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Balmont: A Reappraisal

The revaluation of the literary past was a central preoccupation of the Russian symbolists. Some of these reassessments (Gogol and Dostoevsky in particular come to mind) have remained surprisingly fresh and valid after the passage of more than half a century. It is all the more ironic, then, that for decades the work of the Russian symbolists has been shamefully neglected by the critics. In Russia itself most of these fine poets are hardly mentioned, while a few, such as Blok and Briusov, are presented in such a fashion as to be unrecognizable. Outside Russia there have been valuable contributions to our knowledge of this period (by Mochulsky, Makovsky, Stepun, Tschižewskij, and Setschkarev, as well as Holthusen and other German scholars), but even here there is sometimes undue reliance on doubtful opinions which were formed fifty years ago; Mochulsky, for example, is guilty of this. The present article will attempt to remedy such neglect with respect to Balmont.

The hundredth anniversary of the birth of Konstantin Dmitrievich Balmont (1867-1942) has recently passed. Anyone with a moderate interest in Russian poetry knows that Balmont was one of the first Russian modernists, if not the first, and the earliest of the Russian symbolists to win popular acclaim. His success with his contemporaries was unique and was approached only by that of Alexander Blok. Balmont was not only a famous and historically important figure, he was also unusually prolific, publishing in the course of his life more than twenty-five books of original verse,[1] nine books of essays, a novel, a collection of short stories, a drama, and uncounted volumes of translations, not to speak of the uncollected writings scattered through newspapers, magazines, and miscellanies. Yet it will soon be fifty years (an anniversary of sorts) since Balmont has been published in his native land.[2] As for the émigrés, they barely tolerated him throughout his

1. Let us add to these the books of selected poems, which are *Zven'ia* (Moscow, 1913), *Svetlyi chas* (Paris, 1920), *Solnechnaia priazha* (Moscow, 1921), and *Gamaiun* (Stockholm, 1921). The third of these contains almost three dozen poems not printed elsewhere. Another, *Izbrannye stikhotvoreniia,* published in New York at an unknown date, was probably unauthorized.

2. The anniversary of his birth *was* celebrated in Russia, although somewhat half-heartedly: there were at least two evenings at which papers and memoirs about Balmont were read and poetry by him was recited, and one essay (and possibly some poetry) was reprinted (see "K molodym poetam," in *Den' poezii* [Moscow, 1965]) even before the anniversary. At both of these evenings a new selected edition of his poetry was promised (but has yet to appear at the time of writing). Preparations for the partial rehabilitation

long exile, and it has been suggested that this was at least one of the causes of the mental illness which overshadowed the last ten years of his life.[3] The life work of a poet whose name, in spite of everything, has not been forgotten would seem to have been in vain. Incidentally, even the name Balmónt is habitually pronounced with the wrong stress[4] (a fate shared by Novikóv and Músorgsky).

Many a writer has been neglected in the years following his death to be later restored to a place of honor—even Pushkin did not escape this fate. Balmont's recognition in Russia has been delayed for two reasons: he was a symbolist before the Revolution and an émigré after it. Neither of these circumstances any longer presents an insuperable obstacle, and Balmont's rehabilitation cannot now be far away.

There is, however, the danger that such a rehabilitation will be based on only a fraction of his work, as was his reputation during his lifetime, and indeed afterwards—in the few critical evaluations to appear since his death. Because we have too often relied on the one-sided or downright mistaken judgments of long since forgotten critics in approaching Balmont, his entire poetic *œuvre* must be described here, however briefly. Such a survey will, it is hoped, provide a compact and useful guide for those who wish to explore this formidable body of work.

Balmont's literary career began with the publication of his first book of verse, *Sbornik stikhotvorenii* (*A Book of Poems*), in Yaroslavl in 1890. Later he came to be ashamed of this immature collection, and perhaps for this reason critics have been too ready to dismiss it, alleging a dominant influence by Nadson.[5] This is not altogether correct: Nadson was only one influence—others were A. K. Tolstoy, K. R., and several other "romantic

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of Balmont got under way several years ago, and are not without their comic aspects; for example, Gorky was dragged in to defend Balmont from the "wicked" symbolists, a ploy which echoes the handling of Mayakovsky and the futurists (see the preface to the publication of some of Balmont's letters in *Literaturnyi arkhiv,* 5 [1960]: 142-43). All these activities were limited to, and aimed at, the Soviet literary elite. In Ehrenburg's words, "Young Soviet readers hardly know that such a poet exists" (*Liudi, gody, zhizn'* [Moscow, 1961], p. 152).

3. See, for example, M. O. Tsetlin, "K. D. Bal'mont," *Novyi Zhurnal* (New York), 5 (1943): 359, and Andrei Sedykh, *Dalekie, blizkie,* 2nd ed. (New York, 1962), p. 69.

4. In addition to memoirists who refer to Balmont's pronunciation of his name (e.g., Marina Tsvetaeva, *Proza* [New York, 1953], p. 255), there is the evidence of rhyme: Balmont himself (and Igor Severianin) rhymes it with *gorizónt,* Viacheslav Ivanov with *Gellespónt,* and Mayakovsky with *obormót.*

5. In his youth Briusov was enthusiastic about Nadson too but later singled him out as a writer of mediocre verse and one insensitive to the formal aspects of poetry—a judgment which has now become a tradition, or rather, a cliché, with a great many Russian critics. Actually, Nadson is not as puerile as he is painted and has his strong points.

realists" of the second half of the nineteenth century. The clichés of theme, composition, and diction in *A Book of Poems* are obvious enough; yet on closer scrutiny these twenty-odd poems yield much that is familiar from Balmont's mature work: the theme of the moment, the image of the well (*kolodets*),[6] and even his famous alliteration in rudimentary form ("Mir polon molchalivoi muki"). Translations, almost seventy in number, form the bulk of the collection; most are from Heine (fifty), with others from Musset, Sully Prudhomme, Jean Lahor (Henri Cazalis), and Lenau. Amusingly, one of the Heine translations, "O esli budesh' ty, ditia, moei zhenoi," from this forgotten book was set to music by Grechaninov and has remained—with text slightly amended—a favorite recital encore with Russian tenors. On the whole these juvenilia show fluency but little variety, and are actually not much inferior to the pieces in Balmont's next book, *Pod severnym nebom* (*Under Northern Skies*). The main difference between the two collections is that the first (minus translations) is entirely within the Russian tradition and devoid of metrical innovations and contrivances.

It was *Under Northern Skies* that first brought Balmont to the attention of the public. The book, a slim volume of about fifty poems, was written during the winter of 1894 and is thematically a far headier mixture than *A Book of Poems*. The youthful romantic *Sehnsucht* and pictures of the Russian countryside à la Nekrasov are still there, as is the "civic" verse of the liberal journals (see especially the poem in memory of Turgenev), but occasionally old-fashioned romanticism can hardly be separated from decadence, and Nadson rubs elbows with Baudelaire. Significantly, the book begins and ends with death poems, and elsewhere one finds "poisonous flowers" and the "yearning for what does not exist" (perhaps a bow in the direction of Gippius, whose famous poem "Pesnia" with a similar line had been written the year before). The atmosphere of decadence is particularly apparent in the erotic poems gathered toward the end of the book, which offer a display of "fragrant shoulders," "resilient breasts," "voluptuous speeches," "folds of an alcove" (Balmont's favorite sexual image), and "woman—friend and eternal enemy." Perhaps to counterbalance all this sultriness, the poet introduces the theme of Scandinavia (one which he was to develop to the end of his career), thus, for once, justifying a book's title. The Scandinavian theme stemmed from Balmont's Nordic ancestry and from his enthusiasm for Ibsen and other Scandinavian writers, which eventually developed into a vogue in Russian symbolist circles. The nostalgic longing for a Russian troika which comes to the poet as he stands by a Norwegian fjord makes Balmont an unlikely predecessor of Esenin.

6. In *Tol'ko liubov'* (*Love Alone*, 1903) in another "well-poem" ("Kolodets"), Balmont quoted a stanza from the *Sbornik* poem, "Struia." Still later, he included "Struia" in his *Zven'ia* (1913) and *Solnechnaia priazha* (1921).

The most striking feature of *Under Northern Skies* was the metrical and stanzaic variety, which was so unusual at this period that Balmont found it necessary to subtitle each of the seven sonnets in the book "Sonnet." He hardly ever uses the same metrical pattern twice here, and one can find everything from traditional iambic pentameter and alexandrine (not to speak of classical hexameter and Dantesque terza rima) to various uses of ternary meters (for example, lines of varying length within an amphibrachic stanza, the mixing of amphibrachic and dactylic lines);[7] some poems use a line approximating to the *dol'nik,* while others approach free verse (or rather what Balmont considered free verse). Among the most Balmontian pieces in the collection are the impressionistic "Fantaziia," written in eight-foot trochaics with internal rhymes, a form borrowed from Edgar Allan Poe which was to become almost a trademark with Balmont, and the famous (and excessively anthologized) "Chëln tomlen'ia" (Barque of Weariness) and its lighter-hued counterpart "Pesnia bez slov" (Song Without Words). These two very early pieces were relentlessly overquoted by unimaginative critics and scholars, and came to serve as a worn poetical identification tag attached to him by others.

Strictly speaking, *Under Northern Skies* does not contain a single really good poem. In contrast, Balmont's next collection, *V bezbrezhnosti*[8] (*In*

7. Later, in *Tishina* (*Silence*), Balmont was to mix different meters within the same line.

8. *Bezbrezhnost'* (together with *bezbrezhnyi*) was Balmont's favorite word. It first made its appearance in *Under Northern Skies* (p. 7), while the phrase "pod severnym nebom" is to be found in *In Boundlessness* (p. 107). The word shows up twice in *Silence* and reappears in subsequent collections. This movement of title words and phrases could well provide a subject for a study. Often a book's title can be found, sometimes as a full line, in a poem in the same book (for example, "Sonety solntsa, mëda i luny" is a line in a sonnet on page 23 of the book of that name). Often, however, one comes across titles in other books (and not necessarily books of verse) by Balmont; for example, "goriashchie zdaniia" (*Let Us Be Like the Sun,* p. 13; *The Liturgy of Beauty,* p. 130); "ptitsy v vozdukhe" (*The Liturgy of Beauty,* p. 130); "budem kak solntse" (*The Ring,* p. 39; *Calls of Antiquity,* 2nd ed., p. 296); "zlye chary" (*White Lightnings,* p. 206; *Mirage,* p. 120); "morskoe svechenie" (*Mine—For Her,* p. 103; *Distances Drawn Apart,* p. 153); "belyi zodchii" (*Poetry as Magic,* 1st ed., p. 34); "marevo" (*Where Is My Home?,* p. 25).

All page numbers in this note and accompanying subsequent quotations in the text of this article are from the first editions, except for *Zarevo zor'* (2nd ed.) and the collections from *Under Northern Skies* through *A Round Dance of the Times,* which are cited from the "Scorpio" ten-volume *Polnoe sobranie stikhov* (Moscow, 1907-14).

In Boundlessness is ushered in by an epigraph from Dostoevsky, a writer who played a decisive formative role in Balmont's early life (see his autobiography in S. Vengerov, ed., *Russkaia literatura XX v.,* vol. 1 [Moscow, 1914], as well as his novel *Pod novym serpom* [*Under the New Moon,* Berlin, 1923]). Balmont's epigraphs would make a fascinating study; except for Sergei Bobrov, no other Russian poet—not even Pushkin or Viazemsky—is as devoted to the epigraph as Balmont; his epigraphs (often quoted in the original language) are taken from Pushkin, Heine, Fet, Goethe, Tiutchev, Poe, Dante, Hindu mystical writings, William Blake, Cervantes, Calderón, Sulpicius Severus, *Golubinaia kniga,* John Ford, Shelley, Beaumont, Tourneur, Shakespeare, Baudelaire,

Boundlessness, 1895), is not only bigger (it contains about a hundred poems) but is also the best of the early books. It is also a more consistently "decadent" book, and its formal organization was to become typical of Balmont: from now on almost all his books were to be divided into titled sections, and epigraphs attached to the book itself, to each of its sections, and to many of the individual poems (which almost always bear a title as well). Often a manifesto-like poem gives the keynote to the volume; this "key poem" is printed in italics and stands outside the first titled section. Such is here the famous "Ia mechtoiu lovil" (By Dreams I Captured). The first part of the collection, "Za predely" (Beyond the Bounds), is the best, and also the clearest in its statement of decadent themes—swamps, death, remote and inhuman regions (the ocean bed, the North Pole) alternate with motifs of snakes, the moon, the cold, and vague shadows; occasionally there is a defiant declaration ("Ia zhit' ne khochu nastoiashchim"). The arrangement of poems within this section repays careful study:[9] from sinister swamps we move to titanic solitudes; then sun and movement gain the ascendancy, only to yield finally, though not without a struggle, to the still, unvisited regions, which return with images of moonlit ghosts, sleeping islands, mists, and stunted pines. The book contains such famous poems as "Kamyshi" (Reeds) and "Lebed'" (The Swan), so beloved of "melodeclaimers" of the day; better, though, is the little-known "Podvodnye rasteniia" (Underwater Plants), which has one of the great lines of Russian poetry: "Akuly proplyvaiut inogda." Even at this early stage we find flowers, winds, brooks, and the elements (*stikhii*), all of which occur with such profusion in Balmont's later work; these winds, incidentally, obviously come from Balmont's favorite poet, Shelley, whom he made an integral part of the Russian decadent movement.

The two other sections of the book are disappointing, and give the impression of being gleaned from some of Balmont's earlier, immature poetry. One of these sections is concerned with love, and the treatment ranges from Briusov to Polonsky, with unsuccessful attempts to compete with Tiutchev and Gippius; the other, ambitious in its themes but weak in execution, turns to religious problems and Dostoevsky, and once again treats such favorite

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Tirso de Molina, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, Luis de Granada, Sluchevsky, St. Ambrose, Anaxagoras, Hamsun, Malebranche, Rider Haggard, Apollonius of Tyana, Nietzsche, Diego de Estella, *Pervigilium Veneris,* the cosmogonies of the Mayas, the *Igor Tale,* Krasiński, Mickiewicz, Orpheus, Przybyszewski, the Apocalypse, the Book of the Dead, the Upanishads, the boyarina Morozova, Chaldean writings, Viacheslav Ivanov, The Acts of the Apostles, Vasilii Nemirovich-Danchenko, the Missal, Gogol, Leo Tolstoy, Grebenshchikov, the *Kalevala,* Spanish, Russian, Lithuanian, and Egyptian folk songs, folk tales, and, of course, Balmont himself. A few more names and titles could be added, among them some I was unable to identify, such as Madeleine Bavent and Aglaia Gamaiun.

