected in each other; they projected themselves onto one another and interacted as symbolic reflections.”35 The figures of Bal’mont’s pantheon presented below are not arranged according to a hierarchical principle – with the exception of Goethe, who embodied for Bal’mont the principle of Universality in its ideal form. The other figures are of equal importance to Bal’mont as constituent tiles of a mosaic each contributing unique features to his philosophy of culture: Shelley was his “kindred spirit;” Blake was the “forefather of contemporary symbolists,” and thus his own ancestor; Aksakov was a fellow Russian writer who was a master of “the mellifluous Russian language.”
The English romantic poet P. B. Shelley was one of the most important “selective affinities” of Bal’mont’s; his spiritual kinship with the latter is articulated in his poem, “K Shelli” (“To Shelley”), part of the collection *Tishina* (*Silence*, 1898): “Moi luchshii brat, moi svetlyi genii/S toboiu slilisia ia v odno” (“My dearest brother, my bright genius/ With you I have become one”). One of Bal’mont’s ambitions ever since he became acquainted with Shelley’s poetry was to be able to translate the English poet’s works into Russian and he began to publish some of these works in the early 1890’s. His translation of “The Sensitive Plant” (“Mimoza”) brought him critical attention.

Commentaries to the poems he translated were an important part of Bal’mont’s undertaking and, as Rachel Polonsky points out, “[a] scholarly character attached itself to Bal’mont’s Shelley translations even in their earliest form…” Zinaida Vengerova, an early critic of Ba’mont’s translations, seemed to prefer his commentaries to the translations. Acknowledging the importance of translating the poet who seemed to have taken the place of Byron in all of Europe, Vengerova wrote that Bal’mont was trying to bring the Russian public closer to Shelley if not by his translations then by his commentaries.

In his commentaries to Shelley’s poems, Bal’mont wrote that Shelley had not understood his own essence very well; he was wrong in calling himself a Hellene when he was clearly an Indian in his spiritual essence. There was very little “earthly” material in either Shelley’s works or in Indian hymns; his “direct, refined, exotic poetry” was marked by an “over production of images (“pereproizvodstvo obrazov”) that likewise
was typical of Indian philosophical and poetic works.”\textsuperscript{39} Shelley’s propensity to complicate his imagery along with the relative lack of “earthiness” made it challenging for the average reader to unravel his poetry. Bal’mont, who was not an “average” reader had no such difficulty and was able to appreciate and understand Shelley’s “Indian” poetry.

In her chapter on Bal’mont’s reception of Shelley, Polonsky points to Bal’mont’s numerous allusions to the scholarly literature on Shelley and repeated reference to the “sacred hymns of the Brahmans, the \textit{Rig-Veda}”.\textsuperscript{40} Bal’mont’s source for this knowledge was the German Orientalist and Indologist F. Max Müller, an emeritus professor of Oxford at the time of Bal’mont’s visits to the university; the first visit was in 1897 at the invitation of Professor William Morfill to read a series of lectures on Russian literature at Oxford. Müller became not only an important source of information on ancient India (Müller had made it his life’s mission to “study, edit, translate and publish” the \textit{Rig-Veda})\textsuperscript{41} but also offered a model of cultural philosophy that Bal’mont considered for his own myth making.\textsuperscript{42}

Max Müller, described by Polonsky as “prodigious linguist, mediator, transmitter and interpreter of sacred and indecipherable foreign texts,”\textsuperscript{43} was an important figure in nineteenth-century Orientalism. He was a practitioner of comparative philology, an important tenet of which was the notion that European languages had a common origin with Sanskrit. He advanced the notion that the ancient poets of the \textit{Vedas} had kept intact “a whole world of primitive, natural and intelligible mythology,” and seeing a special role for poets: “poets are mythopoeic, they are linked to primitive mankind.” Polonsky
contends that Müller’s ideas were the most influential in formulating Bal’mont’s philosophy of the Artist.

Bal’mont sees Shelley’s poems “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” and “Mont Blanc,” as the key to understanding Shelley’s worldview. The Russian poet sees “curious possibilities” for linking these two poems and the works of such philosophers as Plato, Plotinus, Spinoza, and such poets as William Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Of the above, Bal’mont singles out Plotinus’ (204-270 BC) philosophy as closest to Shelley’s, as expressed in these two poems. According to Plotinus, God is the Highest Beauty and Highest Good; Cosmic Reason is beautiful since it is the image (“obraz”) of God. Cosmic Reason, the World Soul and the World Body are the three highest forms of beauty. Bal’mont adds that when one sees beauty, one is oneself transformed into a thing of beauty and that in order to see that Higher Beauty, one has to transform one’s internal “I” into something beautiful. This can be done, says Bal’mont by closing the eyes of the body and by resurrecting (“voskresit’”) the living vision (“zhivushchee videnie”) in ourselves. Bal’mont then points out that Shelley’s worldview most resembles contemporary Theosophical philosophy, thus transforming the philosophy of Plotinus into an Eastern one, and Plotinus into an Indian. Plotinus, Theosophy and Shelley come together in “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” and “Mont Blanc” and one is reminded of the fact that Bal’mont denied that Shelley was a Hellene, seeing him as an Indian instead.

One poem of Shelley’s that leads Bal’mont to think immediately and directly of ancient Indians is “Ode to the West Wind.” Commenting on Shelley’s remarkable capacity to personify nature, Bal’mont points out that the Indian writers and composers of the Vedas had already addressed the Wind with similar exhortations as Shelley:
“Pridi, O Vaiiu, pridi, prekrasnyi/Vaiiu vpriagaet dvukh krasnykh konei/Vaiiu vpriagaet v svoi kolesnitsu dvukh bystrykh konei, dvukh sil’neishikh” (“Come, O Vaiu, come O beautiful one/ Vaiu harnesses two handsome steeds/ Vaiu harnesses his chariot with two handsome steeds, two of the strongest.”) Another feature that strikes Bal’mont is the “beautiful alliteration” (“velikolepnaia alliteratsiia”) with which Shelley begins his poem, “O wild West Wind…” (emphasis Bal’mont’s); he adds that this alliterative device already existed in the vedic hymns of India a “thousand years ago,” because of the name for Wind, Vaiu, in Sanskrit. Bal’mont adds that he himself had fully exploited this alliteration in his poem, “Ia vol’nyi veter, ia vechno veiu ..” (“I am the free wind, I blow freely…”) in his collection Tishina.45 He clearly classifies himself as an “Indian” poet in this instance, as well as in many others.

Finally in his commentary to Shelley’s poem, “The Cloud,” Bal’mont explicitly likens Shelley to the Rig-Vedic poets. He makes him into one, by pointing out that in both “Ode to the West Wind” and “The Cloud,” Shelley does not treat various natural phenomena such as the wind, the clouds, the moon, as mere natural phenomena, but presents them as live entities, as personified divine forces. These two poems can be closely compared to the hymn to the gods of thunder in the Rig-Veda, Bal’mont contends. Much like a Vedic poet, Shelley was able to finely distinguish the differences between the Wind and the Cloud: The Wind is both a destructive and creative force at the same time (“gubitel’ i zizhditel’”), whereas the Cloud evolves from a gentle creature to a threatening force. Much like the Maruts, the Indian gods of thunder, the Clouds are insatiable: as soon as they are “fed” with water, they immediately become dark and ominous and begin looking for more “food” to feed on, much like Shelley’s Cloud.
Not only does Bal’mont liken Shelley to the poets of the Rig-Veda, he proceeds to quote the entire Hymn to the gods of Thunder from this Indian source in his own translation, to demonstrate the parallels between the two.\(^\text{46}\) Consisting of nine stanzas, the hymn appeals to the Marutas to come to the aid of the poet and those he prays for:

\[\ldots\ O\ Maruty\ provor\mathbf{nye}!\quad O\ swift\ Maruts!\]
\[\text{Dozvol’te\ zhe\ mne,}\quad \text{Please\ allow\ me}\]
\[\text{moimi\ molitvami,}\quad \text{through\ my\ prayers,}\]
\[\text{Dozvol’te\ zhe\ mne,}\quad \text{Please\ allow\ me,}\]
\[\text{Privlech’\ vas\ siuda\ ot\ nebes\ i\ zemli,}\quad \text{To\ bring\ you\ here,\ away\ from\ the}\]
\[\text{Heavens\ and\ Earth,}\]
\[\text{Dlia\ nashei\ zashchity}\quad \text{For\ our\ protection}\]
\[\text{I\ blagodentsviia!}\quad \text{And\ prosperity!}\]

Bal’mont added that along with his pantheism Shelley’s predilection for abstract thought that was similar to the Indian Vedic poets. In his notes to Shelley’s poem, “Time,” Bal’mont writes, “Shelli, takzhe\ kak\ indiiskie\ poety,\ s\ osobennai\ liubov’iu\ obrashchaetsia\ s\ takimi\ ovtlechennymy\ sushchnostiami\ kak\ Vremia\ i\ Prostranstvo” (“Shelley,\ just\ like\ the\ Indian\ poets,\ approaches\ with\ particular\ love\ such\ abstract\ concepts\ as\ Time\ and\ Space”).\(^\text{48}\) Bal’mont’s own translation of Shelley’s poem is one of his successful ones.

The commentary to the first volume of translations of Shelley by Bal’mont ends with a statement on Shelley’s 1813 work, “Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem.”
Bal’mont observes that Shelley’s extensive notes to this poem were published separately as a “vegetarian pamphlet,” entitled, *A vindication of natural diet*. Among Shelley’s suggestions in this pamphlet, Bal’mont picks out the following: “Do not eat any living being,” and “Do not drink anything but distilled water.”

Noting that vegetarianism and abstinence from alcohol engaged the English poet throughout his life, Bal’mont concludes that, “[i]n the manner of its solution Shelley’s is similar to Indian Wisdom, with Theosophy and Leo Tolstoy.”

Bal’mont then quotes a section from Max Mueller’s *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* (1899) on the topic of vegetarianism: according to the Indian divinity Brihaspati, “[T]he eating of animal flesh was likewise ordered by demons.” Shelley seems indeed to be echoing the ideas of ancient Indian philosophy according to which the attainment of higher truth is closely connected with the notion of proper nourishment and abstinence from “murders” (Bal’mont’s and Shelley refer to animal slaughter in this manner). Theosophy too, proposed similar notions regarding vegetarianism, Bal’mont further notes. Referring to the book of one of the founders of the Theosophical movement, Annie Besant, *Man and His Bodies*, Bal’mont points out that according to theosophical doctrine, Beauty and Truth can be achieved by recasting the human body. The first step on the journey towards Beauty and Truth was to abstain from “corrupting” food, such as meat (“oskvernenniaushchaia pishcha”) and intoxicating drinks.
WILLIAM BLAKE -- THE FOREFATHER OF CONTEMPORARY
SYMBOLISM:

Bal'mont called the English mystic and poet, William Blake, the “forefather of modern
symbolists” in his article entitled “Praotets sovremennykh Simvolistov. Vil’iam Blèk,
Bal’mont saw Blake as a visionary (“iasnovidiashchii”), who had already seen God at the
age of four (“Bog zagliianul k nemu v okno”) and later he saw “angels, prophets and
poets.” Blake therefore had the ability to connect with other worlds, including the world
of the dead, and when he needed to create the portrait of a historical character, he could
dispense with “material” evidence about them, such as busts or historical documents, or
learned treatises. He merely “looked into space” and the image of the historical character
emerged before him.

Further on Bal’mont writes that, according to Blake, “he had previously been
Socrates and seen Jesus Christ,” and when his younger brother Robert Blake died,
William Blake saw Robert’s soul leaving through the ceiling dancing in joy. Blake’s own
death was a joyous affair: as he lay dying, his face became increasingly beautiful, his
eyes lit up and he gave an account of the vision he had of heaven. Bal’mont points out
that one had to be “stikhiino-tsel’nym” (elementary and whole) in order to be able to die
in this manner.

Bal’mont admits that such specifics in the lives of “simple and remarkable
geniuses” (“prostodushn[ykh] i neobyknoonenn[ykh] geniev”) as were mentioned above
about Blake might be seen by some as strange and “even funny,” but he urges his readers
to accept them as an important part of the life of a “reserved, strong and emotionally original soul” (“zamknutoi, sil’noi i original’no chuvstvuiushchei dushi”). Blake, by his own admission, did not consider material reality important and he regarded visible reality as “an obstacle” to higher truths. As a mystic, Blake was familiar with the insights of ecstasy and his words were not the result of rational thinking processes but were seen – literally – by him as vital parts of the mystery of Eternity.

The key to Blake’s uniqueness was that his was not a European way of thinking, – rather he possessed an Indian mind:

Eго [Vil’iama Blèka] manera myslit' napominaet ne evropeiskii, a indiiskii
ium: my raschleniаem, chtoby priiti k tsel'nomu; on vsegda vidit mysl' vo vsei ee tsel'noi slozhnosti; my, chtoby priiti k chemu-nibud', dolzhny smotret' na dorogu, po kotoroi idem, on, kak letiashchaia ptitsa, dostigaet tseli puti, ne smotria sebe pod nogi.56

His [Blake’s] manner of thought is reminiscent not of a European, but an Indian mind: we break things down in order to reach the whole; he always sees a thought in all the complexity of its wholeness; we, in order to reach anything must look at the road along which we are travelling, he, like a bird in flight, attains the goal of his journey without glancing [at the road] under his feet.

This capacity to see an object from every possible angle and as a whole is the distinctive feature of a symbolist poet-philosopher, Bal’mont opines. Blake’s special vision enabled
him to see beyond visible reality and he was able to see the essence of reality through his inner eye. Most importantly, Blake was able to transform existing reality into a “desired” reality:

. . . earthly images combined into a long chain in front of him, and grew like a corridor, at the far end of which he saw the desired image recreated by his imagination. If the corridor was not sufficiently long, the image seemed cloudy; the longer the corridor, the brighter were the completed features [of the images]. This law is common for all mystics, and we see them in the pages of the *Upnishads* in particularly bright manifestations.

Such then was the path of true poets-symbolists – the path of true inner thought. Blake – as a mystic-symbolist and “Indian” had this vision and knowledge in common with the writers of the *Upnishads*.

Throughout his article on Blake, Bal’mont repeatedly characterizes Blake as having an “Indian” mind. Bal’mont picks Blake’s oft-quoted lines from his “Auguries of Innocence” to support his argument for Blake’s Eastern nature:
To see a World in a grain of sand,
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour….

Blake’s poetic thought is exactly the same as the basic thought-tenet of the “holy concentration of meditation” (“sviashchennoe sosredotochie”) of the “wise yogis” of India.58

Blake embodies for Bal’mont an entire matrix of imagery and ideas associated with India. Blake’s exhortations not to kill “a moth or a mole” is seen by Bal’mont as resembling the teachings of the Buddha. Thus, Blake is at once a writer with an “Indian” mind, a yogi, a seer like the Buddha and his philosophy and artistic method is essentially, in all vital respects, the same as that of the writers of the ancient Indian religious texts, the *Upanishads*.

**SERGEI AKSAKOV: TRUE BROTHER OF THE HINDU/ INDIAN**

In his essay entitled “Russkii iazyk. Volia kak osnova tvorchestva,”59 (The Russian Language: Freedom and Will as Basis of Creation, 1924) Bal’mont gives an account of the uniqueness and richness of the Russian language, following in the tradition established by Lomonosov, Turgenev and others (not least himself, as his poem “Ia izyskannost’ medlitel’noi russkoi rechi . . .” testifies). One “forgotten” writer who used his native tongue in a worthy manner and whom Bal’mont asks his readers to remember
is Sergei Timofeevich Aksakov, whose fame was always overshadowed by other great Russian writers. Aksakov was “the favorite of my childhood,”60 Bal’mont states, and now he had once more become a beloved writer for him – not least because he was an “Indian” artist whose “Indian-ness” was expressed in his all-encompassing love of nature.

The author of Detstkie gody Bagrova vnuka (Childhood Years of the Bagrov Grandson, 1856-58) had a pantheistic vision that could “penetrate into the multifaceted and sacred icon of being” (“prinikat’ k mnogolikoi ikone bytiia”) and he spoke like a “true brother of the Indian” (“kak rodnoi brat indusa”).61 Both Aksakov and his “brother” spoke the language of the pantheist who loves every single organism of the great whole. Bal’mont goes on to quote a lengthy passage from Aksakov to illustrate his all-embracing – and Indian – pantheism:

Na vetviakh derev’ev, v chashche zelenykh list’ev i voobshche v lesu, zhivut pestrye, krasivye raznogolosye, beskonechno raznoobraznye porody ptits; tokuiut glukhie i prostye tetereva, pishchat riabchiki, khripiat na tiagakh val’dshnepy, vorkuiut, kazhdaia po-svoemu, vse porody dikikh golubei, vzvizgivaiut i chokaiut drozdy, zaunyvno, melodicheski pereklikaiutsia ivolgi, stonut riabyte kukushki, postukivaiut, dolbia derev’ia, raznoperye diatly, . . . , treshchat soiki, sviristeli, lesnye zhavoronki, dubonoski, i vse mnogochislennoe, krylatoe, melkoe pevchee plemia napolniaet vozdukh raznymy golosami i ozhivliaet tishinu lesov; na such’iakh i duplakh derev’ev ptitsy v’iut svoi gnezda i vyvodiat detei; dla toi zhe tseli poselaiutsia v duplakh kunitsy i belki, vrazhdebnuye ptitsam, i shumnye roi dikikh pchel. 62
On the branches of trees, in the thickets of green leaves and generally in the forest, there live gay, colorful, many-voiced and endlessly diverse species of birds; the silent and simple black grouse perform mating rituals; hazel hens cheep, woodcocks cry out during mating, all species of wild pigeons bill and coo, each in its unique manner, thrush screech and sing, orioles converse mournfully and melodically, speckled cuckoos moan, many-feathered woodpeckers tap on trees, chipping at them, . . . jays, waxwings, king wood-peckers and wood larks chatter, and all the countless winged, tiny songbirds fill the air with various voices and enliven the silence of the forests; birds build their nests and raise their young on the knots and hollows of trees; martens and squirrels – not very friendly to the birds – also nestle in the tree hollows for the same purpose as do noisy swarms of wild bees.63

Bal’mont names Pushkin and Aksakov as the two writers who embody the harmony of the Russian soul, its “solar” foundation and its “mirror-like” clarity: Pushkin was the most Russian of all poets and Aksakov the most Russian of all prose writers. Both these writers understood and best used the Russian language to express “its oneness with nature”; in Bal’mont’s view, Aksakov and Pushkin were universal pantheistic writers who accorded equal importance to the “buzzing of bees” and the deepest recesses of the human mind.

