

Images of madness in visual art: a Russian Symbolist iconography

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ONE OF THE distinguishing aspects of the arts in Russia at the turn of the twentieth century was the aim to unite different forms of artistic expression, such as literature, music, theater, dance, painting and sculpture. These attempts—at times serious, at times more playful—were to be found in virtually every movement, but Symbolist writers in particular focused on the aim of synthesis, which they believed would give rise to a higher art. This was reflected perhaps most clearly on the pages of the journals in which the Symbolists published their work. Publications such as Serge Diaghilev's and Aleksandr Benois's *Mir iskusstva* ('The World of Art'), founded in 1898,¹ and the Symbolist journals *Vesy* ('The Balance') and *Zolotoe mno* ('The Golden Fleece'), founded in 1903 and 1906 respectively, were all noteworthy for the degree to which they combined visual art with poetry, prose fiction and critical articles on all of the arts. The journals themselves displayed high esthetic standards, with lavish illustrations printed on quality paper. They were expensive productions, made possible by the support of wealthy patrons. William Richardson (1986, 75), in his study on *Zolotoe mno*, notes its 'attempt at creating a magazine that was a complete work of art within itself, a combination of art and literature on a scale, and with a quality unequalled by any previous or (it was hoped) subsequent Russian periodical'.

Another, related facet of the Symbolists' 'synthesis' project was their view of the relationship between an artist's life and works. Russian Symbolist writers held that the creative and personal lives of an artist were two interdependent realms, each inspiring and transforming the other. Indeed, they sought no less than a synthesis of art and life through *žiznetvorčestvo*, a Symbolist neologism that conveys the idea of a life that is creative as well as the creation of life itself. Andrej Belyj wrote that 'the ultimate aims of creativity are

¹ While it was only a few years later that the Symbolists had their own journal, *Mir iskusstva* s 'literary section was the first place critical work by Russian symbolist poets was readily accepted for publication,' as Richardson (1986,15) writes in his study on the later Symbolist journal *Zolotoe runo*.

not rooted in the creative forms of art; they are rooted in life,² and Vladislav Chodasevič observed in his memoir *NekropoV* that Symbolism 'was a series of attempts, at times truly heroic, to fuse life and art... Symbolism persistently sought a genius in its midst who could merge life and creativity.'³

The Russian Symbolists' search for such a genius was not limited to their own ranks, but also extended to other periods, movements and art forms. And in keeping with the idea of *žiznetvorčestvo*, Symbolists were often at least as interested in the artists' biographies as they were in the works themselves. Many Symbolist writers moved in the same circles as contemporary artists. Their journals promoted, defended and cooperated with virtually all of the leading modernist painters, at a time when they still met with the scorn of more conservative critics. Several special issues of *Zolotoe runo* were devoted to individual artists such as Viktor Borisov-Muratov, Nikolaj Roerich, Konstantin Somov and Michail Vrubel', and the journal also commissioned a number of artists to produce portraits of modernist writers.⁴ Russian Symbolist authors, in turn, penned their own portraits of these artists in various genres, ranging from critical essays to poetry.

This paper examines the Symbolists' reception and interpretation of the work—and lives — of two contemporary painters: the Russian artist Michail Vrubel' (1856-1910) and the Lithuanian artist Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis (1875-1911). Symbolist depictions of these two artists reveal their ideas about creativity and the artist's role, and they also provide a striking example of how they fashioned a model of ideal genius out of the lives and work of their contemporaries.

Let us begin with Vrubel', to whom much of the first issue of *Zolotoe runo*, from January 1906, was devoted. The journal also commissioned Vrubel' to paint a portrait of the Symbolist writer Valerij Brjusov, for which Brjusov made visits to the psychiatric hospital where Vrubel' was a patient at the time (Richardson 1986,

² «последние цели творчества не коренятся в творческих формах искусства; они коренятся в жизни.» (Belyj 1994, 346.—*Л!* English translations are my own, j. n.)