9. I know of no study of the way poems are arranged in individual collections, although this is something to which many poets have given much attention.

decadent themes as death, sickness, and night. One poem, about a man leaping to his death from a window, carries autobiographical overtones, and the subject was to recur more than once in Balmont's poems and short stories. The book ends with a verse manifesto in praise of the insatiable, the bold, and the boundless, concluding with the words (p. 141):

Мы домчимся в мир чудесный
К неизвестной Красоте.

Balmont's next book, *Tishina* (*Silence*),[10] which was written during the winter of 1897 and published the following year in St. Petersburg, shows signs of stagnation and even of a falling off in creative power. There are examples of the unconscious self-parody which seems to be typical of this poet, whose line of development is complex and full of slumps and resurgences, both great and small, of overlappings and gaps, foreshadowings and regressions. With Balmont decline and stasis usually signify the beginning of a new period and must therefore be given special attention. On the one hand, he "repeats himself" (a favorite reproach of the critics): Shelley, the yearning after the transcendental (*zapredel'nost'*), the moment, the four elements, the eternal cold, stars, flowers, swans, moons, winds, sea images, lilies, alcoves. His "musical" metrics also seem to have become stabilized in this book: internal rhymes, a predilection for certain measures, a strong—often hypercatalectic—pause in the middle of a line, alliteration. On the other hand, there are some unexpected, sometimes hardly noticeable, "firsts":[11] there is, for

10. The hostile Populist critic L. Melshin (P. F. Iakubovich), who was annoyed by what he called Balmont's narcissism, lack of simplicity ("a smile of the wave" is an example he quotes), insincerity, and disregard of sense (what price musicality?), also wrote: "Balmont has already published three books with consistently loud titles: *Under Northern Skies, In Boundlessness, Silence*" (*Ocherki russkoi poezii* [St. Petersburg, 1904], p. 327).

11. Even in the area of rhyme, one comes across *vózdukhu*: *ótdykhu*, which is untypical of both the preceding and the following Balmont (who, in matters of rhyme, can be roughly described as "progressing" from the *nívy*: *ívy* school to that of *mechtá*: *krasotá*). It is interesting that nontypical rhymes appear occasionally in Balmont's work precisely in those collections which stand on the borderlines of various stages in his evolution. Compare *vestálka ia*: *zhálkaia* and *trávy*: *navsegdá vy* in *The Liturgy of Beauty*; *grámotu*: *rádugu* and *mnogosládostnom*: *lándyshi* in *The Glow of Dawns*; *ókrug*: *óklik, Egípet*: *klíknet, iáblok*: *ziáblik, pokupáiut*: *spáian,* and even *minúvshikh*: *víshniakh* in *A Gift to the Earth.*

Innokentii Annensky wrote that "Russian poetry has not known richer rhyme for a long time" than Balmont's, and quoted such examples as *bolóto*: *któ-to, osóka*: *shiróko, kamyshí*: *tishí, navsegdá*: *sledá, izumrúdom*: *chúdom, govoriát*: *vzgliád, raspakhnët*: *gnët* ("Bal'mont-lirik," *Kniga otrazhenii* [St. Petersburg, 1906], p. 212), which look and sound very ordinary to me, a little more than half a century after Annensky. Nevertheless, Balmont's rhyme did seem unusual to his contemporaries. Not only did Melshin (*Ocherki*, p. 330) deride Balmont for the extravagance of his rhymes, but even Briusov wrote that "all Balmont's efforts are aimed at stunning the reader with strange rhyme" (*Pis'ma V.*

example, a hymn to cruelty and perverseness combined with Spanish color, all of which points to his next book, *Goriashchie zdaniia* (*Burning Buildings*), and which seems out of place in a collection entitled *Silence* which otherwise develops the theme of its title very consistently. To give another example, there is a poem with an epigraph from *Golubinaia kniga* which considerably antedates the period of Balmont's enthusiasm for Russian folklore. *Silence* is in many respects a product of the poet's visit to Western Europe in 1897 (in the course of which he delivered lectures at the Taylor Institution in Oxford). The impressions gathered during these travels inspired the poems in the section "Akkordy" (Chords), which contains what might be called Baedeker poetry alongside pieces about Italian and Spanish painting (painting was a favorite theme of other Russian symbolists). The indispensable companion to this collection (and to the two or three that follow it), is Balmont's book of essays *Gornye vershiny* (*Mountain Peaks*), published in Moscow in 1904, which comments on and amplifies the themes of some of the poems and epigraphs in *Silence* (Blake, Calderón, Cervantes; John Ford and other Jacobean dramatists). *Silence* has the subtitle *Liricheskie poemy,* and six such "lyrical *poemy*" are among its twelve titled sections; for Balmont the term *liricheskaia poema* signified a cycle of poems, often written in a variety of meters, which is unified by a single lyric (occasionally balladlike) theme.

In a broad sense it may be said that the four books of verse discussed so far constitute Balmont's poetic debut. The reception accorded to them by the critics, with the exception of a few fellow modernists, can hardly be described as enthusiastic. Even Konstantin Sluchevsky, whom most of the young decadents respected as a literary precursor, and who was benevolent enough to receive them at his literary soirees, was unable to "understand" Balmont's "Maya," for instance.[12] Akim Volynsky (Flekser), a fanatical fighter for "new ideas" and one of the pioneers of Russian modernism, was less than fervent in his admiration for Balmont's books. While granting this verse "a singing musicality with a beauty of its own," he complained of its "lack of feeling," "emptiness," "surface beauty which vanishes from memory," "imitativeness," a predilection for "superficial effects," "gaudiness," "preposterous metaphors," "hopeless inner banality," "forced pretentiousness," and "a

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Ia. Briusova k P. P. Pertsovu [Moscow, 1927], p. 25). It seems to me that all this proves an important point: not all innovations are structural in nature (none of Annensky's examples are), and any history of Russian rhyme which concentrates on structural changes only will miss a great deal of the real historical development.

Balmont's rhyme is also an excellent and unique example of Moscow pronunciation. To the best of my knowledge, no other poet was so consistently Muscovite in his rhyming: *Borísa*: *striaślisią* (*Let Us Be Like the Sun*); *shirókii*: *zelenoókoi* (*The Firebird*); *zazhglós'*: *slëz* (*Mountain Peaks*); *glás*: *veseliás'* (*Birds in the Air*); *Iisús*: *reshús'* (*A Green Garden*).

12. Valerii Briusov, *Dnevniki, 1891-1910* (Moscow, 1927), p. 55.

muddy scum of haphazard words and phrases"—to quote only some of his judgments. He summed up his feelings about Balmont's poetry in a vivid image: "Something flashes before your eyes and vanishes before your attention has had time to grasp it."[13] Volynsky intended this negatively, of course, but, like many an unfriendly critic, he grasped the main point better than the enthusiast, who sometimes imagines more than he sees—his phrase describes Balmont's impressionism very well.

If this was the reception accorded Balmont by the innovators, what could he expect from conservatives like Melshin, who called his poetry "stillborn," or S. A. Andreevsky, who complained that it "does not touch one's heart"?[14] It was left for the younger symbolists to welcome Balmont's early poetry without reservation, in the manner of Ellis (L. L. Kobylinsky), who saw masterpieces at every step (especially in *Silence*) and discovered "nuances unseen before," "astonishingly correct construction of symbols," "subtlety," "complexity," "variety," and "wide-ranging thought."[15]

It is generally agreed, and the poet himself held the opinion, that *Burning Buildings* opens a new period in Balmont's poetry. Ellis even goes so far as to speak of "an almost complete transformation of life" which marks "an abyss between *Burning Buildings* and *Silence*."[16] The book was a triumph for the poet, and together with his next, and even more successful, collection, *Budem kak solntse* (*Let Us Be Like the Sun*), made Balmont the most popular poet of the decade. Writing about Balmont ten years later, Ellis gave numerous quotations from earlier works, but none from these two books because, as he said, everyone knew them by heart.[17] *Burning Buildings* (Moscow, 1900), which consists of a hundred and thirty-odd poems, was composed in the fall of 1899 and dedicated to S. Poliakov, the organizer of the "Scorpio" publishing house. Psychologically and, to a great extent, thematically, this bright-colored, loud-shouting book may seem at first an artistic *volte-face* (and obviously a more mature collection with more good poems than all the preceding books); on closer investigation of the verse texture, however, we may doubt whether any basic change has taken place. The presiding literary deities (Baudelaire among others) remain the same. *Mountain Peaks,* the book of essays to which we have already referred, provides as good a commentary to *Burning Buildings* as it does to *Silence*. Many things in *Burning Buildings* may strike present-day taste as ludicrous (and perhaps really are so), but it is advisable to apply this label with caution. After Kozma Prutkov's

13. Akim Volynsky, *Bor'ba za idealizm* (St. Petersburg, 1900), pp. 383-88, 396.

14. Melshin, *Ocherki*, p. 331; S. A. Andreevsky, *Literaturnye ocherki*, 4th ed. (St. Petersburg, 1913), p. 402.

15. Ellis, *Russkie simvolisty* (Moscow, 1910), pp. 52, 61, 84.

16. Ibid., p. 95.

17. Ibid., p. 96.

"Desire To Be a Spaniard," for example, any Russian poem with Spanish décor becomes suspect and liable to call forth a smile (even if it is written by Pushkin), and so it is no wonder that Balmont's Spanish poems seemed artificial and operatic to some critics. Nevertheless, Balmont knew Spain, its literature (especially Calderón), its painting (especially Goya), its folklore, and its history better than any other Russian poet.[18]

For Balmont *Burning Buildings* was the product of "a single wave"[19] of inspiration, a self-realization, and more than that: he was convinced that he spoke for his contemporaries. It is for this reason that he subtitled the book "poetry [*lirika*] of the modern soul." In this sense it is part of that quasi-, or perhaps pseudo-, Nietzschean trend in Russian literature which includes, among others, Gorky.[20] Possibly the central idea in Balmont's work at this time is what he called *otdacha mirovomu* (giving oneself to the universal). In this he may be echoing Tiutchev and Fet, who played an important part in his formation (while being, one might add, utterly alien to his poetic core), but there can be no doubt that a far more immediate source was theosophy, a movement which attracted so many intellectuals at this time. Balmont had bought in London (evidently in 1897) Mme. Blavatsky's collection of Indian mystical wisdom *The Voices of Silence,* as well as a catalogue of theosophical publications, and he later called this booklet "the morning star of my inner dawn."[21] Theosophy was to remain with Balmont for the rest of his life, and it is an area which must be thoroughly explored if we are to deepen our knowledge of him. A glance through the index of Mme. Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* reveals numerous thematic coincidences with Balmont's poems, and suggests that her writings (and probably those of other theosophists) first pointed the way along paths (in particular, to India and Egypt, and to Maya[22] and the old Persian *Zend-Avesta*) which he later followed to the considerable enrichment of his poetry.

Burning Buildings is a book of storm and thunder, of "dagger words," a book which sings paeans to animalism and glorifies violence and is permeated by the color red—from red poppies and carnations to the blood-stained lips of the vampire. The Russian historical theme (the Time of Troubles, the Oprichniki, the Tatar Yoke), which emerged here for the first time, is, typically, full of Grand Guignol and ferocity. Balmont was now preoccupied with antitheses (sainthood and villainy, love and death); this, however, was not

18. In addition to his translations of Spanish folk songs and essays on Spanish literature in *Mountain Peaks,* see his book *Ispanskie narodnye pesni: Liubov' i nenavist'* (Moscow, 1912) and the travel notes in *Sea Gleams.*

19. *Polnoe sobranie stikhov,* 2: 9.

20. "Gorky and Balmont" would be a good subject for a special study.

21. See *Zmeinye tsvety* (Moscow, 1910), p. 46.

22. In Balmont one should distinguish between the Hindu concept of Maya (illusion) and the American Indian people of the same name.

new (though before he had printed contrasting poems side by side rather than treating the double theme within a single poem). The poet's musicality, as in "Angely opal'nye" (Fallen Angels), also remained essentially unchanged. Manifestoes, sermons, and even satires (not Balmont's forte at all) had grown in number. It is also noticeable that Balmont would now rather call himself a symbolist than a decadent, although his symbolism often, rather naïvely, consists in filling a poem with a single image which begs for interpretation. However, Balmont had not forgotten other aspects of symbolism, and was occasionally able to formulate its aesthetic in a few lines, as in the following Fet-like passage (p. 26):

. . . и в зыбком полусне
Те звуки с красками сливаются во мне,
И близость нового и тайного чего-то,
Как пропасть горная, на склоне поворота.

For most readers and critics the peak of Balmont's achievement has remained *Let Us Be Like the Sun,* subtitled "The Book of Symbols" and published in 1903; it was several years in the writing and is twice the size of the preceding collection. One of the clichés of Balmont criticism is that with *Burning Buildings* the poet abandoned his earlier "moon" poetry and entered his "sun" period. This generalization is not entirely satisfactory, for the sun and moon themes are linked throughout Balmont's work, sometimes juxtaposed, sometimes interwoven.[23] And in this, reputedly the sunniest of his books, the moon also casts its light. It must be said that exaggerated claims have been made for the originality and artistic quality of this book: it contains no new themes or motifs, and there is much in it that is weak (it would be hard to find something more tasteless and absurd than "Danse Macabre," for example). The four elements appear again (the "Hymn to Fire" is a real achievement), as do precious stones, which from now on are seldom absent from Balmont's books.[24] He also devotes more attention to metapoetry in the section entitled "Zmeinyi glaz" (The Snake's Eye), while eroticism is given due tribute in the section "Zacharovannyi grot" (The Enchanted Grotto), a title which clearly has sexual connotations, as do many of the symbols, such as the rose and the shell, in these poems. It is difficult now not to smile at the Victorian daring of Balmont's "alcoves," and on the whole his eroticism is inferior to the somber precision of Briusov's, just as his devilry is no match for Sologub's. Still, some of these sexual poems disturbed

23. The moon theme even emerges victorious in a later work, Balmont's drama *Tri rastsveta* (which first appeared in 1905 in *Severnye tsvety assiriiskie* and was issued as a separate book in 1907).