Thus, for Bal’mont one of the qualities that made Aksakov the best prose writer of Russian literature was the closeness of his pantheistic world-view to Indian attitudes.
towards nature and man. Aksakov was one of those who loved nature “in all its heavenly volume, as an artist, a hunter, as a fisherman, and as a pathfinder (“sledopyt”).”\textsuperscript{64} Inspite of the apparent contradiction – for how can a hunter be seen as a pantheistic Indian spirit who regards all life as equally valid? – Bal’mont’s sweeping vision glosses over this detail.

**SVETOZVUK (SYNAESTHESIA) AND SCRIBIN**:  

Bal’mont was a close friend and admirer of the Russian composer Aleksandr Nikolaevich Scriabin (1872-1915). Along with Wagner, Bal’mont considered Scriabin one of the best contemporary composers; his admiration for the Russian composer who was steeped in mysticism of an Eastern kind, is expressed in at least two essays and in several poems. The article *Svetozvuk v prirode i svetovaia simfoniia Skriabina* (*Light-Sound in Nature and Scriabin’s Light Symphony*, 1917) treats ideas that are integral to Bal’mont’s aesthetic philosophy: synaesthesia and the primordial unity in Nature’s life. Drawn in part from Baudelaire’s *Correspondances*, the article begins with the following two ideas: 1) that the world is structured according to correspondences and 2) that Nature is an indivisible whole. In his characteristic poetic- metaphorical language Bal’mont explains the notion of the wholeness and integrity of Nature and Cosmos: “[Z]vezdnye dorogi Vselennoi slagaiut odnu poèmu” (“The starry paths of the Universe compose a single poem”). \textsuperscript{65}

Characteristically, Bal’mont points out at the outset that it is the poetic soul, which has the capacity to see beyond material reality. He cautions his readers that being
stuck in material petty everyday reality means that one will never be able to see the “whole:”

Budnichnoe soznanie cheloveka samoogranichivaet sebia, i, umom raschleniaia Vselennuiu, vidit otdel’nye chastii ee, otdel’n’ye ee sostoianiia, v svoem chastichnom bytii estvenno prinimaia otdel’n’ost’ za samodavleishchie sushchnosti, ne ulavivaia garmonicheskoi sviazi vsego, ne uglubliaias’ i ne vozvyshaias’ do vseob’emnoi sozertsatel’nosti.66

The ordinary, everyday consciousness of man limits itself, and, dividing up the Universe with the help of reason, sees its individual parts, its individual states, in its partial existence; it naturally considers the part as self-evident essence [of things], without grasping the harmonious connection between everything, without going deeper or reaching an all-encompassing level of contemplation.

Of the two focal points of the article – the notion that svetozvuk (synaesthesia between light and sound) is found in nature and that Scriabin created “illuminated” (“svetovaia”) music – Bal’mont dedicates the bulk of his article to the former. The term svetozvuk was not an arbitrary combination of words, Bal’mont insists, but a clear concept (“tochnoe utverzhdenie”) that was realized in both earthly reality and in “other worlds” (“osushchestvliaishcheisia v mirakh, v deistvitel’nosti”).67 This concept is a reflection of the idea that Nature is one and that, therefore, light and sound cannot be separated: “Mir est’ muzyka. Dukh, veshchestvo, dusha i mysl’ sut’ odin nerazdel’nyi
Svetozvuk”68 (“The world is music. Spirit, matter, soul and thought are all one inseparable Light-sound”).

Although light and sound are inseparable, most of us are unable to perceive this phenomenon since we do not have the powers that visionary poets have. Examples still abound in nature though, the poet claims: Lightning (“heavenly fire”) not only bursts forth in an explosion of bright red-yellow color, but also speaks with the “sound” of thunder. This phenomenon was the source of the “creative play of lofty poets” (“sozidatel’naia igra vysokikh poètov”).69 To this category belong the best representatives of Indian culture.

The ancient Hindu had depicted this natural phenomenon, singing hymns to it in the Vedas, Bal’mont writes. The natural phenomenon that most captured the imagination of the writers of these ancient religious hymns was “speaking” Fire. The Hindu saw the “image (face) of Fire” – both earthly and heavenly – as Svetozvuk (‘Light-sound’).”70 Fire for the Indians was indivisible from sound and it was always related to speech; fire “spoke” to and for the Indians. Bal’mont’s own poetry is permeated with “hymns” to the elements, especially fire, and this is clearly an Indian element in his poetry. Thus Bal’mont’s discussion of Fire as an example of svetozvuk is organic to his artistic vision and creativity.

Indians were the first and still were virtually alone to have understood the unique phenomenon of synaesthesia: “Fire for the Hindu sings, it is organically linked to a speaking voice.” Fire is personified as Agni in the Vedas: it rides red horses; it is born white, turns red and is the bright God among the forces of darkness. Even Agni’s horses exhibit svetozvuk in the combination of their neighing and the radiance of their manes:
A koni ne tol’ko siiaiut svoim iavleniem, no i budiat zvuk. Kon’ bleshchet svoei grivoi i khvostom i vsem svoim iskrometnym ognedyushchim likom, no v to zhe vremia on poet svoim rzhaniem, takim zvonkim, chto ètot zvuk glasit pobedu.⁷¹

And the horses not only shine with their brilliance, but also produce sound. The horse’s mane and tail shine as does his fire-breathing, spark-inducing face, but at the same time he sings in his neighing, so sonorously that it sounds like a victory call.

The *Upanishads* also point to the vital role of *Agni*: according to the writers of the ancient Indian religious texts, Truth was covered by a brilliant layer of deception – *maya*. This Truth would be revealed to true believers however and it was *Agni* who led these on to the beautiful path to revelation. The *Vedas* too praised *Agni* as a poet possessing a “tongue giving forth light”⁷² – a singer with the brilliant (“luchezarnyi”) language of inspiration. Bal’mont’s own highly metaphorical language merges with quotes from the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* in discussing the phenomenon of *svetozvuk*.

Although the title of the article mentions Scriabin’s symphony, only a small part of Bal’mont’s article actually discusses his music. One reason for this is Bal’mont’s highly digressive style that brings into his discussion other cultures, such as the Iranian and ancient Greek ones, that were aware of the notion of *svetozvuk*, before beginning the section on Scriabin. This “elf among people” possessed a “tsvetnoi sluh,” (a capacity to
hear colors) contended Bal’mont, explaining that the “plamennyi Lizst” (“fiery Lizst”) and Rimskii-Korsakov all possessed similar powers of hearing color.\textsuperscript{73}

Examining Scriabin’s conceptions of color and movement, Ralph Matlaw explains that Scriabin “saw colors and keys as individual notes.”\textsuperscript{74} This faculty was not unique to Scriabin – for example, Rimskii-Korsakov possessed it also, except his colors were different and were for keys only.\textsuperscript{75} Nor is it unique to musicians – audition colorée is a main tenet in the practice of synaesthesia, typical of the baroque, romantic and symbolist periods.\textsuperscript{76} Scriabin had a fully developed system according to which the spectrum from red to violet corresponded to C G D A E B F –sharp.\textsuperscript{77} The composer even worked with a “light machine” while creating his musical composition \textit{Prometheus}; he wanted to have the entire hall “‘illuminated’ with blinding rays of white light.”\textsuperscript{78} Matlaw rightly points out that this notion of the close relationship between color and music can be seen as a metaphor “in Scriabin’s thinking, for fragmentation from unity to multiplicity and the possibility of reintegration.”\textsuperscript{79} According to Bal’mont, “[L]ight, and in particular, the light of the sun, is the single most important element in Scriabin, in his work, and his thought.”\textsuperscript{80} The appreciation was mutual between Scriabin and Bal’mont – it was not only the poet who enthused about Scriabin, but the composer too praised the poet in extravagant terms.

Scriabin was deeply interested in Indian culture, in particular, he was interested in Kalidasa’s \textit{Sakuntala} and saw it repeatedly in Tairov’s \textit{Kamernyi Teatr}. He also worked closely with Tairov’s wife and leading lady (who also played the female lead in \textit{Sakuntala}) Alisa Koonen, “to see how music would express itself in motion.”\textsuperscript{81} Also noteworthy is the setting for Scriabin’s magnum opus \textit{Mysterium}, which remained
incomplete at the time of the composer’s death. An “all-inclusive” project in the tradition of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the *Mysterium* was based on Scriabin’s belief that the forgotten ancient rituals and mysteries needed to be reintroduced to produce “mystical catharsis.”  

For his setting Scriabin chose India, “the country of miracles, the cradle of religion and homeland of prophets.” More specifically, the backdrop would be the Himalayas and bells would be suspended from the “clouds” to “summon mankind to the event.”

Bal’mont believed that the synaesthesia of music, color and light had an “Eastern” quality about it and that therein perhaps lay the key to Scriabin’s works:


The combination of light with the music of Scriabin, specifically, is inevitable, for all his music is illuminated. The East is alive in the musical work of Scriabin. Therefore the people of the East like his music, people who are generally unresponsive towards European music or have an antagonistic attitude towards it. Scriabin, while remaining a European and a Russian, was a Hindu, as someone once said about him. He correctly understood the East, whose very air is replete with symphonies of light.
Bal’mont provides anecdotal evidence from his own recent experience in support of his assessment. Having just returned from a trip to the East (Java, Ceylon, India) Bal’mont had returned to Paris and was very eager to attend a piano concert, a musical art form he had loved from childhood. As soon as he could, he went to attend the concert of a famous pianist after the “tropical nature and eastern music”; instead of pleasure, Bal’mont writes, he experienced “torture,” however. His musical receptivity had undergone a change: “[A]ll around I saw listeners enjoying [the recital] but I just saw a boring person in a boring tail coat, and heard how from a big black box he extracted unfinished sounds of various instruments using little wooden hammers and these sounds were accompanied by the resonance from the wooden box.” Unable to bear this any longer, he left after the first part of the program. Soon after the poet came to Moscow and attended a piano concert by Scriabin. Bal’mont described this meeting with the composer as a vision of blindingly beautiful musicality:


This was a vision of singing, falling moons. Of musical starlight. Of Arabesques,
hieroglyphs and rocks, sculpted from sounds. Movement of fire. A burst of sunlight. The cry of soul to soul. An epiphany that came from another planet. A singing illumination of the air itself, in which this child of the Gods moved. This was the same piano. But this time it justified its calling. This was a strong tenderness; a powerful tenderness.

GOETHE: THE CHOSEN SON OF THE EARTH

In Bal’mont’s personal mythology and literary myth-creation, the protean figure of Goethe occupied a central position. The multifarious and diverse intellectual preoccupations of Germany’s national poet, all of which he synthesized into a harmonious life-work oeuvre, as well as his great receptivity to a variety of world cultures, not least, Oriental ones, led Bal’mont to remark: “Vse uznat’, vse poniat’, vse obniat’ – vot luzung, dostoinyi Uebermensch’a, – slovo, kotoroe Gete upotreblial ran’she Nitsshe i s bol’shim pravom” (“[T]o know all, to understand all, to embrace all – here is the motto of the Übermensch – the word that Goethe used before Nietzsche and with greater right”); the German poet was to be considered a figure to be emulated in the new world culture, he envisioned.

Bal’mont’s understanding of Goethe’s universal qualities are presented in his essay “Izbrannik zemli” (“Earth’s Chosen One,” 1908) included in his collection of essays Belye zarnitsy (White Lightning Flashes, 1908). The essay begins with an epigraph from Bal’mont’s own poetry that underscores the “eternal” quality of the chosen one it is dedicated to -- the “izbrannik zemli” (“the chosen son of the earth”):
V sadakh probuzhdennoi zemli In the gardens of an awakened earth
Tsvety rastveli, ottveli. Flowers blossomed and faded,
No byl ee odin vsekh milee: But there was one dearer to her [Earth] than all the others:
Izbrannik zelenoi Zemli, The Chosen One of the green Earth,
On vechno zhivet, zeleneia.90 He lives eternally, and is always young.

Goethe’s “regal figure” (“tsarstvennaia figura”) towers over all other favorite figures of Bal’mont’s pantheon; proximity to his values provides a sense of spiritual peace, as well as that organic wholeness (“tsel’nost’”) that are so valued by the symbolist writer and invariably labeled “Indian.” A prime example of a “complete artist” (“zakonchennaia khudozestvennaia natura”), Goethe’s only other worthy companion among artists and poets was Leonardo da Vinci – until perhaps Pushkin appeared on the world stage.

These two figures Goethe and Leonardo da Vinci had in common a multi-faceted personality (“vsestoronnye lichnosti”) that thirsted for knowledge of all things – for omniscience, no less (“vseznaniie”); they possessed the gift of originality (“samobytnyi”) that allowed them to reach the heights of art, underwent a harmonious artistic evolution, and reached a stage of perfection where transcendence over categories such as good and evil (“genial’naia otreshennost’ ot ramok dobra i zla”) was reached.91 A harmonious synthesis of spiritual and material beauty was the hallmark of their art. Both these “demi-gods” had an immense love for humanity and the Earth and looked upon the world as their personal fiefdoms that they labored over tirelessly, aiming at transforming it.
Granting that in talent Shakespeare and Calderon perhaps exceeded Goethe, the latter yet was a far superior figure thanks to his “tsel’nost’” (“wholeness”) manifested, for example, in his equal skill in a broad range of literary genres (it might have been different if Goethe had written only poetic works, Balmont contends). His multifaceted and forever restless soul, “greedy” for ever new impressions (“raznostoronniaia i zhadnaia dusha”) did not allow him to be satisfied with poetry alone: his love of spectacle led him to direct drama and to introduce new elements to it. Nor was he afraid of “baser genres” and reading less talented writers; thus he “was not afraid of lowering his genius” by translating Benvenuto Cellini. Goethe was a tireless investigator of the natural sciences and his contributions to these were considerable. No field of knowledge remained unexplored by the great German writer: from geology to osteology, from morphology to theories of evolution, from philosophy to Italian art and Chinese literature, Goethe had explored every realm of human endeavor and made significant contributions to each.

Goethe was the whole – the rest were parts, even if very rich ones: Shelley could “wail like a brilliant violin,” Calderon was like “an Indian lotus” who could produce twelve blooms on one stalk, Shakespeare was “an entire continent,” Marlow the embodiment of ambition, Byron “beautiful like Lucifer,” but they were all of them able to see the universe from only their – admittedly broad -- point of view. Some of them could perhaps even be more loved than Goethe, but none could share with him the distinction of being the genius that had all-embracing knowledge and total cultural receptivity. Proteanism was reserved for Goethe and, hence, it was he who would become the model for a future culturally superior race of men:
Goethe sees the universe from different points of view and can change, like Proteus, gliding away from those who do not know how to question, and speaking with wise men as a seer and wise man. And therefore in the future, when people will have conquered the World, this green planet, given to us for pleasure, they will resemble not Shakespeare and not Shelley, but the harmoniously powerful Goethe.

Bal’mont saw Goethe’s legacy as eternal and universal – he was India’s truest son. Unmoved by his own tremendous achievements, indifferent to his personal accomplishments, Goethe was for Bal’mont like the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha received enlightenment. Goethe, like the Bodhi tree would live eternally and inspire everyone who approached his legacy for the wisdom of his peaceful repose. Thus Goethe reigns the pantheon of universal figures created by Bal’mont as its undisputed King.

**STRANA MYSLI: ETERNAL INDIA -- NOT ETERNAL ROME**
The various strands of impressionistic thought presented in the above sections and culled from various essays by Bal’mont are presented in a more unified fashion in his essay "Poèziia Stikhii: Zemlia, Voda, Ogon' i Vozdukh" (Poetry of the Elements: Earth, Water, Fire and Air, 1908). Here he sees India as the locus of universal and eternal wisdom in the world – it was here that the concepts of a pantheistic universe and universal culture were born. Therefore any cultural figure that cultivated a multiplicity of intellectual pursuits and synthesized a multiplicity of cultures, to Bal’mont, was “Indian.” Seeing in himself a representative of universality also, believing himself to be Protean in his poetic practice and receptive in his studies of not just many but virtually all cultures of the world, Bal’mont was clearly an “Indian” also. He was not the only one among the symbolists to see universality as the hallmark of the cultural personality, but he is the only one to make Indian culture the source of the concept.

In the above-mentioned essay, Bal'mont in a distinctly anti-teleological, anti-Hegelian manner proposes his ideas about India's place among world cultures. The German philosopher Hegel, who created a teleological future-oriented model of the development of world history, was very influential among historians and literary figures in their representation of Asian cultures. According to Hegel's model, Asia represented the infancy of human civilization, and Europe, its present and future. Hegel proposed the idea that Asian cultures were fossilized that they had been arrested in their infantile stage. The German philosopher’s view of world history can be summed up in the following quote from his Philosophy of History: “The history of the world moves from east to west, for Europe is positively the end of history, Asia the beginning.”  

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For Bal’mont, however, contemporary cultures evoke nothing but despair and spiritual fatigue, only India offers comfort: "Kogda ustaesh' ot nashei tuskloi razdroblennoi i nekrasivoi Sovremennosti, radostno unosit'sia vospominaniem v inye strany . . ." (“When one gets tired of our gray, fragmented and ugly Contemporary life, it is a pleasure to be borne away via memory to other lands . . .”) – to India specifically. In contrast to European religion and philosophy, Indian religious thought restores a sense of cosmic unity and belonging, personified and worshipped in the four elements that found frequent hymnic expression in Bal'mont's own poetry: earth, water, fire and air.

The poet juxtaposes two cultures in this essay: Mexican and Indian, and draws a distinction between the two. For Bal'mont, Mexico is the "country of dreams" (“Strana Mechty”) and India, "the country of thought" (“Strana Mysli”). Mexico is a country filled with bright colors and is in a state of eternal spring, as in a dream, "Vse krasochno i svezho v neistoshchimoi Mechte, vse iarko tsvetisto i pyshno v strane, gde tsarit Vesna” (“Everything is vibrant and fresh in the inexhaustible [state of] Dream, everything is bright, colorful and luxuriant in the country where Spring rules”).