³ «был ряд попыток, порой истинно героических, — найти сплав жизни и творчества ... Символизм упорно искал в своей среде гения, который сумел бы слить жизнь и творчество воедино.» (Chodasevič 1997, 7)

⁴ The second issue of *Zolotoe runo*, published in February 1906, announced, 'A series of portraits of contemporary Russian writers executed by well-known artists will appear in various issues of the journal.' (Richardson 1986, 51)

39). Shortly after sitting for this portrait, Brjusov wrote a poem about Vrubel', in which he depicts him, in images borrowed from his paintings, as a genius granted access to realms beyond the reach of more ordinary men:

М. А. Врубелю

От жизни лживой и известной
Твоя мечта тебя влечет
В простор лазурности небесной
Иль в глубину сапфирных вод.

Нам недоступны, нам незримы,
Меж сонмов вопиющих сил,
К тебе нисходят серафимы
В сияньи многоцветных крыл.

Из теремов страны хрустальной,
Покорны сказочной судьбе,
Глядят лукаво и печально
Наяды, верные тебе.

И в час на огненном закате
Меж гор предвечных видел ты,
Как дух величий и проклятий
Упал в провалы с высоты.

И там, в торжественной пустыне,
Лишь ты постигнул до конца
Простертых крыльев блеск павлиний
И скорбь эдемского лица!

(Brjusov 1973, 538)

In another poem by the Symbolist writer Konstantin Bal'mont, Vrubel' is portrayed as an 'oracle' perceived by the rest of the world as enigmatic because he has attained a higher level of reality. In the poem's final lines, several different images are employed to convey the elusiveness and exceptional nature of Vrubel':

Врубель — косвенная тень,
Уплывающая лодка,
Взбрызги Солнц, плеснувших четко
На заветную ступень.
Тайной лестницы, ведущей
В мир тончайший, вечно сущий,
В наш великий, в наш грядущий,
Богоравный день.

(Bal'mont 1921, 38)

The last issue of *Zolotoe runo* was published soon after Vrubel's death and contained Aleksandr Blok's article 'Pamjati Vrubel'ja' (In memory of Vrubel'). A good part of this short piece is devoted to a discussion of the nature of creative genius, of which Vrubel' is seen to be an embodiment. Significantly, Vrubel's genius is described as going hand in hand with his madness. Yet here Blok is not referring to the illness that, from 1902 on, required psychiatric treatment and brought Vrubel's career to an abrupt end, but rather to another kind of madness, which Blok describes, in a romantic spirit, as a higher state and source of inspiration. The two kinds of madness are even distinguished in the article by different Russian words: *sumasšestvie* and *bezumie*. According to Blok, *bezumie*— the higher kind of madness—was present in Vrubel' long before his medical diagnosis. He writes, 'Artists, like the heralds of ancient tragedies, come ... to us in a measured life, with the seal of madness [*bezumie*] and fate on their countenances. Vrubel' came with a mad, but blessed countenance. He was a herald.'⁵ Blok thus emphasizes



VRUBEL' *Demon sidjaščij* (fragment), 1890

⁵ «Художники, как вестники древних трагедий, приходят ... к нам, в размеренную жизнь, с печатью безумия и рока на лице. Врубель пришел с лицом безумным, но блаженным. Он — вестник.» (Blok 1982e, 154)

Vrubel's madness as a sign of a divine gift. His portrayal of Vrubel' reflects a romantic notion of the 'mad genius' according to which irrational experience is an integral part of the creative process.