24. Though the theme first appeared as early as *Silence* in the "keynote" poem about the petrified forest in Arizona.

the censors so much that they were later omitted from the "Scorpio" ten-volume edition.[25] Certain passages dealing with religious themes (from the cycle "Soznanie") also fell victim to the censor's pencil.

In this book we may observe the crystallization of a few genres which were to be peculiarly Balmont's own: symbolic pictures, hymns of praise, visionary fantasies, and exhortations. The preacher of spontaneity becomes exceedingly rational at times, and then his verse falls into hollow rhetoric or mechanical jingling (sometimes both at once).

Despite all our cavils, *Let Us Be Like the Sun* remains the milestone of Russian poetry in this century that it is reputed to be, and there is much that is positive to be said about it. In the first place, the metrical experimentation is unceasing, especially in the mixing of lines of different meters (evens iambs with amphibrachs) and in the excursions into free verse. The section "Khudozhnik-D'iavol" (The Devil as Artist), which bears a dedication to Briusov (who disliked it, however), is a series of fifteen long poems written in terza rima, magnificent exercises in the decadent-grotesque with occasional hints of what we would now call surrealism. Balmont's handling of terza rima is masterly; and since, at least on Russian soil, this stanzaic form (like the sonnet and ottava rima) predetermines style, his verse here takes on a fresh and novel aspect. In this book the poet's preoccupation with colors is also much in evidence; there are obvious examples, such as the Spanish poem "Tri tsveta" (Three Colors), which is about the colors black, yellow, and red. And, as the following lines show, Balmont knew how to create more subtle effects:

Тончайшие краски
Не в ярких созвучьях
А в еле заметных
Дрожаниях струн.

(pp. 79-80)

Там были свечи с пламенем неясным
Одни с зеленовато-голубым,
Другие с бледно-желтым, третьи с красным.

(p. 204)

He even anticipated present-day minimalist art (p. 177):

Лазурь в лазури, красное на красном.

This book seems haunted by echoes from both past and future Russian poetry; see, for example, the following lines: "Skhimnik iunyi, uznik blednyi"

25. And even the first edition had to appear in a "second version" with several poems omitted. The "first version" is now a bibliographical rarity.

(cf. Pushkin: "Otrok milyi, otrok nezhnyi"); "Tsaritsa pyshnaia, Luna" (cf. Pushkin: "Tsaritsa groznaia Chuma"); "Voskhvalim, brat'ia, tsarstvie Luny" (cf. Mandelshtam: "Proslavim, brat'ia, sumerki svobody").[26]

Representatives of such different literary camps as Valerii Briusov and Maxim Gorky praised *Let Us Be Like the Sun,* and the book does contain some of Balmont's most celebrated poems, such as "Ia — izyskannost' russkoi medlitel'noi rechi" (I'm the exquisite voice of the broad Russian tongue), "Khochu byt' derzkim, khochu byt' smelym" (I want to be bold, I want to be brave), "V moëm sadu mertsaiut rozy belye" (White roses glimmer in my garden), "Ia v etot mir prishël chtob videt' solntse" (I came to this world to see the sun). (Incidentally, someone should use this last poem to demonstrate vocalic symmetry.)

One can easily imagine the reader of 1903 gasping at such lines as:

Не для меня законы, раз я гений,
Тебя я видел, так на что мне ты?

(p. 186)

Святых легко смешаешь, а уродство
Всегда фигурно, личность в нем видна,
В том явное пороков превосходство.

(p. 199)

Белейшие цветы растут из тины,
Червонней всех цветов на плахе кровь,
И смерть — сюжет прекрасный для картины.

(p. 187)

The same year saw the publication of Balmont's next book, *Tol'ko liubov'* (*Love Alone*), written during the summer of 1903, which Balmont spent on the Baltic coast in the company of the poet Jurgis Baltrušaitis. It differs little from *Let Us Be Like the Sun*: again there are paeans to the sun, epigraphs from Shelley (and from Balmont himself), cruel beauty, yearning for the transcendental; life is contrasted with "the inexhaustibility of dreams," "the shimmerings of dreams"; and the moon and the ocean bed make their inevitable appearance, together with a few manifestoes—"Ia nenavizhu chelovechestvo" (I hate humanity), "Ia ne znaiu mudrosti godnoi dlia drugikh" (I know no wisdom meet for others). Again one notices the characteristic strong caesura in the middle of many lines, and such Balmont specialties as the poems in eight-foot trochaics (none of which, however, rises to the level of a masterpiece); there are numerous gestures in the direction of impressionism on a

26. Many more lines could be cited from other collections echoing Nekrasov, Derzhavin, Zhukovsky, and Lermontov. Entire poems are reminiscent of Fet, Iazykov, Lermontov, or anticipate Blok, Khlebnikov, poets of the "Smithy," Pasternak, and Zabolotsky.

programmatic plane (*mimolëtnosti, sluchainosti*) which are never substantiated by the texture of the verse.

Yet, on the whole, this book is a more solid achievement than either of the two preceding ones. To reproach Balmont with banality is to miss the point—his banality is successful; one might as well reproach Mayakovsky with rudeness. Where Balmont is less than successful is in his love poetry (plainly a product of his real-life flirtations) and in his attempts at philosophical verse in the cycles "Mirovoe koltso" (A Ring of Worlds) and "Priblizheniia" (Approaches), which are downright bad. It is in this volume, however, that one finds the famous "Snezhinka" (Snowflake) and "Bezglagol'nost'" (Wordlessness), the latter of which, for some reason, enjoys a certain prestige even among those who reject the rest of Balmont's work.

A rarity in Balmont is the autobiographical note (apart, that is, from echoes of love affairs) which sounds in this book—a poem about his public appearances, hints of his disagreements with friends and followers among the decadents (especially with Briusov) in the section "Prokliat'ia" (Curses). There are prophetic lines anticipating his fall from public favor in "Tishe, tishe" (Don't Be Hasty) and a good definition of his own poetry as "moë pevuchee vitiistvo" (my singing oratory). We also find the theme of the poet's work as a harsh discipline, something one associates with Briusov rather than the "I-sing-like-a-bird" Balmont. He even tries to undermine his own melodiousness by the introduction of what he calls "preryvistye stroki" (broken lines)—really, on the whole, the four-stress *dol'nik* (or rather *udarnik*). We are given ample proof here that jingling Poe-esque trochees and ambitious hymns to the elements are not, contrary to prevailing opinion, the only Balmont; he was also capable of an "Acmeist" precision of observation (p. 83):

. . . и на песках размытых
Лишь стебли трав морских, согнутых вперегиб,
Осколки раковин, приливом позабытых,
И трупы бледных рыб.

Love Alone is "classic," standard Balmont. It contains typical Balmontisms in the manner of "O kak liubliu, liubliu sluchainosti" (O how I love, I love the play of chance) (p. 75) and textbook symbolism both in its romantic form, as in these lines (p. 91):

Я жажду голубого
Небесного цветка

and in its more essential aspect, as in these (p. 124):

Есть намеки тайные
В будничных вещах.
Есть необычайные
Пропасти в сердцах.

What is most striking here, however, is what might be termed "the hunger of the soul," the desire to run the gamut of all possible and impossible experience—

Хочу я блеска новых глаз,
Непознанных планет

(p. 23)

Не будет ни звука, ни краски,
К которым мечтой не коснусь—

(p. 134)

to "put a girdle round the earth," and to write in as many idioms, manners, and combinations of meter as possible. Blasphemous as it may sound, Baratynsky's famous words about Goethe, "Была ему звездная книга ясна, / И с ним говорила морская волна," fit Balmont much better.

Liturgiia krasoty (*The Liturgy of Beauty*), which bore the subtitle "Elemental Hymns," came out in 1905 and marked the beginning of the poet's fall from fashion. As might be expected, this sense of disappointment was first felt among the elite and took some time to filter down; the general reader was still as intoxicated with Balmont as ever. Indeed, it is reported that Anatolii Lunacharsky, the future Soviet minister of culture, recited poems from *The Liturgy of Beauty* over the coffin of his dead baby.[27] While it cannot be denied that much of the book is mediocre, chaotic, long-winded, and tedious—especially the rehashes of old manifestoes and, once again, the love poetry—there are nevertheless some highly interesting pieces, such as "Pliaska atomov" (The Dance of the Atoms) and "Lemury" (The Lemurs).

The student of Balmont will notice some important new departures in this book. It is here, for example, that the poet enters the field of the occult (although there had been hints of this before); this manifests itself in the epigraph from Apollonius of Tyana, the amulet theme, and the Pythagorean idea of numbers ruling the universe. The Slavic theme too, so important to Balmont's later development, is here sounded distinctly for the first time. Finally, the Mexico of the later books makes its appearance here in a single poem about a hummingbird. Attention must also be drawn to the long (and artistically unsuccessful) cycle "Fata morgana," which deals with colors and their combinations. There is no doubt, however, that the final section of the

27. See Tsetlin, "K. D. Bal'mont," p. 258.

book, devoted to the four elements, is a remarkable, if uneven, achievement. "Earth," as one would expect, is the weakest part, though "Water" contains these exquisitely preposterous lines (p. 110),

> И всюду я думал, что всюду, всегда
> Различно-прекрасна вода,

which will immediately put many Russians in mind of Kornei Chukovsky's classic children's book, *Moidodyr*.

For all his occasional inadequacy, Balmont was one of the few Russian poets who was not only capable of metaphysical flights, but of a bird's-eye vision which perhaps Gogol and Khlebnikov alone among Russian writers could surpass. One might also add that Briusov was correct in describing Balmont as "a poet of individual lines."[28] *Let Us Be Like the Sun* has an abundance of such arresting lines; two examples from *The Liturgy of Beauty* will suffice:

> Рождала отклики на суше глубина
> (p. 120)
> Страшною стала мне даже трава
> (p. 101)

It might be said that *The Liturgy of Beauty* is full of premonitions of approaching crisis, both in its artistic decline and in its groping after new themes. Another sign of these premonitions might be *Feinye skazki: Detskie pesenki* (*Stories About the Fairy: Songs for Children*), a slim volume of sixty-five poems which Balmont wrote in the fall of 1905 and published in the same year. This book is a kind of interlude in the poet's work. He abandons the elemental deeps but finds no genuine new direction; the collection consequently hangs in the air. It does reveal one new theme, however, which will occasionally be returned to. *Stories About the Fairy* is both a discovery of a special world and a new demonstration of Balmont's range. Written for the poet's small daughter, these Victorian picture-postcard pieces about the Fairy and her pastimes, the insects and grasses which surround her, and her war with the King of the Ants are somewhat on the sweet side for modern taste; still, they are convincing in their way and are not without a certain old-fashioned charm. Balmont did have a purity of heart unique among his contemporaries (with the possible exception of Kuzmin). Who else would even have contemplated writing such a poem as "Snezhinka" in *Love Alone*, and who else in the twentieth century could have brought it off successfully? Of course, the book is not perfect, there are clumsy lines and that general lack

28. *Pis'ma V. Ia. Briusova*, p. 35.

of "the resistance of the material" which is so typical of Balmont. There is one curious anticipation of Mayakovsky (later repeated in *Birds in the Air*): "Mne devochka skazala: / Ty—moi volshebnyi Fei" (cf. Mayakovsky's "Nian'" in *Khorosho,* "Obez'ian" in his verses for children, and "Sobak" in his letters).

The second part of the book, which abandons the theme of the Fairy, is an important stage in the development of Russian children's literature before its flowering with Chukovsky and Marshak, and cannot be omitted from any history of such literature.

We now come to a period in Balmont's poetry which has met with almost unanimous critical condemnation. Biographically it coincides with his second exile,[29] which lasted from December 1905 until shortly after the amnesty of February 1913. During this time he lived in France (Paris and Brittany) and Belgium and also traveled extensively in Europe, America, Africa, Asia, and Polynesia. All his books were published in Russia in the meantime (though three of them—*Evil Spells, Poems,*[30] and *Songs of an Avenger*—were confiscated because of their political poetry).

Zlye chary: Kniga zakliatii (*Evil Spells: A Book of Exorcisms*) was written in the spring of 1906 and published the same year in Moscow. It is a tired book, revealing the poet's sickness of spirit on almost every page, and hardly a single satisfactory poem is to be found in it. Stylistic incongruity, repetitions of Balmont's own and echoes of other poets' work (from Apukhtin to Briusov), fragmentariness, and downright vulgarity are some of the book's faults. Lines as invincibly prosaic as (p. 69)

Прощай, мой милый. Милый! Ха! Ну-ну

occur frequently, and even Balmont's famous musicality founders in such lines as (p. 73):

Нас в свой черед зальют.

Nevertheless, the book is the first to develop on any scale Balmont's interest in Russian and Slavic folklore. The source here is obviously Afanasiev's three-volume *Poeticheskie vozzreniia slavian na prirodu,* a work which Balmont must have studied diligently during his exile. For example, the poem

29. Balmont's first exile was brought about by his public reading of a poem satirizing the tsar in 1901, after which he was forbidden to live in the capital or university cities for two years. He spent much of this exile abroad.

30. *Stikhotvoreniia* (St. Petersburg, 1906), published by "Znanie" and unfavorably reviewed by Briusov in *Vesy,* consisted of only fifteen pages. I was unable to obtain the book. Balmont himself never included it later in his list of publications.

about *odolen'* grass not only repeats what Afanasiev says about it, but even has an epigraph taken not, as Balmont claims, from a *travnik* (a popular "herb book") but from Afanasiev's quotations from such a book. Many of the pieces here (among them, the one about the changeling child) are retellings of those quoted by Afanasiev, while the folk exorcisms and pagan Slavic mythology are all taken from Afanasiev. According to E. Anichkov, the entire book speaks metaphorically of "the darkness of 1905,"[31] of the poet's mourning for his native land and his hatred for the oppressors—hence the grotesque images, the Grand Guignol motifs, and the at once tragic and sinister atmosphere which characterize it. Nightmare here is no longer a borrowing from Baudelaire, but a direct projection of the poet's feelings (and it is curious that this "sincerity" should result in artistic failure). Balmont was depressed by the events of the 1905 uprising, which he witnessed before his departure from Russia, and by its aftermath; in this book he attempted to combine his symbolist absorption in the occult with nostalgia for Russia and political emotions. To these we may add the familiar motifs of numbers, amulets, snakes, and, most important, precious stones. The exorcisms contain instances of archaic diction (*idosha, reche*), which are rare in Balmont's work. To understand *Evil Spells* one must also read Balmont's essay with the Mayakovskian title "Fleity iz chelovecheskikh kostei" (Flutes Made from Human Bones), in *Belye zarnitsy* (*White Lightnings*), published in St. Petersburg in 1908.[32]

More "constructive" and far more ambitious was Balmont's next book, written in Brittany during the summer and fall of 1906[33] and published in Moscow in 1907 (as volume 7 of the "Scorpio" edition of the collected works, although it was, in fact, the first in the series to appear). *Zhar-ptitsa* (*The Firebird*) bore the subtitle *Svirel' slavianina* (A Slav's Oaten Pipe) and had a cover designed by Konstantin Somov. The symbol of the firebird recurs throughout Balmont's work (there is a poem with this title in *Love Alone*), and, strictly speaking, there are no motifs in this mammoth collection that were not already present in *Evil Spells*—magic, precious stones, Russian folk poetry and Slavic mythology, much of it again borrowed from Afanasiev. This time, though, there is much more folklore, and it is obvious that Balmont worked with collections of Russian *byliny* and *dukhovnye stikhi* open before

31. E. Anichkov, "Bal'mont," in Vengerov, *Russkaia literatura XX v.*, 1:32. In a shortened form this essay later appeared as a chapter in Anichkov's *Novaia russkaia poeziia* (Berlin, 1923).