The poet sees India as the locus of thought, “Strana Mysli,” unlike the dream-like Mexico. That he places it higher than the country of dreams is clear when he states that Thought absorbs within its broad embrace every phenomenon known to mankind, including dreams. Bal'mont sees Indian culture as all-embracing, all-inclusive:

Ia dumaiu, chto Indiiskaia Mudrost' vkluchaet v sebia vse ottenki, dostupnoi cheloveku mudrosti, mnogogrannost' Indiiskogo Uma neischerpaema, kak v prirode Indii est' vse ottenki i protivopoloznosti, samye mertvye pustyni i samye
I think that Indian Wisdom includes in itself all shades of meaning that are accessible to human wisdom; the multifacetedness of the Indian Mind is inexhaustible, [which is] similar to nature in India that has includes all opposites – from the most desolate of deserts to the most blooming oases. India is a Land of Thought – most complete in its outline and Thought includes in it Dream as well . . .

This being the case, Bal'mont saw India as a country of eternal relevance: "India, vseob"emliushchaia i vseponimaiushchaia, vsevosprinimaiushchaia Indiia, kotoraiia zhila tysiachaletiia - sonny vekov - i budet zhit' do skonchaniia nashikh zemelnykh dnei" ("India, all-encompassing and all-understanding, India, that is accepting of all, that has lived for a thousands of years – for a multitude of centuries – will continue to live till the end of our earthly days"). Bal'mont underscores the non-dreamlike quality of India, by characterizing it as a country primarily of thinkers.

When Bal'mont turned to other cultures, he saw philosophers and artists who were unable to provide answers to his philosophical queries; he was unmoved and unconvinced by contemporary philosophy: " . . . ona [sovremen'naia filosofiia], so svoei razdroblennoi i zhalkoi polzriachei polzuchest'iu, ne imeet dliia menia nikakogo ocharovaniia, malo togo, kazhetsia mne prezrennoi" (" . . . it [contemporary philosophy] with its fragmented
and pitiful half-blind earthboundness, does not hold any fascination for me, not only that, it seems contemptible to me”). 102

Bal'mont saw Russia and Europe as part of the cold "North," as opposed to "Southern" countries such as India, Spain and Mexico. Life in this cold North was suffocating, the people were cowardly, they had lost contact with nature: they no longer looked at the Sun as a god but as merely a yellow ball of fire, a spherical furnace. The poet saw himself as being born in the North as the result of the "severe laws of Karma." However, in spite of being born in the dismal North, the poet was blessed, since passionate verse ("ognennye stroki") burned within him. The poet believes that he had visited both - the Country of Dreams and the Country of Thought – in an earlier life. Thus it was eternal India and not eternal Rome that inspired Bal’mont’s philosophy of culture, as well as his plan to rescue the Russian North from itself.

CONCLUSION

Bal'mont considered poetic pantheism a particularly important element of a symbolist aesthetics. All the truly great poets and writers, according to Bal'mont, were pantheists: William Blake, P. B. Shelley and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Naturally, pantheism was part of the aesthetics of Russia’s best poets and writers as well. For example, in his essay, "Elementarnye slova o russkom simvolizme" ("Some Elementary Words about Russian Symbolism," 1908), Bal'mont discusses the three, in his view, most talented Russian writers of the 19th century – Tiutchev, Fet and Sluchevskii, after Pushkin of course (who had his flaws however, when compared with these three). Bal’mont sees
them as symbolists, employing the term in the meaning of proto-symbolists. An essential feature of their greatness was their independence of Western models and their nearness to the eastern cultural heritage, especially their pantheistic view of nature. Tiutchev, for example, was an Indian type of symbolist, in Bal'mont's opinion, since he was able to understand and portray the very "soul" of nature (for example, in poems such as “Son na more” [“Dream at Sea”].

The nineteenth-century poet transcended mere descriptions of nature such as Pushkin and Lermontov still had presented, being able to not only depict it, but also to commune with it. Bal'mont was convinced that the stars conversed with Tiutchev, and that he was able to understand the language of waves, storms, rivers and woods. In many of his essays, Bal'mont stresses that this communion with nature is at the core of Indian culture; its poets, its religious philosophers are all pantheists; communion with nature forms an integral part of the Indian world-view. In his essay, “Slovo o Kalidase,” for example, Bal’mont writes, “. . . Net Indii bez lotosa, liany, i sviashchennoi smokovnitsy, bez pochitaniiia slontsu i ogniu, bez pochitaniiia tonchaishego vsekhu zhivykh sushchestv, sam bog tam rozhdaetsia v raspustivshemsia lotose, i vozdukh prian ot tsvoetochnoi pyli, i chuvstva priany ot potseluinogo slitiia dushi cheloveka s dushoi prirody, i tak kak spletennye chashchi vetvei uchat cheloveka tishine i mudrosti, tam chuvstva vysoki, tam mysli vozvysheny i blagorodny ostizheniia iskusstva” (“. . . There is no India without lotuses, lianas and heavenly fig trees, without the worship of the sun and fire, without the most refined respect for all living beings, god himself resides in the flowering lotus, and the air is aromatic with flowery dust, and feelings are aromatic as a result of the synthesis of the human soul and the soul of nature, and since the interlaced branches of the woods
teach men to be silent and wise, there feelings are lofty, there thoughts are elevated and
the works of art are noble”\textsuperscript{104}.

Prose writers too could be “Indian.” Employing Kalidasa’s metaphor of
“mountain peaks” to begin his essay, Bal’mont characterizes Tolstoi as one such
“mountain peak,” over whom time and space have no power. Tolstoi’s life and work was
universal in its appeal and had the ability to transcend the material world; herein lay
Tolstoi’s eternal gift to humanity. The universality of Tolstoi’s wisdom was able to
transcend not only time and space but gender, age, nationalities and cultures:

Malyi Vasiutka russkoi derevni, naklonivshiisia nad skazkoi “Chem liudi zhivy,”
ital’ianskaia devushka, s b’iushchimsia serdsem uznaiushchaia o sud’be Anny
Kareninoi, russkii sektant, upornyi starik, vnikaiushchii v slova Tolstoga o pravde
i nepravde zhizni, iaponets, peredelyvaiushchii na svoi lad otiagashchennyе
groz’d’ia tsvetov i iagod, voznikshie v Iasnoi Poliane, indusskii bramin,

zadumavshiisia nad myslitel’nymy utverzhdeniiami velikogo russkogo startsa, -
ne luchezarnaia li èto pobeda izvechnogo chelovecheskogo dukha nad kosnym
veshestvom . . . \textsuperscript{105}

Little Vasiutka from a Russian village, bent over the fairy tale [called] “How
people live,” an Italian girl, who found out about the fate of Anna Karenina with a
beating heart, the Russian sectarian, a stubborn old man, who earnestly studies
Tolstoy’s words about the truth and untruth of life, a Japanese who transforms to
his satisfaction the laden clusters of flowers and fruits that have originated in
Iasnaia Poliana, the Indian Brahmin, who ponders over the philosophical sayings
of the great Russian elder – is this not the victory of the eternal human soul over inert matter . . .

Bal’mont’s own brand of universality created a widely ranging pantheon of universal-pantheistic personalities who intuitively, or consciously, partake of “Indian” wisdom; to have brought to his native culture the knowledge of many others, since as a “poet-ethnographer” during his innumerable journeys, he saw it as his mission to convey the positive and negative aspects of other cultures, gradually focusing ever more on ancient and modern India as a valid source for Russia to learn from. In this mission, one figure that served as a guiding light for Bal’mont was Pushkin. As for so many before him, Pushkin was not only a master poet and the founder of modern Russian literature, but also the model for what the Russians of the future would be like. Pushkin was the universal Russian genius that was “part African, part Slav, part Aryan,” and yet was the most Russian of Russians. He combined the passionate nature of the African with the universal vision of life that was typical of the Aryan; he also possessed the Slavic manifestation of Aryanness -- sadness and song. Both Turgenev (another idol of Bal’mont’s) and Pushkin’s works highlight the feeling of harmony that governs their passionate souls. This harmony, “like a wise conductor of a diverse orchestra does not allow the flute to cry too loud or the violins to drown the rest of the music on the harmonious waves of molten diamond.” Reiterating the aphorism that “Pushkin was the sun of Russian poetry,” Bal’mont characterizes him as a “tsel’naia getevskaia natura” (“A whole nature, such as Goethe”).
While Bal’mont mentions the enormous influence that Pushkin’s sun had over Russian poetry he also speaks of his undivided, harmonious (“tsel’naia”) nature, but he leaves unsaid the impact that the image of Pushkin as a universal figure had on his own cultural philosophy. It can be perhaps concluded nevertheless that Bal’mont aspired to being another Pushkin, the Pushkin that Dostoevskii had created, to be specific. It was under the banner of the universal-Russian Pushkin that Bal’mont advocated the interaction of Indian and Russian cultures. As mentioned earlier, in his article on Kalidasa, “Slovo o Kalidase,” he writes that the Indian playwright already was a poet on a high level of sophistication when Bal’mont was still a “Scythian” and yet the two would understand each other if they were to meet, even though Kalidasa was the more refined poet.\textsuperscript{109} It was refinement, then, that Indian culture could give a rougher and more recent northern culture. And Bal’mont envisioned Russian-Indian syntheses on many levels.

In India the very atmosphere was “steeped in inspiration” and the \textit{Upanishadic} idea that the Universal Whole (Brahma) is present in the Individual and can be manifested as poetry is inherently Indian. Bal’mont describes this vision-image in the following terms: “\ldots Brahma is the face of the Universe. Brahma is scattered into hymn and song. And if I burst forth with the brilliance of song, then I am in god, I am god. And if hymns pour forth from me, and if I sing – I am god.”\textsuperscript{110} The symbolist poet thus sees himself as an \textit{Upanishadic} poet, who sees the universal being, \textit{Brahma} in everything and everyone. And yet, Bal’mont is a \textit{Russian} writer who places himself in the glorious tradition of Pushkin, Fet, Lermontov, and Baratynskii. In his poem “Zavetnaia Rifma,” Bal’mont’s lyrical persona traces his literary genealogy to these poets and yet also
transcends them in two important ways. Firstly, he did not learn his poetic craft from them, but from nature instead, which makes him an Indian poet in the sense Tiutchev and Aksakov were. Secondly he had engaged in a truly global quest for world culture. Thus Bal’mont casts himself as a universal, pantheistic – ultimately Indian – poet, at least in the sense he uses the term in his prose.

Ne Pushkin, za iambami pevshii khorei
Legchaishii stikha obrazets,
Ne Fet, issekavshii v napevakh kamei,
Usladu pronzennykh serdets
Ne Lermontov – ves’ mnogozvezdnaia duma,
Poryv obrashchennyi k mecham,
Ne tot mnogomudryi, v slovakh metkostrel’nyi,
Kem byl Baratynskii dlia nas, -
Menia nauchili nauke svirel’noi,
Granili moi svetlyi almaz.
Khorei i iamby s ikh zvukom korotkim
Ia slyshal v zhurchan’e ruch’ev
I golub’ svoim vorkovaniem krotkim
Uchil menia muzyke slov.
Kachaias’ pod vetrom, kak v pliaske kak v strakhe,
Plakuchie vetvi berez
Mne dali pevuchii razmer amfibrakhii, -
V nem val’s uletaiushchikh grez. . . .

Svershilos’. Doroga moia bespredel’na.
    Pevuchie pesni – moi.
Khvalen’e, chto peli vy mne kolybel’no,
    V dalekoi derevne ruch’i.
Byt’ mozhet, dadutsia drugomu udachi
    Polnei i svetlei, chem moia.
No mir obletel ia. I kak zhe inache
    Krylatym otvetil by ia?
Ia videl vsiu Zemliu ot kraia do kraia –
    No serdtsu vsekh skazok milei,
Kak v detstve, ta rifma moia golubaia
    Shirokoshumiashchikh polei.111

Neither Pushkin, who sang trochees after iambs,
    The lightest model of all rhythms,
Nor Fet, who cut out, in his melodic cameos
    The delight of pierced hearts.
Nor Tiutchev, who understood the harmony of the sound
    That chaos creates during nights.
Nor Lermontov – all many-starred muse,
    A gust [of wind] facing swords
Nor that very wise, very precise in his words poet
That Baratynskii was for us –
Taught me the science of the reed-pipe
   Polished my bright diamond.
Trochees and iambics with their short sounds
   I heard in the burbling of brooks
And the pigeon with its modest cooing
   Taught me the music of words.
Swaying in the wind, as if in a dance, as if in fear
   The weeping branches of birch
Gave me the sonorous meter of the amphibrach –
   In it is the waltz of departing dreams. . .
It is done. My road is endless.
   Sonorous songs are mine.
The praise that you sang to me in my cradle,
   O rivulets in the distant village!
It is quite possible that another will be given poetic success
   Fuller and brighter than mine.
But I was the one who traveled the world. How else would I
   Have answered the winged ones?
I saw the whole World from corner to corner –
   But to my heart is dearer than all fairy tales
My blue rhyme, as in my childhood,
   Of swaying wide fields.
In this poetic declaration are evident the various constituent elements of Bal’mont’s personal cultural mythology of the Poet: universality defined as having seen and understood the cultures of the world, while, at the same time, of all things seen and “conquered,” it is Russia’s wide fields that are dearest to him. The poet invokes the names of his illustrious predecessors of Russian poetry, yet sets himself apart as the Indian pantheist – who learnt his craft directly from nature and who therefore is the one to ascend an even higher level of universality than his predecessors.

Bal’mont also extended his genealogy to include Goethe and his above-quoted poem, “Zavetnaia rifma” clearly echoed the poem-tribute to the German writer “Na smert’ Gete” (“On Goethe’s death,” 1833) by Evgenii Baratynskii, one of the members of the so-called “Pushkin pleaid”:

Pogas’, no nachto ne ostavleno im

Pod solntsem zhivym bez priveta;

Na vse otozvalsia on serdtsem svoim,

Chto prosit u serdtsa otveta:

Krylatoiu mysl’iu on mir obletel,

V odnom bezpredel’nom nashel ei predel

He is no more, but nothing that lives under the sun

has been left untouched without a greeting;

He responded to everything with his heart
Everything that asks for an answer from it:

He flew around the world on the wings of his thoughts

And only in the infinite did he find the finite. 112

Thus, Bal’mont like the Universal German poet had traveled the entire world on his
“winged muse” and “responded to everything” with a greeting. The poet of the cult of the
moment had likewise looked for and was able to glimpse into the infinite
(“Zapredel’nost’”) in his dialog with Indian culture.

NOTES

3 In his article, “A Russian Symbolist View of William Blake” in Comparative Literature, Vol.39, No. 4 (Autumn 1987) 327-339, Martin Bidney ranks Bal’mont as being on the top of a list of translators from all over the world – on a par with such outstanding people in the field as Herder and Pound, going by “the scope and quality of his work and as intercultural communicator through literary translation.” (334).
4 Bal’mont translated into Russian works from several cultures and languages: Scandinavian languages, Georgian, Mayan, Aztec, French, Sanskrit, Spanish, to name a few.


7 Some of Bidney’s works also explore Bal’mont as a translator.


9 Wilhelm Max Müller is different from the famous Indologist and scholar, Friedrich Max Müller, with whose works Bal’mont was also well acquainted.


11 Bidney mentions the London manuscript – but does not provide further details. Bidney, “Land of the Androgyne” 375.


16 Bidney, “Ethnographic Self-Fashioning” 421.

17 Bidney, “Ethnographic Self-Fashioning ” 421.


21 Viktor Dmitriev was born in Leningrad in 1946 and graduated from the Leningrad state institute of theatre, music, cinematography’s department of theatre studies. He was very active in “samizdat” and was forced to leave USSR in 1981, at which time he immigrated to America. After receiving his PhD from UCLA, Dmitriev was working at Oklahoma State University at the time his book was published.


23 Dmitriev 41-43.

24 Dmitriev 43.


31 Although Bal’mont did not write essays devoted exclusively to Pushkin, he discusses Pushkin in several essays devoted to other figures/ topics such as “O russkikh poëtakh,” “O poëzii Feta,” “Russkii lazyk” to name a few.


33 Gasparov 2.

34 These terms are Gasparov’s.

35 Gasparov 2.


37 Polonsky 71.

38 Polonsky points out that some Shelley scholars, in particular Henry Sweet, held a similar opinion. Polonsky 80.
40 Polonsky 77.
41 Polonsky 79.
42 Friedrich Max Müller is not be confused with W. Max Müller, an Egyptologist with whose work Bal’mont was well acquainted.
43 Rachel Polonsky, “Bal’mont’s Shelley and the sacred books of the East,” 77.
44 K.D. Bal’mont, “Primechaniia” 471.
45 Interestingly Bal’mont adds that the Belgian poet Verhaeren’s attempt at a similar alliteration in a hymn addressed to the wind (Le Venti) is not as successful since the French language is “much poorer than Russian.” K.D. Bal’mont, “Primechaniia” 471.
46 Bal’mont quotes another hymn to the Marutas in his monograph Poeziia kak Volshebstvo.
47 K.D. Bal’mont, “Primechaniia” 478.
48 Puchina vechnaia, v kotoroi volny – gody! Vse novykh zhertv, i voesh’, i revesh’;
Vsegda shumiat tvoi rydaiushchie vody, O skaly mertvye ostatki trupov b’esh’!
Oni gor’ki ot gor’kikh slez liudskikh!
Potok bez beregov, ty pleshchesh’ neustanno
V granity vechnosti prilivom voln morskikh!
Dobychei presyshen, ty zhzhdesh’ bezpristanno

49 K.D. Bal’mont, “Primechaniia” 496.
50 Max Muller, The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy (London: Longmans, Green, 1899) 134.
51 In her treatise Man and Beast, Annie Besant describes various hierarchically placed “planes” (or states) in which the consciousness of individuals resides. The physical body is the first of these states and is the vehicle that houses the individual during his earthly life and as such is the first that needs to be cleansed in trying to attain the (true) Theosophical path. In other words, a “pure” body is in many ways a prerequisite to do the higher, spiritual work of Theosophy: “…certain treatment of the body is necessary in order that we may turn our footsteps in the direction of the Path; while dealing with the body only will never take us to the heights to which we aspire, still to let the body alone will make it impossible for us to scale those heights at all. … The body is an instrument which is to be refined, to be improved, to be trained, to be moulded into such a form and made of such constituents as may best fit it to be the instrument on the physical plane for the highest purposes of man.” In order to purify the body, Besant exhorts fellow students of Theosophy to desist from alcohol, for the “drunkards” and people engaged in the trade of alcohol have physically “gross and coarse” bodies. Moreover, drunkards who have “lost their physical bodies” and thus are unable to satisfy their longing for alcohol tend to haunt places where drinks are served and try to push themselves into the bodies of people who are drinking. Another “article of diet” from which to protect the physical body is the “flesh of mammals, birds, reptiles and fish, with that of crustaceous creatures and mollusces which feed on carrion.” One look at the bodies of butchers would be sufficient to convince those who want to attain higher astral planes that bodies fed on meat would not have the “strength and fineness of tempered steel” that man needs for “all kinds of higher work”.
52 K.D. Bal’mont, “Praotets sovremennyk Simvolistov,” Gornye Vershiny (Moscow: Grif, 1904, 43-49) 45.
53 Bal’mont, “Praotets” 45.
54 Bal’mont, “Praotets” 45.
55 Bal’mont, “Praotets” 44.
56 Bal’mont, “Praotets” 45.
57 Bal’mont, “Praotets” 45.
58 Bal’mont, “Praotets” 45.
60 Bal’mont “Russkii Iazyk,” 636.
61 Bal’mont “Russkii Iazyk,” 636.
62 Bal’mont “Russkii Iazyk,” 636.
63 Translation author’s SS. All translations are done by the author unless indicated otherwise.