Blok's article opens with a discussion of the artist's biography, which he likens to the genre of the lives of the saints, in that fact had become interwoven with legend already during his lifetime. Blok relates one such legend about how Vrubel' repainted the head of his 'Demon' forty times. Someone, it was rumored, had happened to see an early version in which the face of this demon was extraordinarily beautiful. Vrubel', however, had destroyed it and started over again. Blok comments that the final version of the painting was likely merely a pale copy of what the passerby had caught a fleeting glimpse of. Yet this is of no consequence to artists, he continues, as

most important is the mere fact that creative energy was expended, lightning flashed, a genius was born; the rest is attributed to either the trembling hand of a master (and does not the hand of the greatest master tremble?), or the force of time, which is infallibly destructive. Let the public weep over mistakes and time, but we should not weep, as artists ... to whom the fact that Venus was *discovered* in marble is dearer than the *existence* of her statue.⁶

Interestingly, this tale seems to reappear in another form in Brjusov's essay 'Poslednjaja rabota Vrubel'ja' ('Vrubel's last work') from 1912. Here Brjusov describes his visits to the Moscow clinic where Vrubel' was undergoing treatment, in order to sit for the portrait that Nikolaj Rjabušinskij, the editor-publisher of *Zolotoe runo*, had commissioned. Although Vrubel' was unable to finish the drawing due to his illness, it was nevertheless reproduced in *Zolotoe runo* and shown at exhibits (Richardson 1986, 53). This was to be Vrubel's last work before his death (ibid.).

Brjusov begins by describing the clinic and Vrubel's appearance, both of which contribute to a general image of dreariness and madness. Even the doctor is characterized as 'animated, interesting, but

⁶ «всего важнее лишь факт, что творческая энергия была затрачена, молния сверкнула, гений родился ; остальное принадлежит либо ошибке дрогнувшей руки мастера (а разве не может и у величайшего мастера дрогнуть рука ?), либо силе времени — везошибочно разрушающей. Об ошибках и о времени пусть плачет публика, но не должны плакать мы, художники ..., кому дороже то, что Венера *найденa* в мраморе, нежели то, что *существует* ее статуя.» (Blok 1982e, 153)

VRUBEL' *Portret*
poëta V. Ja. Brjusova,
1890



with strangely mad eyes'.⁷ Brjusov recounts that his first impression of the artist was that he was 'insane' (*sumassedsij*), but once he begins to paint, flashes of genius shine through the madness.

Vrubel' is not satisfied with his portrait of Brjusov, however, and repeatedly paints over it. Brjusov writes,

Undoubtedly, there was a time when the unfinished portrait was much more remarkable than the one we see today. It was both more faithful and more expressive. Continuing to work, Vrubel' spoiled a lot in his final work.⁸

⁷ «живой, интересный но со странно сумасшедшими глазами» (Brjusov 1976, 296).

⁸ «Несомненно, была пора, когда неоконченный портрет был гораздо замечательнее того, что мы видим теперь. Он был и более похож, и более выразителен. Продолжая работать, Врубель много испортил в своем последнем произведении.» (Brjusov 1976,299)

While Brjusov's emphasis of this point may be attributed to vanity on his part, the close resemblance to the story in Blok's article of how Vrubel' destroyed his painting 'Demon' is nonetheless striking.⁹ Both writers offer the same interpretation of this occurrence, as well. While Brjusov regrets that the final version of the portrait does not reflect the full extent of Vrubel's genius, it is nonetheless the mere presence or possibility of genius itself, and not its final products, that is essential.

Čiurlionis is another example of how the Symbolists searched for signs of genius among their contemporaries. Čiurlionis was first recognized as a composer and then began painting professionally around 1903. The Russian Symbolists had several opportunities to view his work beginning in October 1908, when Čiurlionis travelled to St Petersburg and became acquainted with Aleksandr Benois, Mstislav Dobužinskij and others from the *Mir iskusstva* circle, who pointed out his work to Symbolist writers. Over the following two years he was invited to participate in several Russian exhibitions, such as the Salon and the Society of Russian Artists, and in 1910 he was elected a member of the *Mir iskusstva* Society.