32. This book also contains essays on Walt Whitman and Maurice Maeterlinck, both important influences on Balmont. *The Liturgy of Beauty* has a counterpart here in the essay "Poeziia stikhii."

33. See *Morskoe svechenie* (*Sea Gleams*) (St. Petersburg and Moscow: M. O. Volf, 1910), p. 202: "That summer I was caught up in rhythm each day and each night, and I wrote *The Firebird*."

him. The greater part of the book is taken up with retellings of these folk epics (sometimes even two versions of the same story are made into two separate poems). Perhaps no other book of Balmont's has come under attack so often, mainly on the grounds of its willful distortion of folk poetry. Certainly it is true that Russian *byliny* look uncomfortable in the garb of eight-foot trochaics and tinkling with rhymes like *mechtá: krasotá.* And it is difficult to discern any "folk spirit" in such lines about the *bogatyr'* Vol'ga as (p. 98):

Обучался, обучился. Что красиво? Жить в борьбе

or the description of another *bogatyr'* Potok (p. 102):

На пиру он застыл в непонятных мечтах.

Only Balmont could call the god Perun "obaiatel'nyi" (p. 164) and Ilia Muromets "tainovidets bytiia" (p. 121), or permit enjambment in a *bylina.*

In the perspective of time, however, Balmont needs understanding and defense rather than attack. First of all, it is only fair to say that he "balmontized" anything he laid his hands on (as he did Shelley and Rustaveli in his translations), and there is nothing terrible about that—indeed it was inevitable. Second, Pushkin, too, "distorted" Russian folklore (if this can be considered a legitimate defense). One might also accuse Tchaikovsky of "distorting" Pushkin in both his great operas. But the problem goes deeper than this, and once again we must turn to Balmont's essays for a clue to his poetry. In the essay "Rubinovye kryl'ia" (Ruby Wings) from the collection *Morskoe svechenie* (*Sea Gleams*), a veritable vade mecum to *The Firebird,* Balmont makes it clear that he considers the creative act to take place between two poles: the feeling for a particular country and the feeling of personal limitlessness (*beskrainost'*).[34] Thus what confronts us in *The Firebird* is not so much a preoccupation with folk poetry as a statement of half of one of the great antitheses which so fascinated Balmont. Moreover, true to his symbolist aesthetic, Balmont saw in folk exorcisms "a magic to bring to life, through the word, an integral picture with a double meaning," and it is easy to see that he selects *byliny* in his own way, choosing mainly those that deal with the magical, the mystical, and the erotic. "From the soul of the people I go to my own soul" is another of Balmont's utterances that should settle the problem once and for all.[35]

With all its shortcomings, particularly in the area of lexical stylization,

34. For Balmont, "*Veda, Popol Vuh, Zend-Avesta, Edda,* and *Kalevala,* as well as Russian folklore, posit and solve problems which concern all polarities in nature and in the human soul" (*Sea Gleams,* p. 60).

35. Ibid., pp. 7, 61.

The Firebird is well worth studying, and its sources, themes, and meters await closer investigation. Any Slavist simply must know this book and have the poem "Slavianskoe drevo" (The Tree of the Slavs) in his head. To end our discussion with a curiosity—are not the following lines (p. 210) about a wood goblin an anticipation of Akhmatova's famous (and excessively quoted) lines about the left-hand glove being put on the right hand:

Лапти вывернул, и правый
Вместо левого, лукавый,
Усмехаясь, натянул.

Pesni mstitelia (*Songs of an Avenger*) was the only book of Balmont's exile to appear abroad (Paris, 1907). It contains forty-nine poems, mostly written in Brittany in the same breath as those of *The Firebird* and published earlier in Amfiteatrov's Parisian magazine *Krasnoe znamia*. The book astonished many by its subject matter (direct political invective and satire, calls to vengeance, paeans to the working man and revolution)—and by its poor quality. Actually there was nothing surprising in Balmont's turning to revolutionary themes: he was no ivory-tower aesthete, for all his professed individualism and love of pure art, and he had been involved in politics before (see note 29). The antitsarist poems in *Songs of an Avenger* are particularly abusive ("dirty scoundrel," "bloodstained hands," "monarch-thief" are some of the expressions used); indeed, he even goes so far as to threaten the tsar with the gallows. Certainly no Communist poet ever surpassed Balmont in heaping obloquy on a monarchist regime: *parazity, gady, svirepye sobaki, volch'i dushi* are some of the terms used. It is only fair to add that when it comes to the tsarina Balmont remained chivalrous enough to ask that, as a lady, she be spared. The book also contains Slavic and other East European material—translations of antitsarist fragments from Mickiewicz, a poem about the Slavic tongue, and another about the Lithuanian national emblem. Balmont remained Balmont: he reminded the Russian workers of his Scandinavian origins, used epigraphs from Mayan writings, surveyed Slavic, German, Mexican, and Indian mythology and sometimes got muddled, calling Ivan the Terrible a Romanov. The book is a monument to his civic courage. While his friends promptly abandoned the idea of revolution after the failure of the 1905 uprising, he wrote poems that burned his bridges back to Russia by insulting not only the imperial family but the entire Russian army. The totally adverse verdict passed on this book by even Communist critics (Evgeniev-Maksimov, for example, calls it "the weakest of all that Balmont has written") is not altogether justified, for it does contain about a dozen interesting poems.[36] The

36. V. E. Evgeniev-Maksimov, *Ocherk istorii noveishei russkoi literatury* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1925), p. 122. Among the interesting poems are "Budto by Romanovym," "K ostyvshchim," and "Slavianskii iazyk."

fact, however, remains that Balmont wrote as poorly against the tsar as he was later to do against the Bolsheviks. Contrary to the main axiom of Soviet aesthetics, the "right cause" failed to produce good poetry, although no one can question Balmont's sincerity in writing as he did.

The next "crisis" collection made its appearance in St. Petersburg in 1908 under the title—"preposterous"[37] according to one critic—of *Ptitsy v vozdukhe* (*Birds in the Air*). Subtitled *Strokhi napevnye* (Melodious Lines), the book is in seven sections whose titles are echoed in the poems they contain. In the main, it develops or repeats old themes—some older than Balmont; more than one poem, alas, would please the reader who finds his poetry on the reverse side of the leaves in Russian tear-off calendars. The collection begins with a manifesto on the theme "Ich singe wie ein Vogel singt," which is followed by poems recalling the early Balmont: musical pieces and symbolic pictures (the word "symbol" recurs insistently in these poems). Here again are colors, numbers, and exorcisms; and the imagery—in addition to the promised birds—includes sun, moon, wine, magic, rainbows, snakes, and bees. Folklore, too, is here with themes taken from fairy tales and pagan rites, with folk riddles thrown in for good measure. In "Zolotaia parcha" (Gold Brocade) Balmont finally succeeds in reproducing the true folk style. Lithuanian themes are more noticeable than before, and Balmont touches on the Ukrainian theme for the first time, never to return to it later (an exception among the major Slavic peoples). What Innokentii Annensky called, with reference to Balmont, *perepev* (a term he borrowed from Balmont's own poetry and interpreted as a system of verbal and root repetitions in Balmont's verse) here is found in its crudest form, for example, in "Khvalite" (Praise!). Some of these poems are in one of Balmont's favorite forms, that of question and answer, and there is a tendency toward loosening of meter—see, for instance, "Terem mira" (The Tower of the World). On the other hand, the eight-foot amphibrach is added to his old long-line verse.

Even if most of these poems do not impress (occasionally one has the curious feeling of reading a fine poem in a poor translation), good poems can be found; a certain mellowness is in the air, and there is an unexpected trend toward terseness in the four-line poems. From now on, this will exist alongside Balmont's diffuse and flowing manner.

Special mention should be made of the last section of the book, "Maya," which, in addition to being artistically more successful than most of the poems here, is Balmont's first sizable body of verse concerned with Mexico in general and Mayan civilization in particular—the result of his journey to Mexico with his future wife Elena Tsvetkovskaia in February–June 1905. The very interesting diary of these travels can be found in Balmont's book of essays

37. Ellis, *Russkie simvolisty*, p. 121.

Zmeinye tsvety (*Snake-like Flowers*), which also contains essays on Mexican symbolism and mythology and translations from Mayan sacred books. Much of this was assimilated in Balmont's poetry. Despite the expected "balmontization" of the material, such as calling the hummingbird "little firebird" (p. 128) and making a salad of Slavic and Mexican gods, Balmont manages to add a new sound[38] to Russian poetry with his use of exotic Mexican names:

Здесь агуэгуэтль, любимец Монтезумы
(p. 129)

А Ицтаксигуатль, венчанная снегами,
И Попокатепетль, в уборе из снегов.
(p. 130)

As usual, Balmont went on his travels well prepared: before and during his trip he acquainted himself with works by Prescott, Sahagún, Lumholtz, Le Plongeon, Holmes, Charnay, Chavero, Maudslay, Stephens, Buslaev, Brasseur de Bourbourg, Nuttall, Ehrenreich, Veytia, and possibly a few more. Balmont's indefatigable exploration of geographical and cultural areas neglected or ignored by other Russian poets is something for which Russian literature owes him a debt of gratitude. In addition to Mexico, he explored at the same time Poland, Lithuania, Brittany, and Scandinavia, and later was to explore Egypt and Polynesia. It is he, and not Gumilev, who should be mentioned first whenever the muse of distant travels is brought to mind, and one suspects that much of Balmont's poetry would be more popular if it were signed with Gumilev's name.

Zelënyi vertograd: Slova potseluinye (*A Green Garden: Kissing Words*), which came out in St. Petersburg in 1910, was the occasion of one of the greatest misjudgments of Russian criticism. Ever since *The Liturgy of Beauty* Russian critics had become so accustomed to dismissing every new book of Balmont's that they overlooked one of his finest collections. Briusov's word of admiration[39] went unheeded, as did Balmont's own advice in one of his earlier poems not to be too hasty in "stripping the old idols." *A Green Garden* consists of almost two hundred imitations of the songs of Russian flagellant sectarians (*khlysty*), and it is a poetic miracle. Never before had Balmont maintained such a consistently high level, such longbreathedness

38. This search for new sounds by the introduction of foreign names in profusion was noticeable before, but evidently not to Balmont's contemporaries, who, for instance, in *Let Us Be Like the Sun* singled out for praise the commonplace "Pridorozhnye travy" (Mirsky, Chukovsky) and bypassed such a masterpiece as "Skorb' Aguramazdy," based on the *Zend-Avesta*. More examples of especially interesting usage of non-Russian names are found in *Zovy drevnosti* (Berlin: "Slovo," 1923), pp. 80, 126, 177; and in *Northern Lights*, pp. 31, 56.

39. In *Vesy*, no. 9, 1908.

(*shirokoe dykhanie*), such energy and swiftness, such lightness and simplicity, or even such metrical variety; there are no weak poems here. Perhaps this was what Balmont had needed from folklore in order to soar—not epic but lyrical models. The book is also exceptional in its arrangement: gone are the baroque trappings of preceding collections, with their elaborate divisions into epigraph-studded, elaborately titled sections (and let me remark here that Balmont was a baroque—or rather a neobaroque—poet not in an "impressionistic" or figurative sense). Here the poems do form cycles, but the reader is carried from one to another without any prompting from the poet; the cycles flow into each other—symbolic rivers, paradise, brothers and sisters, the Boat (*Korabl'*), ecstatic rites (*radeniia*), sacred sex, prayers, religious symbolism, culminating in a vision of the end of the world and eternal glory. Balmont can be both wild and gently colorful in the manner of a Russian Fra Angelico, and there is a richness of orchestration here which goes far beyond Poe-esque jingling all the way to Derzhavin; here is an example (p. 204):

И голос, глаголанье, гул без конца.
(Cf. Derzhavin: И гул глухой в глуши гудет.)

He even brings off successful paraphrases of well-known prayers (such as the flagellants' version of the Cherubim Prayer)—an enterprise in which Pushkin himself did not come off entirely victorious. All is achieved without any betrayal of his poetic self: the familiar Balmont features are all here.

Khorovod vremën: Vseglasnost' (*A Round Dance of the Times: All Voices*), which was written mostly in Flanders, concludes Balmont's European period. It has, unfortunately, little to recommend it except variety of content. Balmont enters into competition with the Blok of the Kulikovo Field cycle in his poema "Belyi lebed'" (The White Swan)—Tatar blood, from his mother's side, ran in the poet's veins; he also presents a cycle of poems based on the months, takes up the folklore theme again, along with many other earlier themes. This would be the least interesting of Balmont's books were it not for two poemas: "Kradushcheesia zavtra" (The Encroaching Morrow), a curious utopian fantasy, and "V beloi strane" (In the White Land), which, though strange, carries conviction in its search for new ways. The greater part of this polar poem dwells on the nightmares and deliriums of a man in crazed, snowbound isolation. The familiar Balmont tone is almost completely abandoned, and there are experiments (this time successful) with the diction of everyday speech. Again we hear echoes from the past (Nekrasov and Fet) and presages of the future (Tikhonov and Esenin). For some reason Balmont never went further along this path; after his return to Russia his poetry was to be marked by a resurgence and ripening of his old idiom.