Bal’mont, *Svetozvuk* 3.

Bal’mont, *Svetozvuk* 4.

Bal’mont, *Svetozvuk* 4.

Bal’mont, *Svetozvuk* 5.

Bal’mont, *Svetozvuk* 5.

Bal’mont, *Svetozvuk* 5.


Bal’mont, *Svetozvuk* 19.


Matlaw states that Scriabin thought it vulgar when Koussevitsky festooned the stage with colored lights. Although the original light machine was unsuccessful, there have been performances in Russia with the light score in 1962, in New York in 1967 and also on television. Matlaw, “Scriabin and Symbolism” 10.

Matlaw 11.

Matlaw 11.

Matlaw 10.

Matlaw 19.

Matlaw 19.

Matlaw 19.

Bal’mont, *Svetozvuk* 22.

The terms Hindu and Indian are employed interchangeably in most Russian sources.

Bal’mont, *Svetozvuk* 22.

Bal’mont, *Svetozuk* 23.


Bal’mont, “Izbrannik Zemli” 3.

Bal’mont, “Izbrannik Zemli” 4.

Bal’mont, “Izbrannik Zemli” 8.

Bal’mont, “Izbrannik Zemli” 9.

Bal’mont, “Izbrannik Zemli” 10.


Bal’mont, “Poèziiia stikhii” 19.


Bal’mont, “Poèziiia stikhii” 39.

Bal’mont, “Poèziiia stikhii” 41.

Bal’mont, “Poèziiia stikhii” 41.

Bal’mont, “Poèziiia stikhii” 20.

Bal’mont, “Poèziiia stikhii” 19.

K.D> Bal’mont, “Èlementarnye slova a simvolizme,” *Gornye Vershiny* (Moscow: Grif, 1904, 75-95) 86.

Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 576.

107 Bal’mont, “Rytsar’ devushki-zhenshiny” 613.
109 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 574.
110 This exposition of the Upanishadic philosophy is given in Vera Johnston’s article, “Shri Shankara-Acharia – Mudrets Indiiskii,” *Voprosy Filosofii i Psikhologii*. God VIII, Kniga 1,36 (January-February 1897) 1-39. Vera Johnston, Helena Blavatsky’s niece, was married to Charles Johnston, member of the Royal Asiatic Society of London. She wrote several articles on the Hindu religious philosophy, in particular on the Upanishads. Both Markov and Bongard-Levin cite her as possible sources for Bal’mont. In her article, Johnson writes that, “… the vedantists [writers of Upanishads – S S] did not consider humans and Divinity as irrevocably separated from each other and postulated that the entire purpose of human existence was in striving towards a union.” 26.
CHAPTER 4

FROM SHAKESPEARE TO KALIDASA: BAL’MONT AND THE CRISIS IN EUROPEAN THEATER

INTRODUCTION

One of the aesthetic concerns that preoccupied the minds of Russian intellectuals and – even the general public – in the Silver Age was the current state of European and Russian Theater. Poets, writers, drama and theater specialists engaged in polemics about the new directions theater should take. According to the theater critic Konstantin Rudnitsky:

Strange and even improbable as it may seem, the question of the theater of the future – what form it would take and what place it would have in public life – was one which preoccupied the minds of leading thinkers and writers in the period between the two Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917. It was the subject of endless discussion and furious debate by people who had momentarily forgotten their usual pursuits, who had either no links at all with the theater or who had come into contact with the stage only accidentally, peripherally.¹
More specifically, this immense interest in the future of theater sprung from the perception that it was in a state of crisis. The debate on this crisis continued for more than a decade and was initiated by the self-appointed leader of the symbolists, Valerii Briusov in 1902, in his article in the leading symbolist journal *Mir Iskusstva (World of Art)*, “Nenuzhnaia Pravda. Po povodu Moskovskogo Khudozhestvennogo Teatra” (“Unwanted Truth: About the Moscow Art Theater”).

Briusov, characterized by the theater critic N.N. Evreinov as “undisputedly one of the most enlightened and talented leaders of the new movement in art,” announced in this article that the “petty realism” (“poshlyi realizm”) of the MAT needed to be challenged. The “unwanted truth” that Briusov was referring to was the “naturalist” aesthetics of the MAT under the direction of Konstantin Stanislavsky that operated on what Peter Szondi defines as the “presupposition that art is fundamentally a mimetic discourse.” Briusov spoke for all symbolists when he rejected this “truthful” and entirely earthbound drama. Targeting the heart of the problem, Briusov wrote:

Imitating reality is a means in art, and not its end… Contemporary theaters are aiming more and more towards a faithful recreation of life. These theaters are temples for ‘people with weak powers of imagination’. Their innovations are very timid: they concern themselves with secondary issues and leave the fundamental issues of theater unexamined.
It is important to note that Briusov issued this challenge to the MAT, the theater that “performed to packed houses.” Briusov was convinced that, “[T]ogether with the entire European theater, with insignificant exceptions, it is on a false path.” Denouncing the tendency of contemporary Russian theater of “counterfeiting reality”, he called for a distinction between “conventionality” and “reality” in theater. One area of concern for Briusov was stage decorations; Briusov argued, for example, that the staging of dramas during Shakespeare’s time did not require a forest to be recreated on the stage for a scene in the woods and that even a sign with the word “forest” written on it served the purpose. The directors and stage decorators of the naturalist persuasion who wanted real trees on the stage had taken matters too far, Briusov felt. Addressing this concern for too realistic stage decoration, he concluded his article with the following advice to theater directors: “Let your setting aim not at the truth, but at the suggestion of truth. I summon you away from the unnecessary truth of the modern theater to the deliberate conventionalization of the ancient theater.”

Briusov extended the debate he had begun in 1902 in his later article, “Teatr budushchego” (“Theater of the Future,” 1907) by suggesting the course the crisis ridden theater mired in “scenic naturalism” should take. Once again, pointing to the source of the problem and reiterating his perception that not only Russian but all of European theater was in crisis, Briusov noted that:

Firstly, an overwhelming majority of contemporary dramatists are entirely oblivious to the basic tasks of art, and this, naturally, is because they are not true artists. In contemporary Europe, theater, unfortunately, is in the hands of [clever]
artisans, who are aware of the so-called stage conventions, and who inundate 9/10ths of all existing theaters. From a painter, a sculptor, a poet, one always demands artistic giftedness; much less from a novelist; but a dramatist is happily allowed to do without it!7

The future theater would be handed over to the poets, the true artists, Briusov hoped. Briusov's plan for the future theater included: 1) A reaffirmation of the Aristotelian aesthetics of drama, where "action" would be at the center of dramatic art; 2) a systematic "weeding out" of bad dramas from contemporary theater. Of the three types of dramas to be weeded out, Briusov mentioned tendentious dramas, where each character stood for and defended an abstract idea, such as "Les affaires sont les affaires" by Octave Mirbeau. The second type of plays to be banished from the theater would be byt plays such as those written by Maksim Gor'kii. In such plays, argued Briusov, the author/ playwright is redundant; so realistic are the plays that the dramaturge functions as a transparent glass between audience and reality. Finally, Chekhov's “mood” plays (“drama nastroenii”) - and this included most of his plays - must be dropped; they failed to realize the potential of drama by their complete lack of action, thus negating Aristotelian principles of drama (“Istinnoe soderzhanie dramy v deistvii”).

Joining Briusov in this debate, the theater director Meierkhol’d felt that naturalistic theater presented actors that expressed themselves in a “finished, clearly-defined manner”8 that left no place for suggestion or understatement. He had worked with Stanislavsky, but left MAT over his disagreement with Stanislavsky's naturalism, to form his own company. Vera Komissarzhevskaia, a famous actress of the time, also left the
Imperial Aleksandriinskii Theater, dissatisfied with the “entrenched routine of the Imperial stage.” She toured the provinces with performances and raised enough money to open her own theater in 1904. These two – Meierkhol’d and Komissarzhevskaja – provided the setting for the new Symbolist theater in Russia. Komissarzhevskaja was drawn to Symbolism because of the movement’s “mystical and transcendental” aspect. She stated that she did not believe in naturalism (she characterized it as “ultra-realism”). Komissarzheskaia felt that something higher and more artistic needed to be shown on the stage, not the “brutal” life shown in naturalistic theater, which she decided was not “real art.” Meierkhol’d was interested in the stylization of past theatrical epochs and “theater for theater's sake.” The two briefly collaborated with Meierkhol’d working as the director in Komissarzhevskaja's theater, which she opened in 1906. Together these two artists offered the creative space that facilitated the staging of non-realistic plays of European as well as Russian writers and playwrights, even though their collaboration was brief.

Against this backdrop of attacking the byt plays Russian symbolists “flirted with the prospect of creating a repertoire which would confront, question and challenge the traditions of the realistic nineteenth-century theater.” Kalbouss counts about 180 plays written by Russian Symbolists between 1890 and 1917. Apart from writing their own plays, symbolist writers and theater specialists such as Viacheslav Ivanov, Nikolai Evreinov and Fedor Sologub proposed various theories of drama - solutions for the crisis of realism and naturalism in the theater.
However varied the Symbolist response to the perceived crisis of the theater, it displayed certain invariants: (i) a move away from realism (towards the portrayal of two worlds - real and ideal), (ii) a call for more active involvement of the spectator in the theatrical process, (iii) a return to earlier periods/forms for dramatic inspiration - Ancient Greece, the Spanish Golden Age and *Commedia del’Arte* (iv) a revival of the Dionysian idea of the “theater-temple,” (v) a reassessment of the roles of author, poet and director in the theater, (vi) a belief that drama must have the power to transform life.

For inspiration, Russian symbolists also looked towards contemporary European playwrights – Henrik Ibsen and Maurice Maeterlinck, in particular. Kalbouss examines the influence of contemporary Western playwrights on Russian symbolists such as Henrik Ibsen, Maurice Maeterlinck, August Strindberg and others. The Russian symbolist writer, Nikolai Minskii wrote the first symbolist study of Ibsen in his article, “Genrikh Ibsen i ego p'esy iz sovremennoi zhizni,” (“Henrik Ibsen and His lays of Contemporary Life”) in which he points out that Ibsen presents reality using non-realistic techniques. Quoting the example of Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*, Minskii presents the central character, Stockmann, as an abstraction rather than a realistically portrayed person. Another symbolist writer and critic, Akim Volynskii, saw “poetic allegory, symbolic allusions and psychological and philosophical ideas hidden beneath the external events of the play.”

Maurice Maeterlinck's “shadowy world of semi-allusions and semi-happenings” attracted not only Symbolists but also people of the theater, even Stanislavskii.12 Chekhov thought that Maeterlinck's writings, though “strange and wonderful things,” had “tremendous impact.” He wrote, “If I had a theater, I would definitely put on *Les
aveugles. By the way, this play has a good scenic effect, at a sea with a lighthouse nearby. The public is half-idiotic, yet a failure of this play may be avoided once you write the content of the play on the billboard, briefly, of course.” 13 Ivan Ivanov, a theater critic of the time, believed that Maeterlinck's popularity in Europe as well as the fact that his works were replete with symbolic imagery meant that he should be introduced in Russia as well.

As is perhaps evident from the above examples, most of the leading Russian symbolist writers, fulfilling the role of theater critics, turned to the “West” and to pasts that were part of the Western canon to look for inspirational models to aid with the crisis in Russian theater. Briusov’s conclusion in his article on the future of theater underscores this point: “If we look at the dramatic works that have inspired wonderment and admiration from us, we can be convinced that all of them completely correspond to Aristotle’s definition.” 14 According to Briusov, not only Greek plays that formed the basis of Aristotle’s theory on drama, but plays of the following post-Aristotelian playwrights Calderon, Shakespeare, Ibsen and Hauptmann were worthy of emulation since they operated within the framework of Aristotle’s poetics. Michael Green, in his Introduction to Russian Symbolist Theater (1989), an anthology of the most significant articles in the Symbolist debate on drama and theater, wrote that the art of the symbolist period “was marked by a heightened awareness of developments in the West, a self-conscious return to the community of European culture.” 15 Was there a dissenting voice in this “self-conscious return to the community of European culture?” Who, if any, among the symbolists pointed to an “Eastern” solution to the problem in theater?
That such questions remain largely unaddressed by scholars so far can be seen in, for example, Michael Green’s anthology: all the “solutions” and issues discussed by symbolists and included in the anthology remain within the scope of the European and “Western”-oriented cultural debate. One symbolist who is excluded in this anthology and in critical works as well, is Konstantin Bal’mont, who shared the deep concern of his artistic fraternity on the state of decline of contemporary European theater and, in fact, proposed an “Eastern” solution to the crisis in theater.

Unlike his knowledge of and interest in Indian religio-philosophical texts (such as the *Upanishads*), Bal’mont did not seem to have been aware of ancient Indian dramaturgy until well after 1900, until his meeting in Paris with the French Indologist and Sinologist, Sylvain Levi in 1912. Thus Bal’mont’s search for a solution to theater’s crisis was a long one: it began with translations of Calderon’s plays along with an attempt to write his own play and seems to have ended, perhaps not surprisingly for the Indophile, in the ancient Indian drama *Sakuntala* written by Kalidasa (IV century AD).

While the contributions of leading symbolists in the discussion on the future of Russian theater have been studied, Bal'mont's ideas on theater and drama remain virtually unexamined. One exception is the study by G. Bongard-Levin, who published a collection of Bal'mont's translations of the works of the ancient Indian playwrights, Kalidasa and Asvaghosha, along with accompanying articles by him that deal with Bal'mont's overall interest in India – the Soviet scholar, however, does not examine Bal'mont's views on the crisis in the theater and its future. The only Western scholar to have dealt with Bal'mont's contribution to the symbolist debate on the fate and future of
theater is George Kalbouss. In his book, *The Plays of Russian Symbolists*, he briefly analyzes the only play written by Bal'mont, *Tri Rassveta (Three Blossomings, 1904)*.

The following sections of this chapter will briefly describe the solutions offered by some leading symbolists; next it will trace Bal'mont's search for a solution to this crisis caused by excessive naturalism and realism in contemporary theater. The chapter primarily focuses on the place that Indian drama and theater occupied in Bal'mont's vision for the future of theater in Russia. An attempt will be made to survey some solutions to the crisis in theater and to place Bal’mont’s contribution in this context. More specifically, the Aristotelian solution of the first generation symbolist Briusov, the more traditional return to Greek antiquity of the symbolist of the second generation, Viacheslav Ivanov and the Indian solution of the theater director Aleksandr Tairov – who worked with Bal’mont – will be discussed.

It is noteworthy that Bal'mont to a great extent agrees with the issues raised by the symbolist debate on the theater and its future, but that his solution stands out as virtually the only "Eastward-looking" one: Bal'mont found his model of ideal drama in ancient India, in the works of the playwright Kalidasa (IV century AD). The period examined in this chapter will extend until 1914, the year in which Aleksandr Tairov staged the ancient Indian play, *Sakuntala* translated by Bal'mont, on the opening night of his new theater, the *Kamernyi Teatr (Kamrenyi Theater)*. What exactly led Bal’mont to conclude that the ideal drama was to be found in ancient India? Was Kalidasa Bal’mont’s own discovery or was he influenced by Goethe’s and others’ admiration of the play?
While each of the symbolists discussed in this section had a distinct position on various aspects of the debate on drama, theater and its future, their positions were largely circumscribed within what Raymond Schwab calls the “incestuous circle” of Europe and, more broadly, the Mediterranean realm. Bal’mont and later, Aleksandr Tairov were the exceptions, who ventured outside this enchanted circle.

Briusov’s Theater of the Future:

Valerii Briusov was, according to Meierkhol’d, “the first in Russia to speak of the futility of that ‘truth’ which our theaters have sought so strenuously to capture in recent years; he was also the first to point to other paths of dramatic presentation.”

After staring off the “revolt” against the naturalism of Stanislavsky’s MAT in his 1902 article, “Unnecessary Truth”, Briusov proposed his vision of the theater of the future in his later article, “Teatr budushchego” (“Theater of the Future,” 1907). After staring off the “revolt” against the naturalism of Stanislavsky’s MAT in his 1902 article, “Unnecessary Truth”, Briusov proposed his vision of the theater of the future in his later article, “Teatr budushchego” (“Theater of the Future,” 1907).

Beginning his article with delineating the shortcomings of contemporary theater, Briusov directs the attention of his reader/listener to the “true” source of the appropriate aesthetics of drama – Aristotle. Singling out Aristotle’s claim that, “Tragedy is the imitation of a single, important complete action,” Briusov credits the Greek philosopher with establishing the difference between drama and other forms of art. Thus sculpture
was based on forms, painting on lines and colors, lyrics on mood, epic on occurrence/happening (“sobytie”), but action (“deistvie”), direct action was the cornerstone of drama alone.\textsuperscript{20}

The plays that operated on the Aristotelian principle invariably always evoked “our enthusiasm” (“nash vostorg”), Briusov declared. “In fact, what is the essence of Othello?” he demanded to know. “It was not a static figure, such as, for example, “Beata Beatrix” by [the painter] Rossetti, it was not an outpouring [“izliianie”] of mood, like a poem by Shelley, but a man of action.” \textsuperscript{21} It was not Othello’s external appearances or his words that help the spectator to understand this Shakespearean character, it was his actions. This, then, is Briusov’s “conclusion” about ideal heroes including all of Shakespeare’s and any other “great playwright’s” (“znachitel’nyi dramaturg”) – they are all Aristotelian “action” figures. Briusov expands the Greek philosopher’s definition to include dramas that were not written in the classical mode such as the early dramas of Maeterlinck stating that the “inaction” that the Belgian playwright strove for was purely external and that the “action” was taking place in the characters’ souls.