It is not difficult to see why the Symbolists would have found Čiurlionis' paintings interesting. Their abstract symbolism and pastel horizons seem to point toward another, higher reality. Čiurlionis' biography, as well, fascinated the Symbolists, for it epitomized two elements that were central to their notion of the ideal artist. The first of these was synthesis of the arts. Not only was Čiurlionis a trained artist and composer, he also wrote stories, although these met with less acclaim. A look at the titles of his various works reveals an attempt to merge these three art forms. Many of his musical compositions have names such as 'Symphonic Poem' and 'Cycles of Landscapes for Piano', while several of his paintings have titles such as 'Sonata No. 6 (Star Sonata). Allegro'. As Vytautas Landsbergis writes in his monograph on Čiurlionis (1992, 118), 'not by means of manifestos or aesthetic treatises, [but] by his work itself, Čiurlionis asserts that all human art is one.' A second element of Čiurlionis' biography which bore significance for the Symbolists and which he had in common with Vrubel was mental illness.

⁹ Brjusov (1976, 301) mentions Vrubel's 'Demon' as well, in his criticism of a young artist who had assisted Vrubel' in painting over the earlier versions of Brjusov's portrait: 'At Vrubel's command he, without thinking, would have "erased" all of the "Demon".' («По приказанию Врубеля он, не задумываясь, «„смыл бы" всего „Демона"!»»)

Čiurlionis had suffered bouts of depression at various times, but by December 1909 it had become so acute as to require hospitalization. Two years later, Ciurlionis died from pneumonia at a sanatorium, at the age of 35.

Upon Ciurlionis' death in March 1911, the journal *Apollon* published an article by Sergej Makovskij devoted to him. The article provides an overview of Ciurlionis' life and visual art and includes several reproductions of his paintings. Makovskij (1911, 23) uses musical imagery to describe Ciurlionis' painting as well as his life, calling his short life an 'unsung song' (*nedopetaja pesnja*) and stating that his pictures were at times 'more music than landscape' (*bol'se muzyka, čem živopis'*) and an expression of 'a kind of cosmic symphony' (*kakie-to kosmičeskie simfonii*). Makovskij then quotes extensively from a letter by the Symbolist Vjačeslav Ivanov.

In his characterization of Ciurlionis' work, Ivanov emphasizes the role of the irrational, holding it to be the key to his great artistic vision, which, Ivanov holds, approaches clairvoyance. Ivanov identifies two phases in Ciurlionis' artistic development. He characterizes the first phase as one of 'incoherent intuitionism; this was chaos in which the musical element sought embodiment in fluid

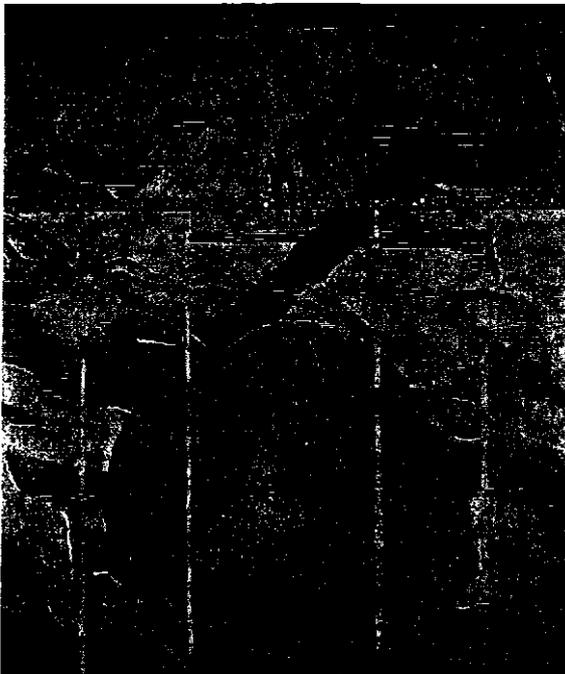
Čiurlionis *Sonata
piramid. Allegro,
1908-9*



forms and colorful correspondences.'¹⁰ (Ivanov does not mention any titles of Ciurlionis' work, so we can only speculate as to which ones he had in mind.)