The books Balmont produced between 1906 and 1912, the years of exile,

were almost unanimously condemned by the same critics who had been so vociferous in their admiration of *Let Us Be Like the Sun* and its companion volumes.[40] The authoritative signal came from Balmont's own symbolist camp: Briusov, who had pronounced *Burning Buildings* Balmont's "best" book,[41] and *Let Us Be Like the Sun* his "most perfect" one, saw signs of decline as early as *Love Alone.* For him *Evil Spells* was a "precipitous downhill movement" (*obryvistyi spusk*), characterized by loss of freshness, careless handling of language, padding, lack of style, and sacrifice of meaning to rhyme. In *The Firebird* Briusov saw "total downfall" and reproached Balmont for his "inartistic attitude" toward folk poetry. He did, however, praise *A Green Garden* for "gentle precision of image" and "constant musicality of rhythm." Later, when Briusov gathered all his reviews of Balmont's work together in one book,[42] he added a postscript prophesying that although Balmont would produce further books, they would add nothing to his reputation; whether or not he continued to publish, Balmont "had said his last word." It is reasonable to suppose that Briusov's verdict, passed in 1911—that is, when his voice was listened to not by his fellow symbolists alone—sealed Balmont's fate. Ironically, Briusov was among Balmont's most sympathetic and objective critics and was, moreover, well aware that "contemporary critics are always, and fatally, shortsighted."[43]

Alexander Blok was less consistent—or sincere—in his evaluation of Balmont's work. He first praised *The Firebird* excessively, saying that "one should take this book to the open field and sing it to the four winds," and seeing in it the victory of "lofty simplicity" over "the old decadent tricks" (5 : 137),[44] as opposed to Briusov, who saw just the opposite—Ilia Muromets and Sadko in "a decadent's frock coat," a sight he found "ridiculous and pathetic."[45] Soon, however, Blok decided that *The Firebird* and *Evil Spells* were "three-quarters rubbish," and the rest of Balmont's books of this period (including *A Green Garden*) "sheer nonsense" (*prosto galimat'ia*), even going as far as to suggest that they should be destroyed (5 : 373-74). For Blok the ideal remained *Silence,* Balmont's "most tender and childlike creation" (5 : 550).

40. Melshin alone was adamant and in 1904 continued to insist that "there is not the smallest grain of poetry in *Burning Buildings.*"

41. It is interesting to note that, for all his respect for *Burning Buildings,* Briusov continued (perhaps nostalgically) to have a far greater affection for Balmont's earlier books, as did Ellis. Briusov was of the opinion that "Balmont's glorification of life is strained and artificial, whereas his melancholy is natural" (see *Vesy,* no. 4, 1905).

42. Valerii Briusov, *Dalekie i blizkie* (Moscow: "Skorpion," 1912).

43. Review in *Vesy,* no. 9, 1908.

44. All quotations from Blok are from *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1960-63), and references are given in the text in parentheses.

45. See *Vesy,* no. 10, 1907.

Ellis, for whom the early Balmont was the perfect symbolist and *Let Us Be Like the Sun* Balmont's "richest and most important book," angrily dismissed his later verse for its "false notes" and repetitions and for the poet's failure to make up his mind what he wanted to write about. Ellis labeled all Balmont's collections from *Evil Spells* to *A Round Dance of the Times* mediocre, devoid of style, weak in content, and almost completely lacking in form.[46]

Such was the judgment of Balmont's fellow symbolists, and others followed, more or less. Like opinions are to be found in the critical articles and letters of such different writers as Maxim Gorky, Kornei Chukovsky, Peter Kogan, Diks, Nikolai Gumilev (who, it should be mentioned, shared with Briusov a measure of admiration for *A Green Garden*) and Vadim Shershenevich, then a futurist.[47]

Balmont had his defenders, but they were not numerous. Understandably, A. Amfiteatrov, the leftist publisher of Balmont's antitsarist poetry in Paris, lauded not only *Evil Spells* and *The Firebird* but *Songs of an Avenger*[48] as well, which, he wrote, "were written not in ink, but in blood."[49] Upon his return to Russia, Balmont also received support from the academic community. A good example is Professor E. Anichkov's article "Bal'mont" in Vengerov's *Russkaia literatura XX veka.* Anichkov not only discovered the significance of Balmont's work and the "variety of his ideas, images, knowledge, enthusiasms, and beliefs" around 1913–14 but recognized the poet as one of his own kind, a scholar (*poet-knigochii i dazhe poet-erudit*). He even suggested that what had been gaudy in *Let Us Be Like the Sun* and *Love Alone* had now "become incomparably more thoughtful and perfect," and he reproached the reader for leafing casually through the pages of Balmont's latest books and unjustly deciding that his talent had weakened.[50]

Unfortunately, however, those who claimed that Balmont had written himself out with *Love Alone* had their influence on the authors of histories of literature and encyclopedia entries, and they in turn helped to shape the opinions of countless students. The fact that "Scorpio" called its ten-volume edition of Balmont's poetry *Polnoe sobranie* (though it was not complete even for that time) also played its hypnotic part. Few, it seemed, cared to read what came after it.

46. Ellis, *Russkie simvolisty*, pp. 54, 79.

47. Maxim Gorky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols. (Moscow, 1949-55), 30:87; K. Chukovsky, *Ot Chekhova do nashikh dnei* (St. Petersburg, 1908), p. 28; P. Kogan, *Ocherki po istorii noveishei russkoi literatury*, vol. 3, pt. 2, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1912), p. 91; B. Diks, in *Kniga o russkikh poetakh poslednego desiatiletiia*, ed. M. Gofman (St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1907), p. 42; N. Gumilev, *Pis'ma o russkoi poezii* (Petrograd, 1923), p. 136; Abbat Fanferliush (V. Shershenevich), "Poshlost' na p'edestale" in the miscellany *Krematorii zdravomysliia* (Moscow, 1913), no pagination.

48. Which was praised by Alexander Blok too (5:138).

49. *Sovremenniki* (Moscow, 1908).

50. Anichkov, "Bal'mont," pp. 65, 68, 78.

Here is a short survey of what some "shapers of public opinion" said. Lelevich, writing on Balmont for the *Literaturnaia entsiklopediia,* declared that after 1903 his poetry became "monotonous repetition of old motifs, degenerating into superficial and tiresome stylization."[51] The authors of literary histories in the major European languages were no kinder to Balmont. According to Mirsky, "all his original verse after 1905 . . . may be swept aside as quite worthless." Simmons wrote that in Balmont's "voluminous later works [that is, after *Let Us Be Like the Sun*] the richness begins to cloy and the patterns of sound become monotonous." Harkins ended his discussion of Balmont with *Let Us Be Like the Sun* and anyway found the poet "banal and puerile" with "modernist and symbolist tendencies relatively superficial" (the Russian symbolists would hardly have agreed with this). Poggioli referred to "keener judges" who pronounced that Balmont went into a decline after *Love Alone,* and stated: "All the collections of poems for which he will be remembered appeared during a brief span of time, that ten- or twelve-year period which formed the only phase of Bal'mont's life [that is, 1894-1903] marked by creativity, and not by fecundity alone." Hofmann was certain that after 1905 Balmont began to "glide down," becoming his own imitator and for thirty-five years doing nothing but "créant de jolies combinaisons sonores, malheureusement dépourvues de flamme et même de la moindre étincelle poétique." For Lettenbauer, *Love Alone* and *The Liturgy of Beauty* "stehen nicht mehr auf der Höhe" of the two preceding volumes; by *The Firebird* he is "enttäuscht," and with that Balmont vanishes completely from the book. Lo Gatto did not discuss Balmont's books after *Love Alone,* and Stender-Petersen, who, like Lo Gatto, cautiously said nothing about a "decline," nevertheless dropped the poet after mentioning *The Firebird.*[52]

The lamentable fact is clear for all to see: some time during the period of his exile Balmont was declared to be no longer worthy of attention and was relegated to limbo. Not only readers and critics but even poets stopped reading him, and only the odd reviewer would sample a random page or two before hurrying to record his predictably negative judgment. The poet was to live for another thirty years, remaining poetically active for at least twenty of them. He was to pass through at least two more creative periods and to write more than ten books of verse. But it was no use. The sentence had been passed: *Balmontica non leguntur.*

51. *Literaturnaia entsiklopediia,* vol. 1 (Moscow, 1929), col. 327.

52. D. S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature* (New York, 1955), p. 433. Ernest J. Simmons, *An Outline of Modern Russian Literature* (Ithaca, 1943), p. 28. William E. Harkins, *Dictionary of Russian Literature* (Paterson, 1959), p. 14. Renato Poggioli, *Poets of Russia, 1890-1930* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 90. M. Hofmann, *Histoire de la littérature russe* (Paris, 1946), pp. 250-51. Wilhelm Lettenbauer, *Russische Literaturgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main and Vienna, 1955), p. 227. Ettore Lo Gatto, *Storia della letteratura russa,* 2nd ed. (Florence, 1943), p. 440. Adolf Stender-Petersen, *Geschichte der russischen Literatur,* 2 vols. (Munich, 1957), 2:521.

Balmont was still abroad in 1912 when the twenty-fifth anniversary of his literary debut was celebrated both in Russia and in Paris.[53] That same year he undertook what was perhaps the most ambitious of all his journeys, visiting Africa, Australia, New Zealand, India, Ceylon, Java, Sumatra, New Guinea, Samoa, Fiji, and Tonga; in that year too his *Zarevo zor'* (*The Glow of Dawns*), without a subtitle for a change, was published in Moscow by the "Gryphon" publishing house. Practically ignored by the literary elite, it enjoyed some popular success, being the last of Balmont's books to go through more than one edition.[54] It is a curious book, easy to dismiss on superficial acquaintance; thematically it seems to repeat the already familiar (a common reproach where Balmont is concerned). There is, however, a new predilection for the short poem, a form which Balmont had not yet completely mastered.

The initial impression produced by *The Glow of Dawns* is that it not only chews over old material, but even reverts to the pre-modernist Russian literary tradition with a concomitant loss of individuality, especially in the landscape poetry, which often brings to mind A. Maikov and other favorites of pre-revolutionary gymnasium anthologies. Soon, however, beneath this surface, one becomes aware of a slow ripening process which did not come painlessly to this "poet-child." Even a "bird in the air," it seems, needs firm ground somewhere beneath, and Balmont achieved here a concentration and discipline which resulted in poems an Acmeist could approve. Composition is now more precise—with the earlier Balmont it had often been amorphous and chaotic—and it is perhaps this which caused Balmont to turn to the sonnet with renewed interest. Although he did not yet handle this form successfully, he was now using it not as he had previously, merely to vary his stanzaic pattern, but rather to achieve discipline; Balmont felt the need of a bridle. A new and unfamiliar Balmont was going hand in hand with the old one; the achievement was as yet uneven, ranging from the exasperatingly unsuccessful to such a masterpiece as "Mirovaia pyl'" (The World's Dust), from Bunin-like pictures to incantations and even surrealistic grotesques (see, for example, "Son," one of several Balmont "dreams"). Of the book's seven sections the best is "Lucheizlom" (The Broken Ray), which is preponderantly violent, menacing, and exotic in its imagery and comes near to being a miracle in its

53. The papers read at the Neophilological Society in St. Petersburg were later printed in no. 7 of *Zapiski Neofilologicheskogo obshchestva pri Peterburgskom universitete* (1914). In Paris there was a surprise party at a café in Balmont's honor; among those present were Paul Fort, René Ghil, Gustave Kahn, and Bolesław Leśmian.

54. Balmont is a classic case of a poet too early acclaimed and too soon cast aside. The public, as usual, lagged behind at both times. A similar case was Balmont's "enemy-friend" Briusov, who was hailed by the literary elite for the immature *Urbi et orbi* (1903), which thus remained his high point in the text book discussions; the first book of his that the public rushed to buy, however, was *Stephanos* (1906), which Blok considered a decline. Briusov's best collection, *Zerkalo tenei* (*The Mirror of Shadows*), which came out in 1912, was ignored by everyone because it had been decided that the poet was "repeating himself."

energy and richness; even the cosmological abstractions come off here (something Balmont had attempted in several preceding books, but rarely with success). One is tempted to say that even in his familiar aspect Balmont became first-rate only in 1912. Thematically, the new thing in the book is a cycle of Egyptian poems,[55] although individual poems on this theme had appeared before; other exotica are poems on Mexican, Hindu, and Druidic themes.

The first book to be published in Russia (by "Sirin") after Balmont's return was the large (two hundred poems), sumptuous, and very important *Belyi zodchii* (*The White Architect*); subtitled *Tainstvo chetyrëkh svetil'nikov* (The Mystery of the Four Lamps), it appeared in St. Petersburg in 1914. In a sense, this is the culmination of the new Balmont, no matter how old some of his themes might appear. No other book of Balmont's approaches this one in variety of subject matter, ranging as it does from Russian folklore to the industrialization of Australia in styles that encompass self-parody and new sonorities. Geographically and culturally, Balmont casts a wider net than ever before, not only consolidating his Egyptian conquests but also annexing South East Asia and the Pacific islands—and it must be said that he has more luck with Malayan incantations than he did with Russian ones. If in earlier books Balmont gave the impression of being carried away, of flooding the reader with his enthusiasms, now, no longer Ariel-like, he builds in stone. Predominantly Balmontian themes, but often with a new "un-Balmontian" personality behind them, are what distinguish *The White Architect.* The outstanding qualities of this verse are tonal richness—especially in the sections entitled "Zolotye vëdra" (Golden Pails) and "Iuzhnyi krest" (The Southern Cross), where Balmont seems to enter successfully into competition with Viacheslav Ivanov—energy, virility, solidity, finish.[56] A good example is

55. This cycle consists mainly of travel impressions and reflects Balmont's disappointment with the "real-life" Egypt. He was enthusiastic about the ancient Egyptians, however, believing that they were descended from the Atlanteans and that they had later been annihilated by the Arabs, whom Balmont despised. The "clue book" to Balmont's Egyptian poems here and later is *Krai Ozirisa* (*The Land of Osiris,* Moscow, 1914), a work of popularization into which went an enormous amount of material digested by Balmont from various learned studies, with his own, sometimes amusing, opinions on matters Egyptological, descriptions of tombs, discussions of various aspects of Egyptian religion, and translations of Egyptian poetry. It is interesting to compare Balmont's admiration for the "magnificent Egyptian statues" with the reaction of Batiushkov, who saw them a hundred years earlier in the Louvre and pronounced them "amorphous." Balmont later published a book of translations under the title *Egipetskie skazki* (Moscow, 1917).