Unable to provide a “working model” of the drama of the future, (since he felt that this was a task premature at the time), Briusov merely proposes the following directions that it should take: 1) It should go into the hands of poets (i.e, true artists), 2) the playwright of the future would base his examples on the great ancient playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles or Kalidasa and base their plays on the Aristotelian principle of action, 3) the playwright of the future would recognize the need for synthesizing art and science and create a drama that was not a temple, but an academy, “where man would learn about himself and would be able to conquer the universe.”
Interestingly, among the writers to be emulated, Briusov mentions Kalidasa, an ancient Indian playwright, whom he includes in the Western canon for what he perceives as his adherence to Aristotelian principles. Unlike Bal’mont, Briusov clearly aligns himself with Europe and includes himself and Russia in European culture as can be seen in his usage of the first-person plural pronoun “my” when describing the problems confronting the contemporary theater: “We Europeans are predominantly analytical. In this is our strength and herein lies our imperfection. Our life will become harmonious only when we understand that we perceive the universe from a single perspective (“odnostoronne”), that our understanding of it is incomplete.”

Although he seems to present a philosophy of Eastern wholeness, it should be noted here that Briusov’s choice of Kalidasa was not dictated by a heightened interest in the East (or India). The erudite writer was undoubtedly aware of the reception – and acceptance – of the Indian classic as a part of the (Western) canon. After the introduction of Sakuntala by William Jones to Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, Western European writers and philosophers received the ancient Indian play with great enthusiasm. Most notably, Goethe characterized Sakuntala as a universal work of art and immortalized his reaction in the following quatrains that became a ubiquitous part of subsequent scholarship on the play:

If you want the bloom of youth and fruit of later years
If you want what enchants, fulfills, and nourishes,
If you want heaven and earth contained in one name –
I say Sakuntala and all is spoken.


The influential philosopher of Romanticism, Herder, stated that the West’s encounter with *Sakuntala* was a vitally important ‘cultural event’ in the history of East-West relations. Friedrich Schiller placed Sakuntala, the Indian heroine of the eponymous drama, above the women characters of Greek drama. And, although Goethe did not share the all-encompassing enthusiasm of his contemporaries for all aspects of Indian culture, *Sakuntala* was an exception. Goethe wrote about the impact the play had on him in a letter to the French Orientalist Antoine-Leon de Chezy, in October 1830: “The first time I became aware of this unfathomable work, it aroused in me such an enthusiasm, it attracted me so much, that I did not cease studying it, indeed, even felt impelled to take on the impossible task of adapting it for the German stage, even though inadequately.”

*Sakuntala* had been partially translated in Russia as early as 1792 by Nikolai Karamzin, who aligned himself with Goethe and Herder in proclaiming the Indian play a classic that should be accorded the same place in the history of Western culture as Homer’s works. Karamzin’s translation was followed by numerous translations in Russia throughout the course of the nineteenth century culminating with the first Russian translation from Sanskrit in 1879 by the linguist Aleksei Putiata.
Ivanov’s Dionysian Theater of the Future

A symbolist of the “second wave” and an influential theoretician of Symbolism, Viacheslav Ivanov’s philosophical and aesthetic world-view was informed by his deep and abiding interest in classical antiquity. Ivanov discussed the crisis in contemporary theater and suggested solutions consonant with his interest in Greek antiquity.25

Like the majority of his fellow symbolists, Ivanov too agreed that there was need for a new theater: “. . . it is impossible to overlook the widespread craving for another, as yet unrevealed theater. This indeterminate and mute craving is accompanied by an equally indeterminate and mute dissatisfaction with the existing theater.”26 According to Ivanov, modern drama – even the best – did not provide the all-important effect of catharsis. For example, in Ibsen’s theater of “oppressive closeness,” argued Ivanov, “the electricity of unexpected energy accumulates and a few purgative thunderclaps break in demonic splendor, without, however, clearing the atmosphere of its ominous tension.”27 Maeterlinck’s mysteries led spectators into labyrinthine recesses without providing a key to them. It was the “aesthetic dullness” of modern spectators that allowed them to witness tragedies such as Maeterlinck’s “Je crache sur toi, monstre!” without “seeking healing resolution”28. The significance of catharsis lay in its ability to bring individuals together by opening them up to a shared reality that would eventually lead to total communication and an all-pervading sense of community.

Aesthetic issues were only part of the crisis in Ivanov’s view. Whereas Valerii Briusov was largely concerned with the resolution of aesthetic problems in contemporary
theater, Ivanov represented the second generation of Russian symbolists who were concerned with physical issues in particular, with a transformation of life.

For the future theater, Ivanov called for a return to the Dionysian Theater of ancient Greece, where the choral element would be predominant. There would be two choruses: a smaller chorus resembling the ones in the tragedies of Aeschylus. This smaller chorus would be directly linked to the action of the play. The larger chorus would be an important part of this theater and would serve as the “receptacle for the incessant creativity of the communal orgiastic consciousness.” This chorus would symbolize the entire community of the spectators and these would participate in the play during moments of heightened interest, marked by “full liberation of Dionysian energies.”

This grand chorus would be acting “with the collective authority of the community it represents.” In order to create appropriate space for such a theater, Ivanov proposed a return to the amphitheaters of ancient Greece where there would be no “floodlights” separating the spectators from the actors. He envisioned a rounded floor at the center of the amphitheater that would be cleared for choral dance and would be accessible to the audience equally from all sides.

As Richard Bird points out, Ivanov’s concern with the theater and its future were clearly not just aesthetic, that the consequences of the transformation of life that he expected that a new theater would bring were extra-aesthetic: “Ivanov’s aesthetic goal of shared catharsis merges with a social goal of spontaneous democracy.” In what seems to be a version of “sobornost,” Ivanov hails the choric dance as the state in which “will be finally solved the problem of the mingling of actors and onlookers in one organic body.” For Ivanov this “great communion of all within the theater walls” meant the existence of
real political freedom where the choric voice of the masses would represent “an authentic referendum of the true will of the people.” Ivanov’s vision included such theaters of choral tragedies and comedies to become the cornerstone of national self-determination.

SILVER AGE THEATER AND THE EAST

Aleksandr Tairov and Kalidasa

Aleksandr Tairov was a young Russian director who felt the need to create a new kind of theater. He had worked with both Stanislavsky and Meierkhold and was dissatisfied with the “naturalism” of the former and its antithesis, the plastic theater of the latter. He had even briefly decided to give up theater, because he felt that, “[J]oy and youth have renounced the theatre, because, instead of wonderful flights into the fantastic regions of the impossible, it struggles weakly in the snares of naturalistic banality or, wingless, drags itself about among the anemic, decadent conventions of formalism.”

Tairov wanted to create a “synthetic” theater that would harmoniously blend various forms of performing arts – mime, ballet, music – in its dramatic works. Tairov who was close to the Russian symbolists Bal’mont, Briusov and Bal’trushaitis, found the play that would answer his criteria in Kalidasa’s Sakuntala. Bal’mont, who was translating the play in 1912-1913 had suggested it to Tairov, who readily accepted the idea of trying it out.

Tairov opened his new directorial venture, the Kamernyi Teatr in 1914 in Moscow with Sakuntala to introduce his new “synthetic” theater and as a strong personal
statement in his ongoing polemics with both Stanislavsky and Meierkhol’d. Tairov not only took the plot of the Indian play, but also adapted and employed several dramatic techniques from the ancient Indian dramatic treatise — Bharata’s *Natyashastra*. Both Tairov himself and theater critics have pointed out that the influence of Indian dramatic techniques continued throughout his career. Tairov seems to have approached the text with a remarkable lack of preconceived notions about the “exotic” orient. For him, *Sakuntala* was exactly what Kalidasa had intended it to be – a play.

Tairov studied the *Natyashastra* for his production and employed it as an important theoretical base for creating his “synthetic” theater. The *Natyashastra* includes minute analyses of extant Sanskrit plays along with instructions for their staging, the construction of the theatrical premises where they should be performed, costumes, techniques for evoking the right audience response and other information which Tairov found very useful. It served a two-fold purpose for Tairov: Firstly, it provided him with an opportunity to, distance himself from the methods of contemporary theater. Secondly, the Oriental play in conjunction with the dramatic treatise also seemed to provide answers for the kind of theater he was looking for.

A chief concern for Tairov was what he called scenic space, which for him was a kind of space in which his actors could perform freely. He wanted to free his stage from the extravagantly painted backdrops, characteristic of the dominant *Mir Iskusstva* (*World of Art*) art movement, which overshadowed the actors till they became mere “picturesque blemishes” as Tairov expressed it. The *Natyashastra* seemed to provide an acceptable answer. Props should not crowd the stage space, according to the treatise. In fact, props were virtually absent in ancient Indian drama. It was the actor’s responsibility, with the
help of the rules provided in the *Natyashastra*, to delineate the space he was performing in, through facial expression and hand gestures, body movement, as well as dialog. This suited Tairov, who wanted to create “a scenic atmosphere in which the lord of the stage, the actor, could create his art freely- an atmosphere which would not swallow up, but would rather vivify, the rhythmic alterations of forms as they unfolded . . .” 33 It seemed that the creative partnership of Tairov and Pavel Kuznetsov, the young and upcoming painter he chose for creating his sets would be ideal, since he had recently exhibited his paintings of Central Asia and seemed to understand Asia.

One area of his production of *Sakuntala* where Tairov was satisfied was the costumes for the play; the *Natyashastra* served as the source of inspiration for Tairov. It was as if one of Tairov’s basic truths i.e. that “the costumes must fit the actor and not vice versa.” found an echo in the ancient treatise. The most interesting technique Tairov used from the *Natyashastra*, was to paint the half naked bodies of actors in different colors ranging from peach to black, based on the character’s rank: “. . . happy characters wore light colors while . . . folk and servants appeared in dark skin colors.” And, “[f]urther [Tairov’s] notes indicate ‘aristocratic women in light color, king, painted in gold, like old ivory, women’s soles and toes, red.’” 34 According to Tairov: “[T]he naked painted bodies of the actors, moving in free rhythm, were a far cry from the artificially set bas-reliefs of the stylized theater” (referring to Meierkhol’d ’s theater) and that it “emancipated the actor and gave him more opportunity to achieve genuine emotionally saturated form.” 35

Unlike many Europeans engaged in Orientalist discourse, Tairov did not want to exoticize his Oriental project and did not perpetuate and recycle the stereotypical images.
of India from the past. Tairov achieved a fine balance between using the Indian drama as a powerful argument in his polemics with his theatrical rivals, and negotiating meaning with the Indian literary text. This successful synthesis of Tairov’s own ideas with the theatrical and dramatic conventions outlined in the classical Indian drama treatise from around the fourth century A.D. seemed to bridge the temporal and cultural distance between the Russian director and the Indian play.

The most important meeting ground for both Tairov’s synthetic theater and the treatise on Indian drama was the role of the spectator. In both these systems, the spectator was expected to be just that – a spectator. Unlike some contemporary theatrical experiments where the physical distance between the stage and the audience was removed, –Tairov and Kalidasa’s – staging posited a spectator, who was physically distanced from the actor’s stage. The main purpose of the elaborate preparation in Indian drama was to evoke an emotional response, or rasa, from the audience. So also, it seemed was the case with Tairov. The director did not require the spectator to participate “actively” in Dionysian choral dances, but wanted him to view it “creatively.”

Tairov’s “Eastern” solution demonstrated that he was a cultural mediator par excellence, who was able to “translate” the ancient Indian classic into a modern theatrical language that could be understood and appreciated by a modern Russian audience.36
Bal'mont's Answer to the Crisis in Contemporary Theater

Bal'mont on the Crisis of Contemporary Theater

Bal'mont agreed with the rest of the symbolists that contemporary theater was facing a crisis and needed a totally new vision. In his article, “Slovo o Kalidase” (“About Kalidasa,” 1914?) Bal'mont wrote that contemporary European and Russian theater presented the human soul in a distorted manner. The poet, who considered harmonious wholeness to be the keystone to Beauty, wrote in the epigraph to this article, Bal'mont wrote:

Malo krikov. Nuzhno stroino,
Garmonicheski rydat'.
Nado deistvovat' spokoino
I krasivy li sozdat'.

It is not enough to shout and scream. There must be
Graceful, harmonious wailing.
Acting calmly, one must create
A beautiful image.

Like Briusov, Bal'mont described the “crisis” as one that had engulfed Russia and Europe: “Ia govoriu, chto evropeiskie narody, i s nimi my, russy, medlim i utopаем в zhalkoi oshibke, v upriamstve zabludivsheisia dushi, nepremenno khotiashchei videt' bez kontsa v dramaticheskom izobrazhenii svoi iskazhennyi lik, soiu khot', svoiu krov', svoiu
revnost' svoiu razvorvannost'” (“I say that European peoples and, with them, we Russians are dawdling and drowning in fatal mistakes, we are stubbornly lost souls, demanding to see without fail again and again, its own distorted face, its own desire, its own blood, envy and fragmentedness”). Thus the crisis in contemporary theater was characterized by an obsession with the (European) self and its many shortcomings.

This self-representation on stage was harmful in Bal’mont’s opinion for he set store by a “mystical dogma,” according to which the spectator was transformed by what he witnessed on stage, leading Bal’mont to the assertion that the spectator becomes what he sees. And as Bal'mont saw it, contemporary theater was characterized by facelessness (“bezóbraznost””) and ugly disarray (“bezobráznost”). It presented its spectators a rehash of old dramatic material that dealt with issues long since resolved (“krovavo-zhalkoe star'e”[“pitiful old-hat”]), problems that already had their solutions – at least as stage problems. The theater's repertoire was based on historical material that had become trite (“do kontsa iznoshennyi”) and an uninspired portrayal of byt.

This state of affairs meant that theater was underestimating the potential of the human soul (i.e., of the spectator), “kakoe ushchemlenie chelovecheskoj dushi, kakoe nedostoinoe zamedlenie v poluzhivotnykh predvaritel'nostiakh istinno chelovecheskogo sushchestvovaniia” (“...what an insult to the human soul, what an unworthy preservation of the semi-bestial preliminaries of human existence”).

Bal’mont bases many of his ideas on drama on the position of the English poet P.B. Shelley as expressed in his famous article, “A Defense of Poetry” (written 1821, published 1840). Shelley’s words had attained an urgent poignancy in contemporary times, according to Bal’mont. In particular, his assertion that the Athenian society of
ancient Greece was the only epoch in the history of “our race” (“nashei rasy”) that saw and portrayed the divine in man. What made this epoch so unique was its poetic ethos: "No tol'ko poèziia – v forme, v deistvii, v iazyke, – tol'ko ona odna sdelala ètu èpokhu bolee dostopamiatnoi, chem vse drugie . . .” (“But only poetry – in form, in action, in language, – only poetry made this epoch more memorable than all others . . .”).

Bal'mont further cited Shelley, that it was in ancient Greek culture that theater was able to achieve a synthesis of various performing arts – dance, music, rhetoric and religious institutions – to create the ideal drama, which in turn resulted in a complete experience (“tsel'noe vpechatlenie”) for the spectator, inspiring sublime passions in him.

Unlike this ideal theater of the past, contemporary theater had forgotten the art of achieving synthesis between different performing arts and had lost the religious element that was an integral part of classical Greek drama. Further quoting Shelley, Bal’mont wrote that the contemporary stage showcased tragedy without music, and music and dance without the “lofty impersonations” and “both without religion and solemnity;” religious elements had simply been banished from the stage.

The crisis in theater, then, in Bal’montian terms can be summarized as characterized by the following: 1) absence of harmony and beauty 2) lack of synthesis between different art forms and the spirit of religion, 3) lack of a poetic ethos in dramatic art, and 4) underestimation of the spectator's potential. While agreeing in principle with Shelley that ancient Greek drama was a possible prototype for the ideal drama, Bal'mont, however, did not consider the choice of Classical Greece as a source of inspiration for himself. Even though Greek and Roman antiquity had been the peak of European civilization, this did not mean they marked the peak of world civilization. As already
discussed in chapter two, for Bal'mont, ancient Greece and Rome were not truly ancient civilizations, he saw them as over-exposed and over-studied by Europe, “[i]a vizhu v nikh [v grecheskikh i rimskikh pisateliakh] vestnykh, pereizvestnykh, povtornost'iu beznadezhno zatertykh, davno voshedshikh v Evropeiskuiu zhizn' i bezvozvratno ischerpannykh . . . podrazhatelei” (“[I] see in them [ancient Greek and Roman philosophers] imitators that are well known, too well-known, and that have become hopelessly faded; they are a part of European life that has been irretrievably depleted . . .”).45

Having delineated the problems of contemporary theater, Bal'mont conceived of a theater of the future that would have the following features: 1) It would be called Teatr Iunosti i Krasoty (Theater of Youth and Beauty) 2) the spectator would be called upon to participate creatively in the theater i.e, experience rasa 3) Synthesis would be the cornerstone of this theater 4) The theater would strive towards “idealism” i.e, present characters that are ideal types, 5) There would be an attempt to commune with the "World of gods" (" chtob cheloveku bog byl dvoinikom"), 6) the ideal playwright would be a poet.

In looking for models of drama for inspiration to help formulate the ideal theater of the future, Bal'mont considered Shakespeare, Calderon, Ibsen, Materlinck, before finally locating, in the ancient Indian playwright Kalidasa, all the features he had imagined for his ideal theater.
Shakespeare's Shortcomings

Shakespeare evoked ambiguous reactions in Bal’mont. He admired Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Macbeth*, but objected to his *Hamlet* and *Othello*. In the last, Bal’mont saw an absence of important qualities and Shakespeare came across as ethically harmful and aesthetically clumsy (“chelovecheski-tiazhelovesen i khudozhestvenno-vreden”). *Othello* was, in fact, a savagely revolting play (“zverinno-otvratitel’nyi”). Shakespeare had committed an unpardonable error in the symbolist’s eyes: he revealed too much, instead of relying on the power of suggestion; naturalism had superseded harmony.