Ivanov characterizes the second phase of Ciurlionis' painting as one of originality and 'crystallized forms, in which the artist is able to give expression, using his brush, ...to a new word'.¹¹ Here things get more complicated, however, for works from this phase, according to Ivanov, fall into two categories corresponding to 'two types of mental state of the artist and, as a result of these experiences, two types of artistic aim'.¹² What distinguishes them is their degree of rationality. The first aim is to depict

the triumphant harmony of ecstatic contemplation. The material world surrounding us vanishes completely, ceding its place to another essence, a divinely illuminated cosmos. Here is the realm of



CURLIONIS
*Zvezdnaja
sonata. Andante,*

¹⁰ « [Начал он] с безсвязного интуитивизма; это был хаос, где музыкальная стихия искала воплощения в текучие формы и красочные соответствия.» (Маковский 1911, 25)

¹¹ «период кристаллизованных форм, когда художнику дано было сказать своей кистью ... новое слово» (ibid.).

¹² «два типа душевных состояний художника и, соответственно этим переживаниям, два типа художественных заданий» (ibid.).

tranquil clarity, the calm after the chaotic swell of a long coming-into-being..¹³

While Ivanov considers such pictures to reflect imagination and good composition, he deems them 'esthetically and technically rational' and therefore less convincing than those paintings that fulfill the second aim, which is irrational. 'This clairvoyant is more interesting and convincing', writes Ivanov, 'when he takes on an irrational task in his painting—when he spontaneously surrenders himself to his gift of dual vision.'¹⁴

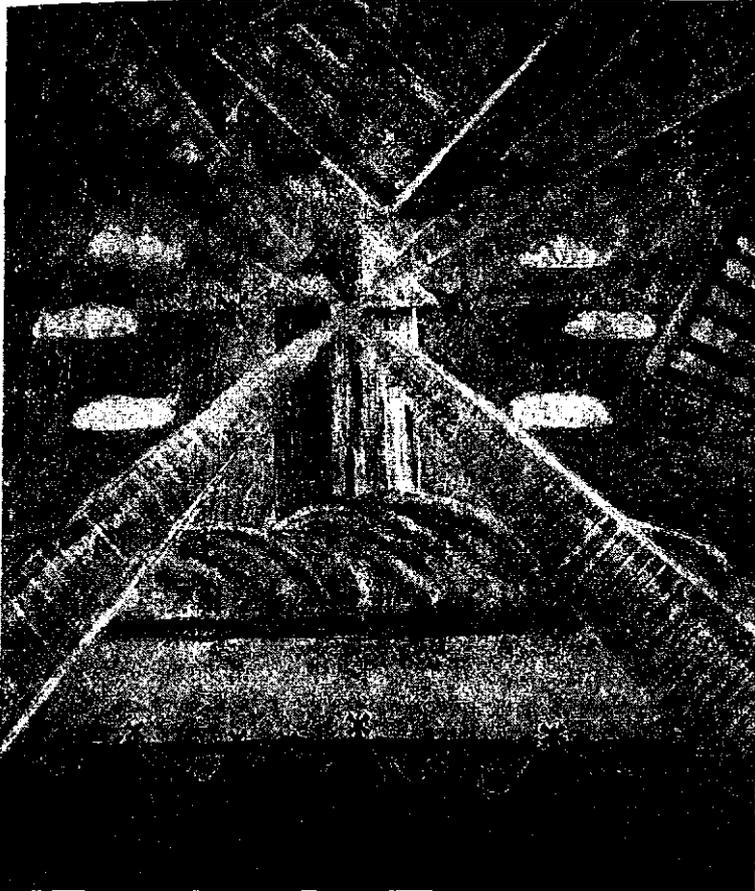
Thus, Ivanov essentially divides Ciurlionis' artistic oeuvre into three categories, rather than two, as he states in the letter. The first of these is characterized by chaos, the second by harmony, and the third by irrationality. These three categories correspond closely to Belyj's outline of the artist's development in his essay *Tragedija tvorčestva: Dostoevski) i Tolstoj* ('The tragedy of creation: Dostoevski) and Tolstoj'), published in 1911, the same year as Ivanov's letter to Makovskij.¹⁵ Here Belyj discusses the work and lives of three Russian writers—Gogol', Tolstoj and Dostoevskij, all of whom he deems geniuses.