56. Of course, Balmont does not always succeed in hitting the bull's-eye. He may be reproached for indulging in a pseudo-Russian style, dwelling too much on his embarrassing "alcoves" and allowing himself, in all seriousness, such lines as "Войди же смело в чертог златой" (p. 226) as if he had never read *Evgenii Onegin* (II, 12). Lines in the vein of "Грудки нежной Папуаски / Под рукой моей дрожали" (p. 135) will not be to everyone's taste either.

"Sdvig" (Shift)—a significant title in the circumstances; it is easy to imagine how Balmont would have written this poem, using the same meter, several years earlier; it certainly would not have been so forceful. The same could be said of "Igra" (Play): earlier it would have been a tinkling imitation of Poe, now it had a massive calm that puts one in mind somewhat of Beethoven's scherzos (p. 5):

Я—тяжелый.
Я—как пчелы.

These two examples will illustrate the development of Balmont's sound-painting:

И вот я в пустыне стою, застывший в ночи обелиск (p. 13)

тяжелое алоэ (p. 42)

An outstanding feature is the way Balmont enriches his (and Russian poetry's) sound palette by introducing exotic names; he had done this before with Mexican, Indian, and Persian material, and now he turns to Polynesia for new sounds (p. 100):

Что Моаной зовут в Гавайики, в стране Маори.

Sometimes this leads to almost Khlebnikovian results; see, for example, "Igra" (Play) and "Plamia mira" (The Flame of the World), the last of which resembles Khlebnikov's "Voina v myshelovke" (War in a Mousetrap). In other poems Balmont approaches the sound of Bely, Briusov, Remizov, and even Gippius. He himself describes his search in the line (p. 24):

Хочется рифм и созвучий неверных, ошибкой богатых.

Metrically, new polyfoot combinations continue to attract Balmont; we find here six-foot anapests with dactylic clausulas (p. 10), seven-foot amphibrachs (p. 23), and twelve-foot trochaics (p. 63). It is sad to report that Alexander Blok received from the author a copy of *The White Architect* which he, like almost everyone else, seems never to have opened.

The same level of quality was maintained in Balmont's next collection, *Iasen': Videnie dreva (The Ash: A Vision of the Tree)*,[57] which came out in

57. Georgii Ivanov reviewed *The Ash* in *Apollon* (no. 6-7, 1916, pp. 73-74) in the usual way: "Another book by Balmont! The twentieth or the fortieth?" He accused Balmont of repeating his "much better" earlier books, and concluded: "Nothing remains of Balmont but his name."

Moscow in 1916. The book is not divided into parts and further consolidates the solidity attained in *The White Architect.* Balmont concentrates here on his symbolical mysticism and on the cosmological theme; both the sources and meaning of this book's symbolism require special investigation, and in this sense *The Ash* is perhaps the poet's most difficult collection. The main image—the Tree—derives from the Scandinavian Igdrazil and other mythological and legendary trees, of which Balmont may first have learned from Afanasiev's book. For the first time the cosmological Balmont is without the defects of artificiality, trivial musicality, and rawness sometimes apparent in earlier books. This poetry is austere, but it has scope and is built with weighty, meaning-packed words. Sharp outlines are provided by the occasional use of scientific terminology (*geometrizm radioliarii,* for example). Such an expression as *rdianye vskipy,* vivid in itself, could have appeared in earlier Balmont, but *izvorotlivaia v'iuga* only at this stage; and only now could Balmont write such a line as (p. 228):

Люблю, сохой разъятый, чернозем.

In this book Balmont explores an area, much closer to Russia, which he had previously neglected—Georgia (*Gruziia*). Very noticeable is the increasingly important place the sonnet now occupies in Balmont's work; it appears individually, in cycles and as "sonnet redoublé" (i.e., a chain of fifteen sonnets). As the poet says elsewhere in this book (p. 176):

Художник любит делать то, что трудно.

In his book of essays *Sea Gleams* Balmont had written: "The sonnet is like a knight's garb: always monotonous and eternally beautiful."[58] Perhaps the best book of his whole career is *Sonety solntsa, mëda i luny* (*Sonnets of Sun, Honey, and Moon*), subtitled "A Song of the Worlds" and published by Pashukanis in Moscow in 1917, and republished in Berlin by Efron in 1921. The book consists of two hundred and nineteen individual sonnets in addition to seven cycles (two of them "redoublé") and was "two winters and two summers" in the writing, as the poet himself says (p. 153), a time when he was "in the sonnet's sweet slavery." The book represents a unique achievement in Russian poetry and deserves to be admired, enjoyed, and studied. Balmont here creates an encyclopedia of his life's work in sonnet form, gathering together all his main themes and areas of interest (and adding China to his already impressive atlas). As in his previous book—and this becomes a habit from now on—Balmont does not separate his poems into sections; they do nevertheless fall naturally into groups, and the whole book

58. *Sea Gleams,* p. 20.

describes a kind of arch, from fire and sun to night, moon, and death, encompassing a great variety of themes both little (cigarettes and children's drawings) and big (man as monarch of nature—a poem with which future Soviet "discoverers" of Balmont might well begin). The exclusive use of the sonnet form does not lead to monotony, and this is not only due to the thematic variegation. Balmont is constantly changing his perspective from the bird's eye to the microscope; lexically he obtains variety by employing scientific terminology, neologisms, and carefully placed long words. Syntax also plays its part: a long time before this book of sonnets he had begun to fragment his lines into smaller units separated by periods. At first he was tentative in his use of this device, and then more and more bold (so that we find it even in his prose, as in *Land of Osiris,* p. 6).[59] In *Sonnets of Sun, Honey, and Moon* the device is used consistently and effectively. Here are some examples:

Хочу. Люблю. Хотел. Всегда. Давно.
(p. 249)

Неслись. Взнеслись. Растаяли. Пропали.
(p. 43)

Space does not permit discussion of all the devices Balmont has recourse to here. Among the thematic cycles mention should be made of the one dealing with hunting and prehistoric life, and of the one devoted to woman (for the first time Balmont is convincing on this theme), as well as of the sonnets on individual poets, painters, composers, and saints; the book also contains a

59. Here are some examples from books written both before and after *Sonnets of Sun, Honey, and Moon*:
Let Us Be Like the Sun:
Здесь. И здесь. Так. И здесь.
The Glow of Dawns:
Истлели зори лета. Час филина. Гляди.
Горят два злые ока. Горят. Не подходи.
The White Architect:
Хочу. Горю. Молюсь. Люблю ее.
Mirage:
Хочу. Люблю. Где солнце? Ночь уж тут.
Я был. Любил. Я жил. Когда-то.
Я не умер. Нет. Я жив. Тоскую.
Mine—For Her:
Я умирал. Не раз. Давно. Когда-то.
Не знаю. И любуюсь. И тоскую.
Перезвон. Перескок. Переступь.
Distances Drawn Apart:
Шире. Дальше. Глубже. Выше. Пой. Не думай ни о чем.
Я мысль. Я страсть. Я жизнь. Я взлет. Свирель.
Northern Lights:
Бежим. Летим. Уйдем. Туда. За дали.
(Cf. Selvinsky: Такая. Должна. Сидеть. В зоопарке.)

cycle of sonnets on the sonnet. The saturated and honeyed lines of this verse (*"dushistyi i tiaguche-sladkii mëd,"* in the poet's own phrase, p. 184) have not only a lovely clarity but also a marvelous sense of ease. Indeed, Balmont is so relaxed here that he can occasionally break his usual solemn tone with a conversational intonation—and without a hint of bathos. The sonnet disciplines Balmont and keeps his tendency to diffuseness on a tight rein; the two dangers which lurk most often for him—the amorphousness of the hymn and the equal, if different, amorphousness of the snapshot—are avoided by the very form of the sonnet. As a result, there is hardly a weak poem in the book, though it must be admitted that the clinching lines of individual sonnets sometimes disappoint (but this is something that even Shakespeare could not always escape).

One is tempted to define the entire book as metapoetry, or, more precisely, as "poetogonic" verse, absorbed as it is with the metaphysical roots of the poet's art; it is thus a predecessor, and perhaps even a progenitor, of such magnificent—and, alas, still underrated—books as Mikhail Kuzmin's *Paraboly* and Benedikt Livshits' *Patmos*.

Balmont's next three books,[60] still published in Russia, are disappointing in various ways which may be due to the deprivations of revolution and civil war, and perhaps to the circumstances in which they were brought out. The only valuable thing in *Persten'* (*The Ring*), brought out by "Tvorchestvo" in Moscow in 1920, is the "sonnet redoublé" with the same name ("Persten'") which concludes the book—a philosophic hymn to creativity and self-expression, to "the desire to preserve oneself in eternity." In spite of the holiday mood of the book's opening ("Letit k nam vol'nost'—legko-svetla"), and poems such as "Poet rabochemu" (Poet to Worker), in which Balmont argues that he, the poet, is a worker too and no exploiter, with a record of rebellion and martyrdom throughout history, the book as a whole is tired, repetitious, and full of undigested material (the atrocious love poetry, for example).

No laurels are added to Balmont's wreath either by *Pesnia rabochego molota* (*Song of the Working Hammer*), which appeared in Moscow in 1922 and was the poet's only book to be published by the Soviet state. It contains only thirteen new poems, dating from February 1917 to February 1920, while

60. Actually, more than three, but I was unable to get hold of *Sem' poem* (Moscow, 1920) and *Revoliutsioner ia ili net?* (Moscow, 1918), which contains some verse. In the selected edition *Solnechnaia priazha* (Moscow, 1921) there are a good number (thirty-two) of poems from *Tropinkoi ognia,* which might be the title of the book Balmont was preparing to publish, although he never succeeded in doing so. The poems printed are of consistently high quality and show some nonconformist traits: hints that Russia was under the threat of death and praise of Christ could hardly have been popular in the Russia of 1921. One wonders how the book came to be printed; perhaps no censor cared to read it, especially since it was presented as a selected edition.

the rest are reprinted from *Songs of an Avenger, The Ring,* and even *Burning Buildings* ("The Smith"). The book made possible Balmont's trip abroad, from which he never returned—but it is not hack-work, and is, on the whole, better than *Songs of an Avenger.* Balmont does not sacrifice his individuality, though he sometimes reveals the influence of the cosmic labor poetry of the period. It is far from being the best Balmont, but is no worse than the general run of Soviet newspaper verse of the time (or of today, for that matter). Balmont even gives good, if unheeded, advice to the authorities (strangely anticipating Lebedev-Kumach in diction):

Есть одна достойная основа,
Океан, где много разных рек,
Этот талисман — Свобода Слова.
Человек лишь с нею человек. . . .

(p. 25)

Balmont was already abroad when *Song of the Working Hammer* appeared, and published in Paris (in 1921—that is, even before the Soviet book appeared) a book of more than a hundred poems, *Dar zemle* (*A Gift to the Earth*). A quarter of these poems are reprinted, with a few changes, from *The Ring,* and most of the others were probably also composed in Russia.[61] As a whole, this is a book of smooth and banal repetitions, a motley collection written in a variety of styles, with raw sketches and much second-rate versifying (for instance, the cycle—interesting from a biographical point of view—about the women in the poet's life, a kind of Balmontian Don Juan catalogue). There are good poems too, especially among the sonnets. Balmont defines his poetry here as *zvon uzornyi* (patterned sound). This is the most eclectic of Balmont's full-length books.

Balmont left Russia, accompanied by his family and by Serge Koussevitzky, on June 25, 1920, arriving in Paris after a brief stay in Estonia. He was supposed to return to Russia after six months; it was not long before rumors that he had "betrayed the government's trust" were in circulation, and Lunacharsky found it necessary to refute them publicly.[62] Balmont, in the meantime, continued to make Paris his headquarters, living in Brittany for more than a year in the course of 1921-22, then moved to Capbreton in the Landes district. During the first years of his exile he published six books (three of them verse), but the Soviet press left him alone until 1928, when he joined with Bunin in reprimanding Romain Rolland for his support of the Communist state. Gorky, who was living in exile himself at the time, entered into correspondence with Rolland in order to discredit Balmont as an

61. But not all. "Primirenie," for example, seems to have been written abroad. Balmont mentions in it some unspecified "offense" given to him by his fatherland.

62. In a letter to the editor, *Kniga i revoliutsiia,* no. 3-4 (1920), p. 101.

alcoholic, a mental case, and a poetical has-been. Gorky's hope that Rolland would publish this letter was, however, disappointed.[63] Balmont's reputation in the Soviet Union was further—and this time irreparably—damaged when he published in a newspaper a poem glorifying the initial letter of his first name, Konstantin, in a paean to the assassins of Soviet political leaders and diplomats (Kaplan, Kanegisser, Konradi, Koverda).[64]

Balmont's first book to be largely written in emigration, and one which clearly marks a new poetic departure, was *Marevo* (*Mirage*), which appeared in Paris in 1922. The ninety-five poems in this book are all dated—an unusual thing for Balmont—and divided into sections according to the time and place of their composition, which is also unusual: those written in Russia in the fall of 1917, those written in Paris between 1920 and 1921, and those dating from his stay in Brittany during the second half of 1921. *Mirage* is Balmont's first completely nondecadent book. It is a diary, a collection of mournful poems about Russia and her revolution. It was not by chance that it attracted the attention of Zinaida Gippius, who had previously never written about Balmont, but now welcomed him, correctly seeing in *Mirage* "a new Balmont," a poet who was also a human being.[65] It might be said that, in the first part at least, the book is rhythmically a regression to the latter half of the nineteenth century, but the content of this poetry is new for Balmont: it is a poetry of conscience, accusation, disappointment in his own people. The predominant motifs are treachery and degradation, and the image of a state somewhere between dream and nightmare runs through the book. It is to Balmont's credit that he is aware that such subject matter requires a complete change of idiom (p. 24):

Петь как раньше пел, сейчас нельзя, нет сил.

The second part of *Mirage* is metrically more varied, and the theme of nostalgia and pain for Russia appears alongside that of the "alien sky." The predominant motifs are whiteness (death and snow), the blizzard, and werewolves. Curiously anticipating Mayakovsky, Balmont exclaims (p. 39),

И мне в Париже ничего не надо,
Одно лишь слово нужно мне: Москва,

63. Gorky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 30: 83, 87.

64. See G. Ryklin, "Konstantin Stoikii," in *Izvestiia*, Sept. 30, 1928. O. Mar in a letter to the editor of *Novoe Russkoe Slovo* (New York), Mar. 17, 1968, mentions that the poem about the letter *k* was first printed in Warsaw in the newspaper *Za Svobodu*, then published by D. Filosofov. It is a curious coincidence that Velimir Khlebnikov in his linguistic theories also associated the letter *k* with the anti-Soviet cause. See his poema "Sinie okovy," where he demonstrates this with such names as Kolchak, Kornilov, and Kaledin.