According to Bal’mont, Shakespeare was “harmful for here he was like a doctor whose vulgar touch poked at the painful spot and having disturbed it during his examination, completely dislodged it in the end.”46 Shakespeare’s works lacked the harmony that was an integral part of Bal’mont’s concept of the ideal drama. According to Bal’mont, the English playwright’s shortcomings included insufficient attention to philosophical questions. In this he compared unfavorably with the ancient Greeks: “. . . neosporimo, chto samo iskusstvo nikogda ne bylo ponimaemo i osushchestviamo [by Shekspirom] kak soglasno s istinnoi filosofiei tak, kak éto bylo v Afinakh . . .” (“. . . it is difficult to argue with the fact that art was never understood and realized [by Shakespeare] in a way that agreed with true philosophy, as was the case in Athens. . .”).47

There were secrets that must be hidden from the reader and spectator, Bal’mont declared. They must be hidden not in a “small secret box” (“malyi tainik skryvatel’stva”)
but must be sent away to mirror-like distances (“otodvinuty v glubokuiu zerkal’nuiu
dal’”). Thus, the writer or playwright must not reveal everything and the unrevealed or
the hidden must serve as a “warning” just as the hidden depths of a quagmire is a warning
not to enter it. In characteristically poetic prose Bal’mont suggests an alternative:
“uvidennye dolzhny byt’ nastol’ko preobrazheny ètoi zerkal’nost’iu, chtob krasivoe i
zhutkoe èto koldovanie, ne oskverniaia dushu grubost’iu . . . pugalo ee, no takzhe i
obogashchalo . . .” (“that which is revealed must be transformed to such an extent by this
mirror-like state, that this beautiful and horrifying . . . sorcery would terrify the soul and
yet at the same time enrich it . . .”). 48 Most importantly, the poet and playwright should
never corrupt the soul with any vulgar “material touch” (“ne oskverniaia dushu grubost’iu
veschestvennogo prikosnoveniia”).

Drawing upon Shelley’s comparison of Shakespeare and Calderon (discussed
below), Bal’mont agreed that the Spanish playwright had succeeded where Shakespeare
had failed and, according to Shelley: “Calderon in his religious Autos49 has attempted to
fulfil (sic!) some of the high conditions of dramatic representation neglected by
Shakespeare; such as the establishing [of] a relation between the drama and religion.”50
Calderon’s drama also had elements of dance and music, elements that Shakespearean
drama seemed to lack, “Kal’deron v svoikh religioznykh deistvakh pytalsia osushchetvit’
nekotorye iz vysokikh uslovii dramaticeskogo izobrazheniia, oboidennykh Shekspirom.
Tak on ustanovil otnosheniia mezhdu dramoi i religiei i prisposobil ikh k muzyke i
tantsam . . .” (“Calderon in his religious plays tried to realize some of the highest
conditions of dramatic portrayal that were ignored by Shakespeare. Thus he established
the relationship between drama and religion and adapt them to music and dance . . .”).51
A playwright who definitely interested Bal'mont, was the Spanish writer Pedro Calderon de la Barca (1600-81), who had been discovered for Russia by Dmitrii Merezhkovskii. His play *Vozvrasheniie k prirode*, *(Return to Nature)* written in 1897, was an adaptation of Calderon's play, *Life is a Dream* (1636). Bal’mont’s interest was more long lasting than that of his fellow-symbolist: he translated six of Calderon's plays and dwelt at length in his criticism on the Spanish playwright's *Life is a Dream* as it dealt with aesthetic and philosophical questions that were of particular interest to him.

In his article on Calderon's *Life is a Dream*, “Kal’deronovskaia drama lichnosti” (“Calderon’s Drama of Individualism,” 1904), Bal'mont characterized the Spanish writers as the most universal among Spanish writers who was at the same time the “most Spanish” of them all (“muy español, españolísimo”). Calderon was a realist like Lope de Vega, had the sparkling wit of Cervantes, the “tragic stance” of Tirso de Molina, the “demonism” of Louis Belmonte and while other Spanish writers had their specific individual talents, Calderon had them all. Having all these qualities meant that Calderon had the “harmonious wholeness of multi-voiced moods” (“garmonicheskaia polnota mnogozvuchnykh nastroenii”).

Calderon's play is set in a fantastic Poland and presents the story of Segismundo, the heir to the Polish King Basilio. Prior to Segismundo's birth, astrologers predict that the prince would grow up to be a tyrant and would conquer his father. Upon his birth, Basilio informs his subjects that his son was stillborn and incarcerates him in a tower. Later on Basilio decides to test the prophecy and to free Segismundo for a day with the
following caveat: if Segismundo deports himself in a benign manner, he will be set free and become the ruler; if not, he would be re-imprisoned and would be told that his day on the throne was but a dream. Segismundo ascends the throne for the day and is anything but a benign ruler: he is involved in several violent encounters and is finally reincarcerated and even comes close to killing his father, the King, and his tutor.

He also falls in love first with one princess and is ready to challenge a rival prince in an attempt to win her affection. When his first attempt does not succeed, he readily falls in love a second time and attempts to court her over her protests. Clotaldo, Segismundo’s tutor protects the princess (Rosaura) from his ward’s advances only to be threatened by him. Next, Segismundo begins fighting a duel with Astolfo, who is defending Clotaldo from Segismundo’s attacks. Finally, he is given a sedative and when he awakens, his tutor Clotaldo tells Segismundo that all this glory, power and “sweetness of love” was but a dream.

Clotaldo reprimands Segismundo saying that even in his dreams, he should have treated his tutor differently. Clotaldo points out that he had raised Segismundo with love and gentleness and warned him that the good deeds done by a person would live for an eternity even if they were done in sleep.

In response to Clotaldo’s admonition, the imprisoned Segismundo undergoes a transformation. From a wrathful prince, he becomes a self-denying, "desire-quenching" sage. Segismundo had gone though all the human passions (“strasti”) and his “soul was tired” (“dusha ego ustala”), like the soul of an “Indian sage,” Bal’mont declared. His response to Clotaldo’s words is: “remarkable, as a brilliant formula of the illusory quality
Segismundo surmises that life on earth is but a dream, in Bal’mont’s translation, Segismundo says:

On prav. Tak sderzhim zhe svirepost’,
I chestoliubie ukrotim,
I obuzdaem nashe buistvo, –
Ved’ my byt’ mozhet tol’ko spim.
Da, tol’ko spim, poka my v mire
Stol’ neobychnom, chto dlia nas –
Zhit’ znachit spat’, byt’ v ètoi zhizni –
Zhit’ snovideniem kazhdyi chas.\(^{52}\)

He is right. Let us then restrain the fierceness,
And tame ambition,
And rein in our intemperance, –
For perhaps we are just asleep.
Yes, just asleep, while we are in a world
So unusual, that for us –
To live means to sleep, to be in this life –
Is to live dreamlike every hour.

Declaring life to be “madness” and a “mistake,” Segismundo concludes that his incarceration was also a dream. However, he had already been drawn into the “whirlpool of life” and would have to complete the entire cycle, Bal’mont comments. Soon the royal soldiers discover the truth of the king’s treachery and approach Segismundo with the
proposal to wrest control of power with their help. His newly found insight about the illusoriness of life leads him to reject the soldiers as phantoms.

However, Segismundo is convinced to take action when one of the soldiers points out that his earlier dream must have been a portent of events to come. He decides to “sleep with greater attentiveness” and forge ahead keeping in mind the realization that he would have to awaken from this bliss at the best moment. (“No budem grezit’ – ponimaia/ Chto my ot ètogo blazhenstva/ Dolzhny prosnut’ sia v luchshii mig;” [“But we will dream/ Understanding that from this bliss/ We must wake up in the best moment”]). Thus, Segismundo defeats the king and upon assuming power, surprises everyone by his calm wisdom. He does not take revenge on his enemies and quells the unrest. To those who question his behavior, he replies that he has learned from his dream and is afraid that he could awaken any minute to find himself enclosed in prison walls again.

Reacting to Segismundo’s conversion in the play, Bal’mont concludes that the prince had decided to live by thought rather than passion: “Thus Segsimundo comes to believe in the necessity of strictly thoughtful life, dedicated to the good of others and to the belief in the illusoriness (“prizrachnost”’) of our passions.” Summarizing Calderon's philosophical position, Bal’mont wrote that: “Po predstavleniiu Kal’derona, v mire chuvstva my idem ot rabstva k rabstvu, i, poka ne podchinim nashi strasti soznaniu, my zhalkie nevol’niki v mire, prizraki pod vlast’iu prividenii” (“According to Calderon, we move from one state of slavery to another, and, so long as we do not subjugate our passions to our consciousness, we are pitiful prisoners in the world”).
According to Martin Bidney, Bal'mont believed that Segismundo's transformation was modeled on the life of the Buddha. Bidney points out that in his introduction to a volume of translations of Calderon’s plays, Bal'mont cites European scholars of Calderon, who had established that Calderon was inspired by the story of Buddha. In particular, Calderon had studied his predecessor, Lope de Vega's, *Barlan y Josafa* (*Varlaam and Josaphat, early- to mid-seventeenth century*?), a traveling legend based on the Buddha’s story.55

In addition to the influence of the Buddha story, Bal’mont saw the Spanish playwright anticipating the ideas expressed by the Russian theosophist, Elena Blavatsky in her so-called treatise on Indian Wisdom, *Golos molchaniia* (*Voice of the Silence, 1889*). Quoting a lengthy passage from Madame Blavatsky's treatise, Bal'mont points out that the two texts, Calderon's and Blavatsky's share many components: most importantly, both texts ultimately aim at denying the concept of individualism.56 Both texts also emphasize the concept of *maya*, or “earthly illusion,” and call for human beings to renounce passions and practice self-denial.

Characterizing Blavatsky’s *Voice of the Silence* as a “typical example of Indian Wisdom,” Bal’mont concludes that the central tenet of Blavatsky’s theosophical doctrine was identical (“slivaiutsia do tozhdestva”) with Calderon’s, namely that the “I of the matter” (“‘Ia’ materii”) and the “I of the spirit” (“‘Ia’ dukha”) could never meet and that one of these would have to be eliminated from human existence. In other words, both Calderon and Blavatsky contend that, “passions work as enslaving forces, they originate
from darkness, not light, and they must be conquered in order to become part of the
Eternal Source of all Life, and in order to repose in a place of peace, and to not know
pain.”

“Isn’t there another solution to this question – from this question that brings such
anxiety to us all about our fate on earth?” Bal’mont continues, and provides his solution.
Positioning himself philosophically opposite both Blavatsky and Calderon, he insists that
earthly life has both philosophical and concrete value and rejects the path of total
renunciation. He polemicises with their too “Buddhist” stance. Life is not a dream, reality
exists and it is cowardice and tiredness of the spirit that cause some to deny its existence.

In other words, Bal'mont proposes the aesthetics of harmonious balance between
pain and pleasure, self-denial and self-affirmation, renunciation and excess, calling upon
his readers to embrace both. Bidney sees the aesthetic position that emerges in
Bal’mont’s critique as an Apollonian-Dionysian conflict – synthesis, in an East-West
version. Bal'mont is a universalizing symbolist visionary, who combined the Eastern
position of Calderon (that of renunciation) and the poet's own Western, Nietzschean
aesthetic of Intensity, and his cult of the moment.

It must be pointed out that Bal’mont’s essay on Calderon was written much
earlier than the experiences that helped deepen his knowledge of India: his journey to
India and his encounter with the French Indologist Sylvain Levi. At the time of writing
this article, Bal’mont erroneously refers to Blavatsky’s treatise as a “typical example of
Indian wisdom.” It becomes clear on studying Bal’mont’s oeuvre, as well as following
the evolution of his cultural philosophy that his understanding and perception of India included much more than the theosophical and Buddhist notion of the primacy of self-denial in Indian philosophy. Rather, he saw India as a synthesis of both – the Buddhist and the Brahmanical – ways of life.

Ibsen, Maeterlinck and Nietzsche

Another dramatist that Bal’mont studied attentively was the Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen whom he considered a genius. Ibsen had been a source of Bal'mont's inspiration to Bal’mont from his school days and that admiration continued till much later Bal’mont encountered Ibsen during one of his visits to Scandinavia. Recalling this event of “meteoric magnitude,” Bal’mont later wrote that he saw Ibsen walking in the distance, the “real, live Henrik Ibsen.”

. . . [I]a byl v Khristianii i v iarkom svete letnego dnia uvidel – kak videnie – Genrikha Ibsena, zhivogo, nastoiashchego Genrika Ibeta, kotorym ia vokhishchalia i kotorogo izuchal eshshe s gimnazicheskikh dnei. On proshel blizko peredo mnoiu po trotuaru, ia imel vozmozhnost’, sluchainuiiu, podoiti k nemu i zagovorit’, no on byl takoi osobennyi, tak nepokhozhii na kogo-libo iz liudei, chto serdtse moe zamerlo v blazhenstve, i mne ne nuzhno bylo podkhodit’ k nemu. Ia videl ego, kak mnogo pozdnee uvidel, odnazhdy, v Provanse, padenie bolida – v shirokom svete nebesnoi neozhidannosti. Est’ videniia, kotorye nasysshchait’ dushu srazu, vne radosti osiazaniia i prikosnoveniia.
... [I] was in Christiania and saw in the bright light of the day – as if in a vision, the real, live Henrik Ibsen, whom I had admired since my days in the gymnasium. He walked in front of me on the sidewalk and I had the opportunity, quite by coincidence, to approach him and talk with him, but he was so extraordinary, so unlike anyone else, that my heart froze in bliss and I no longer felt the need to walk up to him. Seeing him was similar to another encounter I had later in Provence – I saw the falling of a meteor– in the expansive light of heavenly unexpectedness. There are such visions that saturate your soul instantly and that transcend the pleasure of sight and touch.  

His admiration for Ibsen notwithstanding, Bal’mont felt that his work was in need of greater inner –non-theatrical – substance. One source he considered as a potential one for cultural “enrichment,” but later rejected, was Nietzsche. In 1894, on returning from his trip to Scandinavia, Bal’mont wrote, “Lichno dla menia filosof ‘Zaratustry’ ne byl vlastitelem dum, no ia ispytal ego moguchee vliianie let 25-26, kogda, vozvrashchajus’ iz Stokgol’ma, uvlechennyi Ibsenom, chuvstvoval neobkhodimost’ vnutrennego dopolnenia ego kem-to” (“Personally for me the philosopher of Zaratustra was not a source of inspiration, but I did experience his powerful influence at age 25-26 when on my return from Scandinavia, enchanted with Ibsen, I [nevertheless] felt the need for someone to complement him internally”). Having changed his mind about who should complement Ibsen philosophically, Bal'mont however persisted in his view that something was lacking in Ibsen's work.
One reason Ibsen was not the ideal playwright in Bal'mont's eyes, was that the Norwegian seemed to have lost the connection with his mythical ancestors, the Vikings. For Bal'mont, this meant that Ibsen did not have an organic connection to valuable dramatic resources: his nation's mythology: “Kogda drevnie skandinavskie geroi padali v bitve porazhennyye vernym udarom, oni peli, umiraia, i proiznosili zakliatiia. Èto bylo v te dni, kogda ikh chuvstva nakhodili vyrazhenie v sozdaniakh skal’dov, a ne v bol’nykh dramakh poèta razdvoeniiia, kak Genrik Ibsen” (“When the ancient Scandinavian heroes fell in battle, struck by a precise blow, they sang while dying and pronounced curses. This was in those days when they were still Vikings and their feelings found expression in the creations of the Skalds [their poets], and not in the sick dramas of the poets of schizophrenia, such as Henrik Ibsen”).

Moreover, Ibsen had not been able to find the answer to the isolated condition of the contemporary European individual. In Ibsen’s dramas, which Bal’mont characterized as panoramas “cold and full of animosity” (“kholodn[ye] i poln[ye] vrazhdebnosti panoram[y]”), the reader and spectator is assaulted by feelings of impending death. The desolate and pathetic protagonists of “Rosmersholm” and “The Wild Duck” are unbearably lonely. This condition of utter loneliness was characteristic of all Ibsen’s lead characters, such as Hedda Gabler, Solness and Oswald. Bal’mont extends this notion of isolated individuals, living in a fragmented world to Ibsen’s own life: inspite of his worldwide fame, the great Scandinavian playwright led a life of isolation.

The Belgian playwright Maeterlinck was very popular among Russian symbolists for his plays of “semi-allusions” and “semi-happenings.” Bal’mont had been asked by Stanislavsky to translate his play, “The Blue Bird” for the Moscow Art Theater and
during the process Bal’mont paid him a visit. Bal’mont, who like other symbolists believed in “life-creation” (“zhiznetvorchestvo”) where the poet’s life was treated as an extension of his lyrical persona, was unprepared for the unpleasant impression the meeting would leave in his mind. Maeterlinck, the man, turned out to be not at all like Maeterlinck, the writer, should have been in Bal’mont’s perception. Bal’mont was dismayed that Maeterlinck was more engrossed in his collection of automobile memorabilia than in his Russian translator. Bal'mont was understandably disappointed for the Belgian playwright’s interests were too mundane for his lofty vision of the poet and not at all inspiring.63

Bal’mont’s rejection of Maeterlinck’s aesthetics did not stem from the above-mentioned personal encounter alone. In his tellingly titled article on Maeterlinck’s poetics, “Taina odinochestva i smerti. O tvorchestve Mèterlinka” (“The Secret of Solitude and Death: About the Art of Maeterlinck”), Bal’mont points to the poetics of loneliness and death that characterize the works of Ibsen, Hauptmann, and Maeterlinck. “Oshchushchenie Smerti i vnutrennego Odinochestva khorosho znakomy kazhdomu khudozhniku i kazhdomu tonko-chuvstviushchemu cheloveku, no ono sdelalos’ kak by lozungom sovremennogo khudozhestvennogo tvorchestva. Èto oshchushchenie, v dramaticheskoi форме, osobenno iarko vyrazilos’ u trekh krupnykh pisatelei – Ibsena, Gauptmana i Meterlinka, i u poslednego iz trekh ono dostiglo svoei kristallizatsiei . . .” (“The feeling of Death and inner Loneliness is well known to each artist and to each sensitive person, but it has became a motto of contemporary artistic creation. This
Maeterlinck’s poetics of loneliness in Bal’mont’s view, stemmed from a malaise that had infected all of Western European culture. The European “I” had lost its connection to the Universal Whole (“Mirovoe Tseloe”); Western man had become blinded by his mistaken notion of being creature granted but one life. So caught up was the Western European imagination in these anxieties about the shortness of existence and absoluteness of death that it was unable to find its way back to a harmonious synthesis with the Cosmos; the heart of Western man was plunged in the darkness and uncertainty of Chaos that seemed to him the only reality. There was a way out of this “zabluzhdenie” (misconception), though neither Maeterlinck, nor any other Western playwright had found it.