As in Ivanov's characterization of Ciurlionis' work, Belyj identifies three stages in the development of genius. The first, which he calls the romantic stage, is associated with madness and resembles Ivanov's description of the 'chaos' and 'incoherent intuition' of Ciurlionis' early work. The second stage in Belyj's scheme of artistic development is classicism, and it is described in the same terms Ivanov uses to characterize the second category of Ciurlionis' work: harmony, clarity, craftsmanship and a newfound calm.

¹³ «победную гармонию экстатического созерцания. Окружающий нас вещественный мир исчезает всецело, уступая свое место другому естеству, божественно просветленному космосу. Здесь царство успокоенной ясности, затишье после хаотической зыби долгого становления...» (ibid.).

¹⁴ «самое задание является эстетически и технически рациональным»; «Любопытнее и убедительнее этот духовидец тогда, когда он ставит себе задачу уже иррациональную для живописи, — когда он непосредственно отдается своему дару двойного зрения.» (ibid.)

¹⁵ For a more in-depth discussion of Belyj's *Tragedija tvorčestva*, see Hansen 2001.



ŠuRLIONIS *Vesennjaja sonata.*
Andante, 1907

But the artist's journey does not end here, for Belyj argues that this 'victory over romanticism is not the *final* aim of artistic creation; balance, the harmony of form, is merely a temporary stop on the path toward the madness that is called creativity.¹⁶ Belyj, as we have seen, associates madness with creativity earlier in the essay, in his discussion of the romantic, chaotic stage. Here, however, madness is set forth as the ultimate goal of the true artist. As in Blok's essay, there is a significant difference between these two kinds of

¹⁶ «победа над романтизмом не последняя цель художественного творчества; уравновешенность, гармония формы есть лишь временная остановка на пути безумия, называемого творчеством» (Belyj 1971, 16).

madness. Whereas romantic madness tends to be destructive because it is unfocused, the madness of the third stage leads to *žiznetvorčestvo*. At this point, the artist renounces the harmony of classicism and enters into a struggle with life. Art and life merge, and the artist becomes a prophet, 'because the final aim of art is prophecy about the final aim of life'.¹⁷

This final stage, in which the excesses of the previous stages are overcome, can be seen as a synthesis of romanticism and classicism or, more precisely, a synthesis of undirected madness, on the one hand, and the confining structure of reason, on the other. This synthesis requires a struggle, however, in which 'the artist is either destroyed as an artist..., destroyed as a person ..., or perishes as both artist and person'.¹⁸

Again, Belyj employs some of the same terms in his charting of the true path of genius as Ivanov does in his description of Ciurlionis' work: vision, madness, 'exceeding the boundaries' (*perestupat'za predely*), and a higher aim for art. Ivanov also observes that 'Ciurlionis persistently and mightily struggles with madness'.¹⁹

Ivanov returned to the subject of Ciurlionis' work three years later in an article entitled 'Curljanis i problema sinteza iskusstv' ('Ciurlionis and the problem of synthesis of the Arts', also first published in *Apollon*), which contains a longer and more in-depth analysis. Ivanov begins it by quoting his own letter to Makovskij, with the explanation that although he wrote these words having seen only a few of Ciurlionis' paintings, they still ring true after a closer study of the artist's work. Here he deems Ciurlionis to be one of the most enigmatic of artists, and locates his genius in his way of seeing and his ability to make others see the world in a new way (Ivanov 1979,150). Ivanov identifies Ciurlionis' method as one that unites visual art and music: 'the pictorial treatment of elements of visual contemplation according to a principle borrowed from music'.²⁰ He holds that this method gave Ciurlionis access to a higher realm hidden from most others, and that he used painting as

¹⁷ «потому что последняя цель искусства — пророчество о последней цели жизни» (Belyj 1971, 17).