65. "Bal'mont," *Poslednie novosti* (no. 710), Aug. 11, 1922.

and, providing Ehrenburg with an image for his essay on Balmont, he likens himself to a parrot in a cage. Revolution he considers tragic and regrettable, but transient, so that the book is not the cry of despair that individual poems may make it seem. Despite the image of Balmont later built up in the Soviet press, he was neither a monarchist nor a White, but rather resembled Maximilian Voloshin in his horrified rejection of bloodshed on both sides:

Красное марево зыбится там,
Белое марево тут
(p. 42)

Я ни вправо, я ни влево не пойду
(p. 67)

It must be admitted that this significant book is not an aesthetically satisfying whole, although it is on a higher level than most of the books of Balmont's prerevolutionary exile. The poet here seems to have laid aside his usual concern with formal trappings and incessant coloring; the poems are monotonous and frequently written in meters—such as trochaic pentameter—to which Balmont is unaccustomed. In short, Balmont here often seems like a fish washed up on the shore—but it is precisely this which gives the book its individuality. Excellent poems are not lacking however—see, for example, "Reka" (The River) and "Dvoinoe zrenie" (Double Vision)—and the sonnets continue to be almost invariably magnificent.

The tragic atmosphere of the book reaches its greatest intensity in the last part, with its motifs of famine, fear, blood, and pillage, and Balmont finds images in the Gospel parables and the Book of Revelation for his macabre and grotesque visions. This part is also the most outspokenly anti-Soviet, with its images of the possessed, the blind leading the blind, the people enmeshed in a foul, blood-stained cobweb, and pus flowing from the Kremlin into the world; the poet calls for the execution of the executioners. For Balmont the events in Russia are simply madness, a case of the Dostoevskian demonic possession of a whole people. He is appalled by bloodshed and fratricide (as he had often been appalled by war in his earlier verse),[66] and communism repels him not because of his political convictions, but because its sole eloquence for those who think differently is the bullet (p. 114):

Пятирогатая кровавая звезда.
Все, что не я, сотру. Всем, кто не я, возмездье.
И гибнут области, деревни, города

The relevant book of essays for this collection is the later published *Gde moi dom?* (*Where Is My Home?*) (Prague, 1924), where Balmont carries great

66. The antiwar theme in Balmont dates from *The Liturgy of Beauty*.

human conviction in lamenting the impossibility of writing poetry both in the Russia of the Soviets and the politics-dominated Russian Paris of the émigrés.

A complete contrast to *Mirage* was Balmont's next book, *Moë—ei: Rossiia* (*Mine—For Her: Russia*), which appeared in Prague in 1924; here his old form-preoccupied, multicolored, *perepevy*-packed self makes a reappearance. The only thing the two collections have in common is that they are both dedicated to Russia, as, indeed, are all the books of Balmont's exile. This relatively small book (it contains sixty poems—three cycles and one "sonnet redoublé") shows, after the "cracked" quality of *Mirage,* a firm hand, a virtuosity and smoothness of execution which borders on slickness and threatens to turn his nostalgic evocations of Russia into picture postcards. The poet's familiar themes are represented here with such fullness that it would take a sizable paragraph merely to enumerate them. The flora, fauna, and folklore of Balmont's native land still hold a central place—see, for instance, "Ia chëtko vizhu vsë rodnoe" (All that is native I see clearly before me), and "Nochnoi put'" (The Night Road), one of the most arresting examples of Balmont's poetic botany. Toward the end, in the "sonnet redoublé," the book unexpectedly almost rises to greatness; elsewhere, though, an excess of color has a harmful effect. It is as if Balmont is trying to take refuge from the depressing reality of historical Russia and his exile in a technicolor never-never land. The poet's underlying dejection breaks through in such lines as (p. 68):

Но вдруг опять душа срывается в бессилье.

There is a noticeable increase in the number of neologisms, almost all of them compound words denoting shine and brilliance.[67]

67. In earlier books, if one puts aside most of Balmont's favorite formations using *-ost',* neologisms are infrequent: мятежиться (*Silence*), скелетствовать (*Let Us Be Like the Sun*), стальнеть (*Evil Spells*), врагини (*Birds in the Air, A Round Dance of the Times, The Glow of Dawns*), тридцатость (*A Round Dance of the Times*).

Later they increased in number: *The Glow of Dawns*: кругообрисы-цветы, тенесвет, связа, равновстречность. *The White Architect*: колыбелиться. *The Ash*: заревестница, закрыв (noun), скров. *Sonnets*: лезвииться, хоть (noun), огневзнесенье, вспевность, луннозвоны, звездозлатиться. *Mirage*: бесчасье. *Mine—For Her*: змееперевязь, мудрожонка, зимоблещущий, огнесветиться, тучевеющий, веснуя, etc.

Distances Drawn Apart: светловольный, первовесть, златобить (noun), лобзальница, сребробить, гудный, многольдяность, мыслевнутренний, птицебыстрая, сребросинь, златоиспещренье, пламекруг, златомерцанье, сердцедуги, заколыбеленный, солнцегроздья, грустянка, златозернь, водокруть, цветокрылья, привиденно. (Some of these may not be neologisms but "borrowed" words, as may be seen in the poem "Son prelestnyi," the epigraph of which—taken from the Missal—contains the word *bezvremennomechtanen,* which later occurs again in the poem itself.)

Northern Lights: огнегром, огнесвет, пламеомут, златозвонкий, среброкрылый, златовоздух, осенюет, осенины, снегобелый, златолюлька, многоптичий, златослезы, светомгла, огнердеющий, тайновеющий, многозернь. *The Blue Horseshoe*: среброскок, светозвон, круговетви, златоогонь, солнцезахваченный.

The greatest surprise of Balmont's poetic career was *V razdvinutoi dali* (*Distances Drawn Apart*), which appeared in Belgrade in 1930 (even though the title page bears the date 1929). This is the best, and the earthiest, book of his exile, and it is hard to understand how it could have been completely ignored by the critics; even such a leading Balmont-baiter as Georgii Adamovich would have found little to complain of here, for the best poems in *Distances Drawn Apart* are characterized by restraint and subdued tones. One explanation is the book's somewhat unpromising start, with page after page of second-rate verse, mainly patriotic stuff probably composed with an eye to the poet's public appearances before none-too-refined Russian audiences in various émigré centers. The book proper begins with autobiographical poems, followed by some most interesting, Tiutchev-like, metaphysical verse, then by ocean poetry composed at Capbreton; scattered among these cycles are many individual poems which stand by themselves. We find here a Balmont who is enigmatic and elusive, magnificent and autumnally subdued—a poet, in a word, who cries out for critical attention and study. In particular, the new Balmont sound requires investigation. Occasionally one is reminded of Viacheslav Ivanov, and even of Mandelshtam—but more often than not this poetry is reminiscent of no one, least of all of the earlier Balmont himself. The style is not a unified one; sometimes Balmont presents us with a piece of realistic description a prose writer might envy, such as this of an Easter egg (p. 125):

Чуть серовато, сахаристо,
Как серый, между трав, снежок.

A folk riddle from the Sadovnikov collection may, in Balmont's hands, evolve into surrealism (see *"Dvoe"* [Two]), and in the metaphysical poems he resorts to sestina form (used in Russian poetry before by Viacheslav Ivanov). There is now a new quality in Balmont's poetry as a whole; the verse has become slow-moving, dark-hued, rough-surfaced, quiet (one poem is significantly entitled "Perfect Calm"). A good example is "Son prelestnyi" (An Enchanting Dream), which has a special simplicity whose secret lies in an intonation which is not "Balmontian" at all. Even in pieces which might be accused of banality there is a new weightiness in individual lines and unexpected combinations of words. A poem may begin obviously enough, then suddenly, after a touch or two, it becomes haunting. These poems do not strike or charm in the old Balmont way, but touch strangely with their deceptive simplicity. Thus, the pieces about sorcery—an almost irritatingly persistent theme with Balmont—are magical for the first time (see "Donnaia trava"). An examination of Balmont's new lexical resources here will, in some measure, account for this "newness"; his language is now more varied than before (there are

even archaisms, such as *odesnuiu* and *oshuiu* [p. 172], which are successfully absorbed). Balmont also shows a new feeling for words; in his youth he had been preoccupied with the surface sound of words, then slowly he had learned the Acmeists' art of semantic precision, and now, like Remizov and Khlebnikov, he acquires a feeling for the inner thickets of a word. Three poems will demonstrate three different sides of this new Balmont: "Son prelestnyi" approaches Pushkin in its rightness of tone and intonation, whereas "Noch'" (Night) seems strange and experimental. Yet again, "V dalëkoi doline" (In a Far Valley) seems to be the old Balmont—but with a difference: its "musicality" is denser (thirteen *d*'s in the first two lines) and it is at once darker-toned and more precise, convincingly recreating the dream experience. In short, for all that Balmont had produced impressive, fascinating, and even perfect books before, it might be said that only in *Distances Drawn Apart* did he touch greatness. It is incredible after this that Adamovich and other émigré critics (who obviously never opened this book) continued to condemn "Balmontism" as false poetry.[68]

Severnoe siianie: Stikhi o Litve i Rusi (*Northern Lights: Poems About Lithuania and Russia*), which made its appearance in 1931, may almost be considered Balmont's last book of verse. His often pioneering interest in remote regions has been demonstrated more than once in the course of this survey; he was also attracted by lands nearer home, indeed there is hardly a Rússian poet to surpass him in enthusiasm for and knowledge of other Slavic cultures, an enthusiasm which resulted in original poetry as well as translations and essays. He was first interested in Poland, then in his last exile he published a book on Bulgaria,[69] while works on Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia remained in the preparatory stage. Among Russia's non-Slavic neighbors, Finland and Lithuania engaged him.[70]

Lithuania, which Balmont thought of as one of his ancestral lands, entered his work as early as *Sea Gleams* and *Birds in the Air*. *Northern Lights* is a result of his visit to Lithuania in 1928, when he was received with great pomp (including a military band) and feted by the local poets, in

68. Among the poems of this book "Morskoi skaz" deserves attention. It is Balmont's etymological genealogy in verse; not only does he trace permutations of his family name through history, but he also deduces from his ancestry the very themes of his poetry. Surprisingly, it is in this poem that the notoriously egocentric Balmont mentions his name in verse for the first time, thus joining the company of Russian poets who have made their names a poetic fact (among others, Mayakovsky, Severianin, Gumilev, Georgii Ivanov, and all the main Imagists).

69. *Zolotoi snop bolgarskoi poezii* (Sofia, 1930). See also *Souchastie dush: Ocherki, Kapbreton 1928-1930* (Sofia, 1930).

70. In our own time, when literary and cultural ties have once more become a subject for intensive study, consideration of Balmont from this viewpoint is overdue, especially when narrower topics such as "Severianin and Estonia" and "Briusov and Armenia" have already been taken care of.

particular by Liudas Gira, who wrote the cycle of ten sonnets (probably translated by Balmont himself) with which the book opens; Gira calls Balmont "a second Baian who combines in himself Pushkin, Tiutchev, and Fet." The book's atmosphere of mutual admiration can easily be understood if one visualizes, on the one hand, Balmont, at that time more ignored by his compatriots than any other major poet of his generation and starving for adulation, and, on the other hand, the Lithuanians, who were not generally spoiled by attention from the Russian cultural elite.

The last part of the book is devoted to slightly stylized, but good, poems about Russia, among them one of the best of Russian patriotic poems, "Severnyi venets" (A Northern Wreath), and one unknown to most Russian patriots.

A curious finale to Balmont's poetic career was the slim volume entitled *Golubaia podkova: Stikhi o Sibiri* (*The Blue Horseshoe: Poems About Siberia*) published in the United States by the writer Georgii Grebenshchikov; there is no date on the cover, but the latest dated poem is from May 1934.[71] Not all these poems are "about Siberia," and at least five of the nineteen had been published previously. The book includes a short poetic travel diary of Balmont's trip to Siberia and Manchuria in the spring of 1916. Even the last dated poem in the book shows no sign of creative decline before the onset of the mental illness which is supposed to have lasted to the poet's death at the end of 1942.

The poetry of Balmont's exile continues to be habitually dismissed by critics; Poggioli calls these volumes "hardly worthy of being mentioned" and says they "well deserve the oblivion which was their immediate lot," while Adamovich muses "how can a man with taste and ear read Balmont after Pushkin?"[72]

Mention should be made of Balmont's translations (of which there is still no decent bibliography), since many of them are an integral part of his poetic output. The translations of some poets—Blok for example—can be put aside as being of little relevance to their main work, while other poets, such as Pasternak and Balmont, have the gift of making anything they translate peculiarly their own. Balmont was incredibly active in this field, translating not only poetry but also histories of literature. His versions of Shelley and Whitman have been harshly criticized, following the lead given by Kornei Chukovsky's scathing essays; nevertheless, it is with these poets (and, of course, Poe) that Balmont's name is most often linked. The condemnation of

71. All the poems in this book are dated, and some of these dates reveal that poems which found a place in the collections of Balmont's exile (even as late as *Distances Drawn Apart*) were written before the Revolution.

72. Poggioli, *Poets of Russia*, p. 90; Georgii Adamovich, *Odinochestvo i svoboda* (New York, 1955), p. 111.

these (and other) translations is far from being unanimous. Blok, for example, praised Balmont for his Whitman; Tsetlin found kind words for his Shelley; Tkhorzhevsky, himself a translator of note, valued both Shelley and Poe in Balmont's version; Diks lauds all his translations—that of Poe in particular.[73]

A mere enumeration of the poets and writers translated by Balmont would fill a lengthy paragraph, but perhaps no other book is so much a part of his original work as *Zovy drevnosti* (*Calls of Antiquity*), first published in 1908 and again, with additions, in Berlin in 1923. It offers Egyptian, Mayan, Mexican, Chaldean, Assyrian, Indian, Iranian, Japanese, Scandinavian, Breton, and other poems, obviously not translated from the original. What makes them Balmontian is their frequent cosmological themes and hymnic features, their saturation with exotic names and the fact that many of them are incantations (one of which was set to music by Sergei Prokofiev).[74] It is in his later translations that Balmont is often at his most successful—compare, for instance, his "Pesn' Garal'da Smelogo" (Song of Harald the Brave) with its well-known predecessor by Batiushkov.[75]

Now that we have brought this fascinating chore of surveying Balmont's entire output to an end, some conclusions, at least, beg to be made. Balmont, who is habitually divided into early, famous, and washed-up (or appearance, flowering, decline, and nonbeing), turns out to be a poet of consistent achievement who was growing and changing throughout his creative life. Five periods can easily be established:

1. From *A Book of Poems* through *Silence* (1890 to 1898). One is tempted to label this his "blue period."

2. The next period, this time colored red, extends from *Burning Buildings* to *The Liturgy of Beauty* (and includes, by way of an appendix, *Stories About the Fairy*). Further analysis may show that these two periods are actually one, since, while distinguishable in atmosphere and subject matter, they do not differ much in verse texture (once again a parallel with Picasso is seductive).