_Tri Rassveta (Three Blossomings)_

Before embarking on a survey of renowned playwrights from antiquity to the renaissance and from the Baroque to Modernism, Bal'mont wrote a play, _Tri Rassveta (Three Blossomings)_ in 1904, around the same time he was studying and translating Calderon's plays. It was the first "mystery-play" to be produced on the Russian stage and although Bal’mont never asserted that it was to serve as a model for what drama should be, it seems reasonable to assume that this must have been the case. _Tri Rassveta_ was staged in St. Petersburg's _Theater of Dionysus_ and the performance of the play was
declared a failure. According to George Kalbouss, Bal'mont's play had the “dubious honor” of both opening and closing the theatrical enterprise.66

An allegorical play, *Tri Rassveta* presents a Female Force (Elena) searching for a compatible Male Force. The play has three acts: each act corresponds to a particular phase of the female figure's search. In the first act, she meets Youth (“Iunosha,” symbolizing young love), in the second she meets Lover (“Liubiashchii,” symbolizing erotic love) and in the third act, she meets Poet (symbolizing philosophical or cosmic love). The Poet is her obvious choice of a mate. One reason Bal'mont's play was a failure, as Kalbouss points out, was its obscure system of referents which did not work in the case of an allegory. The poet's imagery does not communicate its message clearly. Kalbouss rightly points out that often the results prove unintentionally comic rather than tragic and provides the example of the scene depicting the death of Youth. Elena sends Youth to fetch a white lily for her. He accidentally falls into the pond while reaching for the flower and drowns.

The drowning takes place offstage while Elena recounts it to the audience in the following passage:

Pauza — “On upal!”  
Dlitel'naia pauza. Elena vypriamliaetsia; kak by vyrostaet, i otrvashchaetsia ot obryva, — “Utonul. Ia tak i znala.” 67
Elena: “He is bending towards the Water. He is stretching, stretching. He will touch the flower any minute now. He is on a slippery shore. He is slipping. He has touched the flower – Ah!” Pause – “He has fallen!” Long pause. Elena straightens up; it’s as if she is growing, and she turns away from the precipice – “He has drowned. I knew this would happen.”

Bal'mont never wrote another play and, according to Kalbouss, “the lessons learned from the attempt might have guided other symbolists, notably Blok and Sologub, around his mistakes in their allegories, *Song of Fate* and *Love Above the Abyss.*”

The play's failure notwithstanding, it is useful to note that Bal'mont's first and only attempt at producing an example of his ideal *Teatr Iunosti i Krasoty* underscored the following features: 1) A poet as a central figure, 2) striving to transcend earthly existence (Elena and the poet are “dead to the people of the earth,”) 3) an attempt to avoid portrayal of byt, 4) instead there is a portrayal of an “other-worldly” ideal place (that is near mountains reminiscent of the “cup from which Indian Gods drink”), 5) the triumph of love and beauty.

Bal'mont continued his search for the ideal drama that would help bring into clearer focus his ideas for the future theater, the Theater of Youth and Beauty, even after abandoning dramaturgy himself. His search would end a few years after his work on *Tri Rassveta* and after his translations and critique of Calderon. And most importantly, Bal’mont found his ideal model after his meeting with the French Indologist, Sylvain Levi. Earlier, in 1904, Bal'mont's understanding of India was largely based on the
publications of the Theosophical Society of London (in particular, the works of Elena Blavatsky) and the works of the German Orientalist Max Mueller.

As discussed above in the section on Calderon, Bal'mont came to disagree with the position of Blavatsky as stated in her treatise *The Voice of the Silence*. Bal'mont at first characterized Blavatsky's work – inaccurately – as a typical example of Indian Wisdom. Bal'mont's meeting with Levi in France (probably in 1912) and his later journey to India in 1913, brought about a deepening and broadening in the poet's perception and understanding of India. It was there that Bal’mont found a playwright and a play that would come very close to satisfying his criteria of the ideal drama.

**THE IDEAL DRAMA**

As has been mentioned earlier, Bal’mont delineated problems of contemporary theater in his many articles on various canonical European playwrights mentioned earlier in which he simultaneously proposed a model of the ideal future theater. The main features of Bal'mont’s theater of the future were: 1) The theater of the future would be the *Theater of Youth and Beauty* (youth and beauty with capitalized letters) 2) The spectator and performer would be in communion, 3) Synthesis of various art forms would be the cornerstone of this theater 4) The theater would strive towards “idealism” i.e, present characters that are ideal types, 5) There would be an attempt to commune with the “World of Gods”; and 6) the ideal playwright would be a poet.

Bal’mont’s search for the ideal drama ended with his discovery of Kalidasa, an ancient Indian playwright (IV –V century A.D). The discovery of Kalidasa should be
seen as a natural by-product of Bal’mont’s long-standing interest in Indian culture. Bal’mont was not unique in turning his attention to Kalidasa, whose works were first introduced to Western Europe by the British Orientalist, Sir William Jones, at the end of the eighteenth century. Bal’mont was aware of the enormous interest shown in Jones’s body of work in Europe particularly by literary greats such as Goethe and Herder.70

Knowledge of Kalidasa and his works was evident in Russia as early as the end of the eighteenth century. Karamzin had translated four acts of Kalidasa's play, *Sakuntala* in 1792; several other translations of *Sakuntala* and Kalidasa’s other plays as well as other works of classical Indian literature and drama had appeared in Russian periodicals throughout the nineteenth century.71 Some examples include Merezhkovskii’s translation of Kalidasa's *Vikramurvasiyam – Muzhestvom dobytaia Urvasi* (*Urvasi Conquered by Valor*), and Viacheslav Ivanov’s translation of an excerpt from the drama, *Nala Damayanti*. In 1898, Vsevolod Miller, a Russian Sanskritologist, Iranist and a specialist on Ossetia, published his translation of the first part of Kalidasa’s play, *Urvashi*, known in Russian as *Muzhestvom Dobytaia Urvasi*. Briusov, in his 1907 lecture, entitled, “The Theater of the Future” as previously mentioned, named Kalidasa among one of the true playwrights of the past.

Bal’mont’s work on Ashvaghosha’s play *Life of the Buddha* brought him in touch with Sylvain Levi (1863-1935), a famous contemporary French Indologist, professor of Sanskrit at the Ecole des Hautes Études (1885-86) and the author of *Le Théâtre Indien* (1890). This monograph was Levi’s doctoral thesis and has been described as a book “combining solid erudition with a rare sense of artistic insight, replete with personal reactions and original reflections. . .”72 Bal’mont consulted with Levi as well as read *Le
Théâtre Indien (while he was translating Kalidasa’s Sakuntala (the poet was in Paris while working on his translation).

Le Théâtre Indien was met with enthusiasm by Indologists at the time of its publication. It presents a comprehensive history of the origin and development of ancient Indian drama including leading treatises on dramaturgy and the history of Indian dramatic literature. Aspects of Indian dramatic art are presented in detail with a discussion of dramatic genres, subject matter, the hero, heroine etc. Original works of playwrights such as Kalidasa as well as his successors and predecessors are presented along with discussion of dramatic theory and practice.

Bal’mont’s translations of Kalidasa’s plays were published by the publishing house of Mikhail Sabashnikov. A look at the poet’s correspondence with M. Sabashnikov reveals Bal’mont’s heightened interest in Indian literature and drama after his visit there in 1913. In his letter dated December 24th 1913, Bal’mont writes to Sabashnikov that he considers Kalidasa’s work to be exceptional: “Ia perechitivaiu ‘Sakuntalu’ Kalidasy, i esli ona mne vsegda nravilas’, teper’ posle bolee blizkogo prikosnoeniia k Indii, ia ot nee v vostorge. S istinnym uvlecheniem zaimus’ vosproizvedeniem ego po-russki” (“I am re-reading Kalidasa’s ‘Sakuntala’, and if I always liked it, now after a closer encounter with India, I am fascinated by it. With true admiration I will undertake rendering it into Russian”).

Bal’mont worked closely with Levi on the translation of Kalidasa’s works and quotes passages from Le Théâtre Indien in his own article on Kalidasa, “Slovo o Kalidase.” Initially, “Slovo o Kalidase” was delivered by the poet in the form of a lecture that he presented during tours in Russia in 1915. Later, for the publication of a volume of
his translations of Kalidasa’s plays along with Ashvaghosha's *The Life of Buddha*, Bal’mont was very eager to invite the well-known and much respected Russian Orientalist and specialist in Indology, Sergei Ol’denburg, to write the introduction. Bal'mont made it clear to the publisher that in the event of Ol’denburg’s refusal or inability to write it, he must be consulted before selecting another scholar. Bal’mont ruled himself out since he felt that his lack of expertise of Sanskrit made him an unfit candidate. He did not have to be consulted about another scholar since Ol’denburg agreed to write the introduction.

Once he finished translating *Sakuntala*, Bal’mont started translating other works of Kalidasa’s - *Maliavika i Agnimitra* and *Urvashi*. In his report on Bal’mont’s correspondence with Sabashnikov on this topic, Bongard-Levin notes that Bal’mont wrote frequently to the publisher about corrections to his manuscript, about plans of publishing a collection of his translations of Indian literature, and ideas for staging Kalidasa’s drama in Moscow or St Petersburg.

Bal’mont wrote frequently on this topic to his wife Ekaterina-Andreeva. In a letter dated 12th June, 1914, Bal'mont lists some of the reasons why he was so taken with *Sakuntala* and believed in its potential for success in the theater: “I am completely enchanted with *Sakuntala* … This is such perfection….I see this drama as the magic of sounds, colors, light, body movements, dancing of souls, of gentle dance and of refined experience. I believe in its enormous success on stage.”

*Sakuntala* was soon chosen by the young director, Alexandr Tairov, for the opening of his new theater, the Kamernyi in Moscow in December 1914. The play opened to good reviews with Alisa Koonen playing the role of *Sakuntala*. 
The story of *Sakuntala* is simple: A powerful ruler, king Dushyanta, is on one of his hunting expeditions when he meets Sakuntala, the daughter of a celestial nymph and a sage, at a hermitage, and falls in love with her. They secretly get married. Dushyanta has to leave and he gives Sakuntala a ring as a token of their union. After his departure, Sakuntala is completely lost in her dreams of Dushyanta and forgets to pay due respect to a visiting sage. The sage is enraged and places a curse on her: that he about whom she is so much in thought will not remember her. Sakuntala is unaware of this curse but her friends intervene and plead with the sage who relents and says that Dushyanta’s memory would return on seeing some token of remembrance. Kanwa, Sakuntala’s adoptive father returns to the hermitage, approves of Sakuntala’s secret marriage and arranges to send a now pregnant Sakuntala to her husband. Dushyanta refuses to recognize her and she is unable to produce the ring having lost it on her way to the palace, while bathing in a river. Seeing her misfortune from the heavens, her celestial mother descends to earth and whisks her away to the heavens. Sakuntala gives birth to her son there. Dusyanta’s memory eventually returns when a fisherman finds the ring and brings it to him. He is later united with his son and wife in the heavens. The reunion happens when Dusyanta is in heaven on a mission helping out the Gods with some trouble they are having with the demons. The happy family, now reunited, returns to earth.

Bal’mont explicated the reasons for his admiration for Kalidasa’s dramaturgy in his speech (later published as an article) entitled “Slovo o Kalidase” (“About Kalidasa”). These were: (1) that Kalidasa was a poet-playwright (2) In Kalidasa’s works there was a synthesis of two worlds – the real and the ideal; (3) the Indian playwright’s works represented an escape from the vulgar materialism of contemporary theater, a way out of
the attention to petty details that was a part of current theatrical practice and finally, (4) his works were harmonious “poems of love.”

Bal’mont’s approbation for Kalidasa’s dramaturgy was expressed in his article “Slovo o Kalidase.” An important reason for Bal'mont’s high regard was the connection between poetry and drama in Kalidasa’s oeuvre, i.e. Kalidasa was a poet-playwright. Bal’mont quotes Shelley’s treatise “On Defense of Poetry” in his essay to underscore this important connection between poetry and drama: “The drama, so long as it continues to express poetry, is as a prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of these elementary forms, and touches them with majesty and beauty, and multiplies all that it reflects, and endows it with the power of propagating its like wherever it may fall.”

For the symbolist Bal’mont, Kalidasa’s plays represented the embodiment of yet another symbolist tenet: the synthesis of two worlds, the real and the ideal. Kalidasa’s three plays, taken chronologically represent various stages of Kalidasa’s evolution towards such a synthesis in Bal’mont's analysis. Relying on Levi for the chronology of Kalidasa’s works: he presents as the earliest play Maliavika i Agnimitra, and Sakuntala as the next, and finally Dobytaia Muzhestvom Urvasi as the third and the last. In the first of the three plays the action takes place solely on earth; in the second, Sakuntala, the play culminates in an interaction of two worlds. In the third play the two worlds are in constant contact with each other, close to a synthesis. In other words, the contact first established in Sakuntala is confirmed.

Describing Kalidasa’s dramatic oeuvre as a triptych (“trilistnik”) Bal’mont explains the significance of the loci of action of each of the three plays and their
relationship to Bal’mont’s artistic evolution: “V pervoi, iunosheskoi [drama], deistvie proiskhodit na zemle, v tsarskom dvortse, vo vtoroi, oznachaiushei polnyi rastsvet poëticheskogo geniiia, deistvie nachinaetsia na zemle, no v kontse zemlia slivaetsia s nebom, v tret’ei, predstavliaiushchiei iz sebia kak by poëticheskuiu svodku zamysla, presledovavshego um Kalidasy vsiu ego zhizn’, deistvie proiskhodit vse vremia v neposredstvennom soprikosnovenii s nebom” (“In the first [drama] the action takes place on earth, in a royal palace; in the second that signified the complete blossoming of the poet’s genius, the action begins on earth, and at the end the sky unites with earth; in the third, which was an artistic summing up of his thought process that followed Kalidasa all his life, the action took place all the time in direct contact with the sky”).

The most important meeting ground for both Bal’mont’s ideal drama and the ancient Indian drama, was the role of the spectator. For one, in both the theaters the spectator is physically distanced from the actor’s stage unlike some other models proposed during this period. However, this did not absolve the actor or the director from their responsibility before the spectator. The main purpose of the elaborate preparation in Indian drama was to evoke emotional response or rasa from the audience, thus establishing a dialog between actor and spectator; the spectator had to participate creatively in the experience.

Similarly in his future Theater of Youth and Beauty, Bal’mont conceived of a theater where the poet-playwright would understand like their (ancient) predecessors that the will of the spectator was like malleable metal from which could be fashioned “golden, moving (“podvizhnye”) sculptures.” The final goal of this drama would be a communion of author and spectator that Bal’mont likens to the gathering of worshippers during
service on Easter night, or on a morning in May and “... in the joy of a universal holiday (“vsenarodnyj prazdnik”) and in the joining together in matrimony (“v obriade venchaniia”) and in the company of friends and loved ones, in those states of spiritual upliftment when it would become possible and realizable for man and god to be twins.”

Sakuntala remained the ideal drama for Bal’mont, above all because in it was an escape from the vulgar materialism of contemporary theater, a way out of the attention to petty details that surrounded him. The poet felt that Sakuntala anticipated much from the Theater of Youth and Beauty and was relived that it had not been “hijacked” by the naturalists, who had “reduced theater to a miserable clinging to the boring, trite materialism.” The naturalists had not understood that the “path of the soul and of dreams” was richer and more beautiful than the trite reality, byt, and the “lower depths of life” (an allusion to Gor’kii’s play, The Lower Depths) that they insisted on portraying.

Kalidasa had created a world where the human soul was elevated to a state where, as Bal’mont wrote, “The Gods were Man’s kin.” Most importantly, wrote Bal’mont, Sakuntala appealed to Europeans and Indians alike, since love triumphs in the end, but not without prior suffering. Unlike Shakespeare, whose dramas of suffering lacked harmony, Kalidasa was able to create a drama in which, “liubov’ liubit do stradaniia, cherez stradanie . . . szhigaia svoei siloi vse sumraki ispytaniia” (“love loves till the end, love overcomes suffering, ... and fires up the twilight zone of suffering with its strength”).

In other words, the goals that Bal’mont had attempted to achieve with Tri Rassveta had been anticipated by Kalidasa. Namely, 1) the playwright was poet, 2) the
characters transcended earthly existence, 3) there is no portrayal of byt, 4) instead there is a portrayal of an "other-worldly" ideal place 5) and love and beauty triumph in the end.

**CONCLUSION**

Konstantin Bal’mont was concerned – along with other leading symbolists such as Briusov and Ivanov – about the declining standards of contemporary dramatic and theatrical art. While Briusov and Ivanov turned to ancient Greece and Rome for finding models for a contemporary ideal drama, Bal’mont found an “Eastern” solution to the crisis. It is noteworthy that the concept of the future theater suggested by these three symbolists and philosophers of culture have features in common. For example, Bal’mont shared with Ivanov the notion of a theater, which would synthesize different branches of artistic expression, such as dance and music and he agreed with Briusov that the “poets” should be given a pivotal role in the theater of the future. Clearly some of these similarities are due to common sources, such as Wagnerian opera.

The difference between Bal’mont and his contemporaries lay in the sources on models to be used for the transformation of contemporary theater. Ivanov’s solution was a combination of ancient Greek Dionysian choric dance with the Wagnerian chorus. Bal’mont also accepted Briusov’s suggestion that the great ancient playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Kalidasa must be explored for the theater of the future. True to his belief that ancient Greek culture was an imitation of more ancient cultures – conscious or unconscious (this was irrelevant to the him) – Bal’mont chose the Indian playwright as his ideal and was able to inscribe in the ancient Indian play all his
requirements for the *Theater of Youth and Beauty* that he had conceived long before encountering Indian dramaturgy. Bal’mont’s vision for the theater of the future was shared by the director Aleksandr Tairov, who not only staged Kalidasa’s play but also employed techniques of ancient Indian drama throughout the course of his artistic career.
NOTES


2 Moscow Art Theatre will henceforth be referred to as MAT.


8 Briusov, Literaturnoe Nasledstvo 225.

9 Komissarzhevskaya and Meierkhold worked together in her theater for two years, 1906-1908, before their personalities clashed and they parted ways over differences in aesthetic ideology.


11 Kalbouss 5.

12 Kalbouss 5.


14 Briusov, Literaturnoe Nasledstvo 180.


16 Levi had worked extensively on the ancient Indian treatise on drama, the Natyashastra and was an expert on ancient Indian drama.