¹⁸ «художник или разрушается, как художник ..., или он разрушается, как человек ..., или он гибнет, и как художник, и как человек» (Belyj 1971,17).

¹⁹ «Чурлянис упорно и мощно борется с безумием» (Makovskij 1911, 26).

²⁰ «[ж]ивописная обработка элементов зрительного созерцания по принципу, заимствованному из музыки» (Ivanov 1979, 151).

a means to explain the mysteries of the world. It is this attempt that makes him a creator of myths. Ivanov, like other Symbolists, believed *mifotvorčestvo*, or mythopoesis, to be the true artist's mission which would transform the world and save society from the crisis of individualism

Just like Belyj, however, Ivanov emphasizes that this gift comes at a price:

One cannot exceed the boundaries of human perception with impunity: almost certain destruction awaits the daring; but that which he has brought to people by daring to go beyond the verge, is the gift of gifts ... It seems that Ciurlionis overheard the creative conversation of the World Soul and her primordial creations.²¹

Ivanov writes that Čiurlionis was a musician not merely through his compositions, which, he admits, were not particularly innovative or significant, but by virtue of his 'general musical spontaneity, which seems to overflow into his entire mental make-up'.²² As in Blok's article on Vrubel', the final result of the artistic process is deemed secondary to *žiznetvorčestvo* and the force of the artist's vision. Ivanov (1979, 160) maintains that Ciurlionis needed music in order to maintain his connection with the world, the loss of which threatened him with madness. He was also alone, belonging to no one art form exclusively, and therefore misunderstood (ibid., 161). Such souls, Ivanov tells us, are 'always a little crazy (*juro-divye*)' and become martyrs to the cause of true art and a vision of a higher world (ibid., 164).

Thus, synthesis of the arts, a higher artistic aim and madness go hand in hand in the Symbolists' literary and critical portraits of the ideal artist. The merging of different art forms, as well as the interrelationship of an artist's life and work, were central to Symbolist views of the artist's role and mission. It was therefore natural that they should search for these qualities among contemporary artists as well as writers. Blok even argued in his essay 'Kraski i slova' ('Colors and words') that the art of painting was in some ways superior to that of writing, in that it teaches the artist to truly *see*

²¹ «Нельзя безнаказанно переступать за пределы, положенные человеческому восприятию: гибель, почти наверно, ждет дерзнувшего; но что принес он людям, отваживаясь перейти грань, есть дар из даров ... Кажется, будто Чурля-нис подслушал творческий разговор Мировой Души с ее первозданными творениями ...» (Ivanov 1979, 160).

²² «по общей музыкальной стихийности, как бы разлитой во всем его душевном составе» (ibid., 160).

nature in the same way children see it. Blok argues that there is a natural affinity between the literary and visual arts and that 'the foundations of the sentence—noun and verb—often correspond to paint and lines, respectively'.²³ He urges writers to take up art, citing Puškin as an example of an untrained artist who experienced the liberating effect of art through his drawings in the margins of his manuscripts (Blok 1982a, 10).

Symbolist portraits of Vrubel' and Ciurlionis repeatedly emphasize their special way of seeing and the irrational nature of their work. Both are depicted as martyrs, suffering madness and loneliness as a result of their gift. Yet in the Symbolists' interpretation, their lives as well as their works serve a higher artistic aim. They also hold them to be ready proof of the possibility of synthesis.

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²³ «основы предложения — существительное и глагол — совпадают, первое — с краской, второй — с линией» (Blok 1982a, ю).

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