3. 1906 to 1908 might be called the European years, even if Balmont's awakening interest in Russian folklore seems to contradict the phrase. This period covers *Evil Spells* to *A Round Dance of the Times.*

4. In the middle of 1909 Balmont broke with *Vesy,* and important

73. Blok, 5:203-4; Tsetlin, "K. D. Bal'mont," p. 361: Ivan Tkhorzhevsky, *Russkaia literatura,* 2 vols. (Paris, 1946): 2:465; Diks, in *Kniga,* pp. 43-44.

74. Prokofiev is mentioned in Balmont's short story "Lunnaia gost'ia" (*Vozdushnyi put'*, p. 164) as "the composer of the *Scythian Suite*" who once played for Balmont "an organ fugue by the forgotten old master Buxtehude" (spelled in Russian Бугстэгудэ).

75. In exile Balmont published two books of translations from Slavic poets: selected verse by the Czech poet Jaroslav Vrchlický and Jan Kasprowicz's *Księga ubogich.*

changes soon began to show in his verse. So, cautiously (because Balmont never ceased to be a symbolist) we might call this period, ending in 1920, post-symbolist.

5. The last period, from *Mirage* to *The Blue Horseshoe*—that is, roughly from 1920 to 1934—is that of Balmont the émigré.

Such a survey as this one must perforce be a little primitive and superficial, and our periodization a simplification. In reality, transitions from period to period, and even from book to book, are always prepared for and are far from abrupt. Moreover, Balmont's evolution is not a straight line, but one that loops and sometimes turns back on itself. What presents itself here is a complex development from early "musicality" to a more traditional, Acmeist-like verbal precision, and finally to a groping toward new, individual paths—all of this interspersed with "loops" (and these seeming regressions must be studied to ascertain whether or not they do contain elements of evolution); in the background is a more or less stable philosophy which worships vital forces and "primary elements," and also a preoccupation with cosmogonies.

Among the aims of this survey has been to show that Balmont remains creatively alive and stimulating even at his poetically least convincing, and that, contrary to the prevailing view, he was far from finished after *Love Alone*; indeed, he went on to produce his greatest books—*A Green Garden, The White Architect, Sonnets of Sun, Honey, and Moon,* and *Distances Drawn Apart.* The first two periods were, understandably, slightly overestimated by critics; the third, forgivably, underestimated; the last two, inexcusably, almost ignored.[76]

In the course of our survey we have given some attention to the reception accorded to Balmont's work by his contemporaries. At this point perhaps a brief summary of the general critical evaluation would be desirable, though, on the whole, it is a depressing picture of a few half-truths repeated *ad nauseam* by the very people whose favorite charge against Balmont is that he repeats himself.

To take the good things first; Balmont is credited with "musical" quality by almost everyone, including populists and Marxists, who, one suspects, could not be more indifferent to it—especially in a poet who, in their view, failed miserably in such important areas as political verse and folklore. This musicality is sometimes described as "virtuosity in sound,"[77] and Balmont is even credited with having discovered alliteration for Russian poetry.[78] The

76. Balmont himself knew his own forte. In *Solnechnaia priazha,* for which he selected 250 of his poems written between 1890 and 1918, his choice was: 46 from *Sonnets,* 25 from *The Ash,* 22 from *The White Architect,* 17 from *Love Alone,* 16 from *Let Us Be Like the Sun,* 15 from *Burning Buildings.*

77. Lelevich, col. 327 (see note 51).

78. Anichkov, "Bal'mont," p. 72.

poet himself gave a patronizing nod in the direction of such statements when he said: "I am quietly certain that before me, on the whole, no one in Russia knew how to write sonorous verse (*zvuchnye stikhi*)."[79] Someone should really investigate Balmont's musicality, both in its essence and in the impact it had on his contemporaries[80] (Briusov declared, for example, that "musically, Balmont is superior to Lermontov and Fet").[81] Few critics are specific when they talk of this "musicality"; even the fact-loving Briusov says merely that Balmont "transformed and recreated [*peresozdal*] meters and instilled them with a new music."[82]

Other favorable judgments are that Balmont was a poetical pioneer and every inch a poet, a compliment less vague than it sounds, since even among the Russian symbolists Balmont was a quixotic figure, with his untiring efforts to soar above "base" reality. In a different sense, Viacheslav Ivanov paid tribute to Balmont's essentially poetic nature when he said that his poetry was "the unique miracle of an almost uncanny uninterruptedness of lyrical creation."[83]

As for negative evaluations, they are more persistent, if hardly more varied. The accusation of repetitiveness can safely be dismissed, since, as we have already hinted, it is a complex problem which requires investigation. Another label often applied to Balmont and in crying need of definition is "banality," which again, whatever it is, may eventually prove to be an indispensable part of Balmont's poetic system and therefore not to be condemned.[84]

Some critics, among them Marina Tsvetaeva and Alexander Blok, claim that Balmont is non-Russian in his poetic essence.[85] One is, however, more inclined to agree with Professor Anichkov, who saw in Balmont's Westernism no more than a "pilgrimage,"[86] a view supported by the poet's entire development from *The Firebird* on.

What then of the accusations of unevenness and lack of self-criticism? Both his fellow symbolists (Briusov, Blok) and the professional reviewers joined forces in this stricture, though here too Balmont was only being true to himself, as may be clearly seen from the highly interesting polemic he con-

79. *Kniga o russkikh poetakh poslednego desiatiletiia*, p. 35. The modifying "on the whole" implies such poets as Pushkin, who could on occasion be sonorous in a Balmontian way—for example, in "Obval," a poem greatly admired by Balmont.

80. This impact took the form of initial shock followed by second thoughts. See Gippius (quoted by Briusov, *Dnevniki*, p. 64): *Stranno, vo vtoroi raz oni mne men'she nraviatsia.*

81. "Bal'mont," *Mir iskusstva*, 1903, no. 7-8, p. 35.

82. *Dalekie i blizkie*, p. 106.

83. "O lirike Bal'monta" in *Apollon*, 1912, no. 3-4, p. 38.

84. We will not discuss the numerous reproaches made to Balmont for "bad taste," "forcing of the voice," "lack of simplicity," et al., of which Aikhenvald in particular was a past master.

85. Tsvetaeva, *Proza*, p. 260; Blok, 5: 552.

86. Anichkov, "Bal'mont," p. 94.

ducted with Briusov in the newspaper *Utro Rossii* in 1913: Balmont declares himself the enemy of polishing or revising original poems, holding this to be a "sacrilege" ("Who changes words in a prayer? Only a nonbeliever"). His advice is: "One must write a new poem" rather than tamper with the "past moment."[87] Here we have another explanation of Balmont's "repetitiveness."

Certain benevolent critics, such as Aikhenvald, Struve, and Ehrenburg,[88] have suggested that all Balmont's good poems be gathered in a single volume so that he would stand revealed as an excellent poet unembarrassed by "incredibly poor poems in incredibly great numbers."[89] But what of such books as *A Green Garden* and *Sonnets of Sun, Honey, and Moon,* which have no need of pruning? Not to speak of the danger of distortion inherent in the anthologizing approach, which, at its extreme, would deprive us of the philosophical digressions in *War and Peace* and even of the Levin-Kitty line in *Anna Karenina*; one might also humbly add that the poetry of Lomonosov, Lermontov, and Esenin would also appear to advantage in selection. At any rate, scholars have little cause to complain of Balmont's prodigality: the poet stands before them hiding nothing and making their work to that extent easier. As usual, Balmont himself has an answer to the accusation: "There are no best or worst books in my *œuvre*; they are all equally bad and equally good."[90]

An extension of the cliché about Balmont's unevenness is the repeated statement that he fell into a decline, with, however, little agreement as to when exactly this fall took place. Briusov, as we have seen already, pinpoints *The Liturgy of Beauty* as the beginning of this process, others saw it in 1917 or even right after 1895.[91]

In fact Balmont's critics disagree all too often. Some call him craftsman and virtuoso, others frown at his slipshod technique and lament the rawness of his finished products. He is credited with depth and dismissed as a perpetrator of complete nonsense; considered a genuine poet and reproached for

87. Cited in N. Ashukin, *Briusov v avtobiograficheskikh zapisiakh, pis'makh, vospominaniiakh i otzyvakh kritiki* (Moscow, 1929), pp. 312-13.

88. Iulii Aikhenvald, *Siluety russkikh pisatelei,* 3rd ed. (Berlin, 1923), 3:107; Gleb Struve, *Russkaia literatura v izgnanii* (New York, 1956), p. 133; Ehrenburg, *Liudi, gody, zhizn',* p. 154.

89. P. Pertsov, *Literaturnye vospominaniia, 1890-1902 gg.* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1933), p. 264. Let us add here too that, contrary to the often expressed opinion (Mirsky, Struve), Balmont's prose is not poor. Even if his collection of short stories, *Vozdushnyi put'* (Berlin, 1923), is hardly more than an entertaining synopsis of Russian decadence, his novel *Pod novym serpom* (Berlin, 1923), which alternates lyrical, symbolist interludes with realistic descriptions of life on a country estate, is a significant work in many respects and a "must" for any student of Balmont's poetry. As to his handling of the prose medium—one can point to excellent pages in his theoretical *Poeziia kak volshebstvo* (Moscow, 1915).

90. *Kniga o russkikh poetakh poslednego desiatiletiia,* p. 36.

91. D. Vygodsky, "O tvorchestve Bal'monta," *Letopis',* 1917, no. 5-6, p. 251; Pertsov, p. 258.

affectation and pretentiousness;[92] called a "spontaneous" poet and respected for his erudition; praised for straightforwardness and denounced for "constantly lying to himself."[93] Briusov discussed Balmont's eroticism, while Annensky could find none in his poetry;[94] Ehrenburg shrugged him off with "there is nothing one can learn from Balmont," and Gorky, of all people, suggested that proletarian poets should learn from him.[95] Ellis manages to combine these contrasts in a single sentence, calling Balmont "the creator of a new style, the magic perfectioner of Russian verse, and [at the same time] its crudest vulgarizer."[96]

It would be wrong to question the validity of all Balmont's past critics. Briusov was, on the whole, both friendly and impartial in his evaluation of Balmont's earlier verse. Annensky deserves the highest tribute for his pioneering analysis of Balmont's style and technique (a task later undertaken with less success by Vygodsky). Interesting things were said by Anichkov, Baltrušaitis, and Ellis. Nevertheless, there is no escaping the fact that a critical injustice of the first magnitude was perpetrated, one which led to the total neglect of an important and sizable body of work by a first-class poet.

Although the sole purpose of this essay has been to describe for the first time Balmont's poetic *œuvre in toto* and to take issue with some of his critics, it does not seem out of place here to offer two or three suggestions toward the new image of Balmont which, no doubt, will some day emerge. These suggestions will be essentially constructive, since it is all too easy to make fun of Balmont and to apply to him two famous aphorisms of Kozma Prutkov's—the one about embracing the unembraceable, and the other one about the fountain—or to dismiss him as altogether too much of a good thing.

Balmont'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. In spite of what has often been said to the contrary, however, Balmont never abandoned his native soil. Even during his early years, when he was preoccupied with Shelley, Baudelaire, and Whitman, he was aware of continuing the tradition of Lermontov, Fet, and Tiutchev and claimed Russian priority in the sym-

92. Compare this with Annensky ("Bal'mont-lirik," p. 203), according to whom Balmont is refined without being mannered, escapes banality, and is more alien to artificiality than most poets.

93. Andrei Bely, *Nachalo veka* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1933), p. 148.

94. *Dalekie i blizkie*, p. 76; Annensky, "Bal'mont-lirik," p. 192.

95. Ilia Ehrenburg, *Portrety sovremennykh poetov* (Moscow, 1923), p. 28; Gorky, *Sobŕanie sochinenii*, 28: 371.

96. Ellis, *Russkie simvolisty*, pp. 118-19.

bolist movement (see his book of essays *Mountain Peaks*). Later he broadened the foundations of his poetry with Russian folklore.

Another important characteristic of Balmont is his "genetic" orientation. "Kak voznikaet stikh" (How Verse Comes into Being), the title of one of his short poems, is both typical and revealing; the finished product interested him much less than its origins—hence his cosmological poems. A Balmontesque image that characterizes his poetry would be that of a tree whose foliage seeks to grow outward while its roots tangle about the mystery of its origin.

It should not be forgotten that Balmont remained a symbolist to the end of his days. All his poetry can be summed up in the image of a man walking among "mysteries," which, however, are always clear to him and which "intoxicate" him. He seeks myriads of connections with the world and a deeper meaning behind all things (*Sonnets*, p. 44):

А если мышь мелькнет, и в ней ищу я знака.

Balmont's innovations went, paradoxically, hand in hand with an innate conservatism. He was one of the last fighters against poetry's inevitable descent from the "language of the gods" to the conversational idiom, a "lowering" process he found difficult to accept and had, therefore, to yield his brief popularity to such poets of "human interest" as Blok and Akhmatova. The wave of the future was the diary, not the hymn.

This does not mean that Balmont's poetry cannot be "discovered" by the present-day generation. His "cosmic consciousness" with Indian overtones, his Art Nouveau features, his antiwar poetry and his numerous flower-poems present a mixture which sounds familiar.

For the student, Balmont is an inexhaustible mine. It would not be hard to suggest excellent topics for ten full-length dissertations and dozens of fascinating papers; but the first priority remains, as Anichkov wrote in 1913, to create a vade mecum to his poetry.[97]

Balmont should be especially attractive to scholars in our own field, being not only Slavic- but also East-Europe-orientated. Some of his lines could well adorn the title pages of our journals, and some of his poems ought to be mandatory recitation pieces at our congresses and conferences.

97. Anichkov, "Bal'mont," p. 99.