17 Vsevolod Meyerhold as quoted in Michael Green’s The Russian Symbolist Theatre, 24.

18 This article was not published during Briusov’s lifetime. It existed as drafts of the original lecture(s) that Brisov had delivered at least on three different occasions in 1907 – on 26th March at the Museum of History, on 11th April at the Politechnical Museum and once again on 10th May at the Museum of History.

19 According to the annotators of Briusov’s text, he was paraphrasing Aristotle’s words/ thoughts on this issue.

20 “I ètimi slovami s porazitel’noi tochnost’iu on [Aristotle] otdelil iskusstvo teatra ot drugikh vidov iskusstva. … Skul’pture – formy, zhivopisi – liini i tsveta, lirike – nastroeniia, èpike – sobytiia, no deistvie, neposredstvenoe deistvie – ostaetsia udelom tol’ko dramy” (“And with these words he [Aristotle], with striking accuracy, separated theatrical art from other types of art. Sculpture goes with form, painting with light and colors, lyrics with mood, epic and events, but action, direct action remains the domain of drama alone”). “Bruisov i Teatr” 180.

21 “Bruisov i Teatr” 180.

22 “Bruisov i Teatr” 187.


26 The most significant of these articles are published in Viacheslav Ivanov. Sobranie Sochinenii. Ed., D. Ivanov et al. Foyer Oriental Chretien: Brussels, 1974. Some of these are: “Tantalus”, “Novye Maski”,

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31 Alexander Tairov, Notes of a Director, (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1969) 41.
33 Tairov 59.
35 Tairov 59.
36 The list of the illustrious spectators who saw and admired Tairov’s production includes such diverse figures as the composer Scriabin and the Soviet Minister of Culture, Lunacharslii.
38 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 568.
39 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 569.
40 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 570.
41 Bal’mont uses the word rasa (race) in an idiosyncratic manner not uncommon for his times. Shelley’s original quote reads as follows: “ Of no other epoch in the history of our species have we records and fragments stamped so visibly with the image of the divinity in man” from “A Defence of Poetry” in Shelley’s Poetry and Prose. Authoritative Texts. Criticism. Eds, Donald H Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W.W.Norton and Company, 2002) 518.
42 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 570.
43 Shelley’s words in the original are as follows: “For the Athenians employed language, action, music, painting, the dance, and religious institution to produce a common effect in the representation of the highest idealisms of passion and of power; each division in the art was made perfect in its kind by artists of the most consummate skill and was disciplined into a beautiful proportion and unity towards the other.” Shelley, 518.
44 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase”
46 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 570.
47 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 570.
48 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 570.
49 “Autos” are allegorical religious plays.
51 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 571.
53 Bal’mont, “Kal’deronovskaia drama lichnosti” 36.
54 Bal’mont, “Kal’deronovskaia drama lichnosti” 35.
Blavatsky’s original text reads as follows:

“These instructions are for those ignorant of the dangers of the lower IDDHI (translated by Bal’mont as lower powers of humans). He who would hear the voice of the Nada, “the soundless sound” and comprehend it, he has to learn the nature of the Dhâranâ.

Having become indifferent to objects of perception, the pupil must seek out the rajah of the senses, the Thought-producer, he who awakes illusion. The Mind is the great Slayer of the Real.

Let the disciple slay the Slayer. For: When to himself his form appears unreal, as do on walking all the forms he sees in dreams; When he has ceased to hear the many, he may discern the ONE – the inner sound which kills the outer. Then only, not till then, shall he forsake the region of Asat, the false, to come unto the realm of Sat, the true. Before the soul can see, the Harmony within must be attained, and fleshly eyes be rendered blind to an Illusion. Before the Soul can hear, the image (man) has to become deaf to roarings as to whispers, to cries of bellowing elephants as to the silvery buzzing of the golden fire-fly. Before the soul can comprehend and may remember, she must unto the Silent Speaker be united just as the form to which the clay is modelled is first united with the potter’s mind. For the then the soul will hear, and will remember. And then to the inner ear will speak – THE VOICE OF THE SILENCE. And say:– If thy soul smiles while bathing in the Sunlight of thy Life; if thy soul sings within her chrysalis of flesh and matter; if thy soul weeps inside her castle of illusion; if thy soul struggles to break the silver thread that binds her to the MASTER; know, O Disciple, they Soul is of the earth. When to the World’s turmoil thy budding soul lends ear; when to the roaring voice of the great illusion thy Soul responds; when frightened at the sight of the hot tears of pain, when defeated by the cries of distress, thy soul withdraws like the shy turtle within the carapace of SELFHOOD, learn, O Disciple, of her silent “God” they Soul is an unworthy shrine.” Bal’mont quotes the entire “Fragment I” of which the above excerpt is a part. For complete text, see H.P. Blavatsky, The Voice of the Silence. Being Chosen Fragments from the ‘Book of Golden Precepts.’ For the Daily Use of Lanoos (Disciples). Pasadena CA: Theosophical University Press, 1889.

Bal’mont, “Kal’deronovskaia drama lichnosti” 36.


P V.Kuprianovskii and N.A. Molchanova, Poèt Konstantin Bal’mont, (Ivanovo: Izdatel’stvo Ivanovo) 41.

Bal’mont, K.D. “Praotets Sovremennykh Simvolistov,” Gornye Vershiny:Shbornik statei (Moscow: Grif, 1904, 43-49 ) 43.

Bal’mont concludes his thoughts by going further back in time. He quotes the example of Christopher Marlowe, who both lived and wrote within the framework of strong passions resulting in noble deeds. Bal’mont singles out the scene of Marlowe's death: the English writer fearlessly died in a duel, defending his love. That is how a poet/ writer must live, Bal'mont felt and posed the rhetorical question: “Were they capable of only talk? . . .These people had the capacity to live and experience the entire spectrum of feelings.” Konstantin Bal'mont, “Chuvstvo lichnosti v poèzii,” Gornye Vershiny:Shbornik statei. (Moscow: Grif, 1904) 23.


The classification of this play as a "mystery-play" is George Kalbouss'.

Kalbouss, 54.


Kalbouss, 54.

Bal’mont, Tri Rassveta 33.

In a letter to his wife, Bal’mont requests her to find for him commentaries by these writers on Kalidasa: “Naidi mne, pozhaluista, esli smozhesh’ chto govoriat o Kalidase Gete i Gerder. . . .” Bongard-Levin, 553.

See Bibliografiia Indii (Moscow: Izd-vo vostochnoi literatury, 1959) for details.


Bongard-Levin 552.
74 Bongard-Levin 552-3.
75 Shelley, 520.
76 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 575.
77 Bal’mont’s original reads as follows: “Если мы пойдем по этому пути храмового причастия душ в зрешичное таинство, если основой наших мыслей мы сделаем музыку, благоговение и поиски мечты, если мы понимаем, что понимали древние, что плоскость есть молитва, если мы понимаем, что воля зрителей есть как течущий металл, из которого можно выковать золотые движения и тончайшие струны, мы сможем тогда создать Театр Юности и Красоты, где все будут вместе, как на пасхальную ночь и на Майское утро, и в радости народного праздника и в обряде венчания в окружении друзей и любящих, и в тех состояниях духовного подъема, когда можно надеяться — и сбывается. Чтобы мужчина и бог были двоиником” (“If we follow this path of religious participation of souls in the secret of dance, if we make music, worship and singing dreams the foundation of our thoughts, if we understand that which the ancients understood, namely that dance is prayer; if we understand that the will of the viewers is [like] flowing metal, from which can be forged moving sculptures of gold and the most delicate of strings, then we will be able to create the Theater of Youth and Beauty, where all would be together as on an Easter night and on a May morning, and in the joy of a universal festival and during the celebration of weddings in the company of friends and loved ones, and in those states in which the spirit is uplifted, when one can hope and the hope is realized .. That men and gods could be twins”) . Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 580.
78 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 580.
79 Bal’mont, “Slovo o Kalidase” 578.
CONCLUSION

. . . I will sing a hundred thousand songs in that ancient India . . .

Bal’mont’s Diary.

I know that the Russian soul will always remain boundless.

Bal’mont, “Volia Rossii”

This dissertation has attempted to demonstrate that revisiting Bal’mont’s oeuvre may add new facets to the image we have of him and add complexity to the traditional vision of the “naïve singer” of often enchanting, but also very often emotionally overblown, poems. One facet that this examination has added is that Bal’mont is quite an original philosopher of culture of the Silver Age; that he was part of the symbolist “yearning for world culture,” not least oriental culture. It is true that the arts in Russia, especially music and ballet, even before the Silver Age had incorporated many oriental motifs (Rimskii-Korsakov, Borodin), but these were largely decorative (and in any case, rarely taken from Indian culture). Bal’mont went beyond the use of oriental motifs for purely decorative effect, studying an alien culture that had not attracted much attention from the symbolists, and he did so for the purpose of learning a cultural lesson.¹

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Bal’mont was of course above all a highly talented poet of early modernist verse – despite the considerable body of rather poor verse along with brilliant poems – but he was also a champion of the concept of world culture and Weltliteratur in the Goethean sense – and he wanted to see Indian literature added to that “of the world.” He created a “cultural mythology” that he based on a variety of ancient and modern cultures, usually cultures deemed inferior to the European tradition. This was unlike the position of the influential German philosopher Hegel, who had a negative attitude to Indian culture, which he “disqualified” as “stagnant, frozen in the past and incapable of resuscitation.”

In Bal’mont’s cultural mythology, this judgment was reversed and India rather emerges as “eternally young,” as opposed to “stagnant and frozen.” As Boris Gasparov has pointed out, the notion of cultural tradition had with the onset of modernism yielded to the concept of cultural myth with its greater potential for overcoming time as linear sequence and hence for sudden transformations. He notes that, “[T]he flow of historical time is brought to a halt by the messianic act of total renewal.”

Historical succession gave way to cultural mythology and postulated that the ideal culture was one in which “previous epochs merged in an ideal synthesis.” This was one way to keep the past alive and to make antiquity – the truly ancient antiquity of India – forever present.

Bal’mont increasingly favored Indian culture above all others, seeing in it a bulwark against the dangers he saw in contemporary European civilization – positivism and naturalism, both movements that lived for the current moment only, as well as a notion of “progress” that invalidated the past, privileging a superior future. To Bal’mont, on the contrary, the present was valid only when drawing upon a vital past – as it did in India. But synthesis, to Bal’mont, did not only pertain to time, but also to space. In
Bal’mont’s “ideal synthesis” (Gasparov) ancient India and contemporary Russia came together in ways that were both “panchronic” and “atemporal, as well as merging in space.” To create his cultural mythology of the ideal synthesis, Bal’mont appropriates elements from both cultures to create a complementary culture that would be realized on the space of Russia. Or, perhaps, more accurately, he envisioned Russia as culturally still empty (in the tradition of Chaadaev), but also as culturally receptive; specifically it was ready to absorb into itself the culture of the ”Land of Thought.” Russian space and Indian content could only enrich each other in his cultural myth.

Bal’mont’s cultural mythology was also centered on the notion of the universal poet exploring ever new vistas of world culture. Who else, if not the Poet, was to be the mediator, catalyst and carrier of cultural synthesis? And as all Russian literati knew ever since Dostoevsky’s Pushkin speech – there was a precedent in Russian literary history: the most Russian of all Russian poets and the most universal as well, Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin. Undoubtedly Bal’mont saw himself as Pushkin’s successor (as well as Goethe’s), if not his equal in talent, then certainly as his equal in the task of universalizing culture; perhaps he even was the more universal of the two poets, while remaining equally Russian. After all, the symbolist poet had extended the frontiers of his poetic world in a concrete sense; while Pushkin in his famous “Exegi monumentum” had invoked “every tribe and every tongue” in Rus’ and aspired to be known among “[t]he proud descendant of the Slavs, the Finn, the Tungus/ Who is now savage, and the steppe-loving Kalmyk,” Bal’mont’s “travelling muse” (“stranstvuushchaia muza”) embraced such far-away and forgotten places as India, Mexico, Spain, and Japan among others. He had not only visited them all in person – which, in his mind, placed him at a decidedly
advantageous position in comparison to others\textsuperscript{7} – but also studied their past; furthermore he had shared his knowledge with his contemporaries and in his poetry created myths of their ultimate synthesis.

There is relatively little explicit invocation of Pushkin in Bal’mont’s writing until after his final emigration from Russia in 1920. As Bal’mont noted: “Pushkin had attracted me as well since childhood. But in my youth, as I looked for and found my own poetic path, I looked at Pushkin and Lermontov more by accident than out of any need of my soul” (“Pushkin plenil menia tozhe s detsva. No v iunosti, poka ia otyskival i nashel svoiu sobstvennuiu poèticheskuiu dorogu, ia i Pushkina i Lermontova liubil skoree sluchaino a ne iz dushevnoi neobkhodimosti”).\textsuperscript{8} Once he had “lost his mother land,” however, i.e. in the 1920’s, Bal’mont declared that he had come to realize that “Pushkin had become [his] true and everlasting boundless love and the object of [his] heart’s worship . . .” (“Pushkin stal moei nastoiashchei i uzhe navsedgashnei bezmernoi liubov’iu i prekloneniem serdtsa . . .”).\textsuperscript{9} This statement explains in part why Pushkin had rarely been explicitly mentioned in Bal’mont’s pantheon of “Indian mountain peaks,” or his poetry until 1920. Yet, Pushkin, whom Bal’mont characterized as the “most Russian” and the greatest Russian genius,\textsuperscript{10} was ever present in Bal’mont’s poetic subconscious, at least in his cultural hypostasis of “universal-Russian” genius. In his answer to a French graduate student who wanted to know the nature of Fet’s influence on him, Bal’mont declared that he did not particularly value this “historical-literary term” (i.e. “influence”), when speaking of a true artist. Providing the example of the literary “influences” on Pushkin by his predecessors, as an illustration, Bal’mont wrote: “Derzhavin and Zhukovskii did not influence Pushkin,
and yet, again and again, they awakened Pushkin in Pushkin” (“Derzhavin i Zhukovskii ne vliiali na Pushkina, a lishnii raz, eshche i eshche raz, probudili v Pushkine Pushkina”). Similarly, even in the absence of direct evocations of Pushkin, he nevertheless remains the figure Bal’mont most strove to emulate. Or, perhaps it could be argued that the functions that Goethe fulfilled in his Pantheon potentially could be taken over by Pushkin at any given moment. It is not excluded that Bal’mont hesitated to give Pushkin the first place in his gallery of “Indian” poets, because Turgenev – a writer he greatly appreciated – refused to do so in his “Pushkin speech” delivered at the same time as Dostoevsky’s better known one. Turgenev refused Pushkin the honor of being the” most universal of all” that Dostoevsky was so willing to accord him, because Pushkin lacked the support of a cultural base, a national culture that encompassed the entire nation (as opposed to a tiny elite). For Bal’mont, the myth of Pushkin as the universal poet created by Dostoevsky ultimately seemed to have been more of interest than his oeuvre.

Bal’mont too saw Russia as an empty space, one that he wanted to fill with “India, -- the land of Thought.” In this respect he perhaps believed he would accomplish what Pushkin had failed to do: to usher in a nationwide cultural renaissance. He cannot have been unaware of Gogol’s famous statement that Pushkin was “the Russian man in his ultimate development, as he, perhaps, will be in two hundred years.”12 Was he not the new Pushkin who had emerged – already one hundred years later, following the famous formula “proshlo sto let” (a hundred years had passed) in answer to Gogol’s famous prophecy – with the difference that he, Bal’mont, was a “Pushkin” who could compete with the most universal of European geniuses, Goethe himself? He too had after all been a “scientist” – an ethnographer and historian – in addition to being a Poet; and he had,
unlike both Goethe and Pushkin, been a discoverer in the truest sense of the word -- a true
Columbus, who discovered the right India. ). Although a speculative supposition,
becoming the next universal Russian poet, the new Pushkin, was perhaps the innermost
desire of the poet, a desire that remained unrevealed before Bal’mont’s emigration.
Bal’mont seemed to have been considering a variety of candidates for the “throne” of the
Universal poet: Calderon, Goethe – Pushkin (who is never explicitly acknowledged, not
in much detail anyway) – Bal’mont. Perhaps it did not really matter what name the
“universal-national Poet” wore. “Goethe” or “Pushkin” were after all but “functions” (in
a Proppian sense) of mythology, or the cultural myth of the universal-national Poet who
ushers in a new Renaissance. His name in any case now was “Bal’mont;” he was the Poet
who merged life and art, who wrote in all genres, explored all cultures, mediated between
cultures as a translator, and who created the myth of synthesizing the European East
(Russia) with the Oriental East (India), drawing upon a wide range of other cultures, past
and present as well.

The October Revolution crushed Bal’mont’s myth of a Russia that would
revitalize world culture with the help of “eternal India.” Pushkin now became to him, as
it did to most émigrés, the guarantor that Russian culture some day might return to itself.
After 1920, Bal’mont too sees Pushkin as the “sun-genius” (“s solntsem v dogovore”)\footnote{13}
and acknowledges his indebtedness to him openly (after all the formula “Let Us Be like
the Sun” was clearly Pushkinian

If Pushkin was at last given his rightful place in Bal’mont’s Pantheon, Indian
culture never lost it. During his émigré years, Bal’mont returned again and again to
Indian themes, declaring Indian culture to be one where, “‘Rosa i dym, svetliak, ogon’ i
veter, / Luna, kristall, i molniia, i Solntse, - Chrez èti liki v zrenii vnutrezorkom / Do Bramy prikazaetsia tvoi dukh.”) (“‘Dew and smoke, glow worm, fire and wind/ The Moon, crystal, and lightening, and the Sun, / Through these faces in the insightful inner vision/ Your soul will reach Brahma.’”)

This period of Bal’mont’s Indophilia lies beyond the scope of this dissertation however. We may only note that India remained a cornerstone of Bal’mont’s dream of world culture, that he could not envision either Weltliteratur or world culture without Strana Mysli.
NOTES

1 In the Silver Age, an artist who comes close to Bal’mont in his attitude toward Indian culture is Nikolai Roerich, the painter-theosophist.
4 Gasparov 2.
5 Gasparov 2.
7 Neither Goethe or Pushkin had traveled even a fraction of Bal’mont’s peregrinations Pushkin had never been able to visit any foreign country.
9 Bal’mont, “O poëzii Feta” 395.
10 Bal’mont, “O poëzii Feta” 395.
11 Bal’mont, ‘O poëzii Feta” 395.
12 Quoted in Gasparov 6.
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