

Vergil Goes North: Aeneas' Journey in Russian Poetry

In his comprehensive work *Europäische Romdichtung*, Walter Rehm points out that the modern “Roman text” was created exclusively by the writers from other countries, primarily by those located north of the Apennine Peninsula (Rehm 1960, 274). For the Russian poets creating their “Roman text,” Vergil acquired a mystical and poignant significance as a poet of imperial aspirations, as a spiritual messiah predicting the new world-order, and as a poet of the brutalizing price of the heroic achievement.

This talk focuses on such a gradual development in Russian poetry of one of the Vergilian themes, the mission of Aeneas, from Alexander Pushkin to Viacheslav Ivanov and finally to Joseph Brodsky. These three Russian poets receive and interpret the mission of the Vergilian hero in the context of their own epoch and individual cultural poetics.

Pushkin's Vergilian *Romdichtung* finds its reflection in many of his lyric poems but most eloquently in Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman*. This poem - separated from the *Aeneid* by almost two millennia in time – exhibits striking similarities to the latter as regards their author's creative concerns and responses to several major political, historical, modern, and philosophical issues (Rudich 2002). Although the narrative of the *Aeneid* emphasizes the wasteful destruction of young and heroic lives and Aeneas' choice to sacrifice his humanity, Vergil also appreciates necessities and complexities inherent in historical process. In the same vein the *Bronze Horseman* manifests deep compassion for the downtrodden victims of history and the state asserting at the same time Pushkin's stand as a supporter of strong statehood, whose security and viability he puts, like Vergil does, above the needs of an individual.

Viacheslav Ivanov, the most influential Russian Symbolist, in his youth a student of Theodore Mommsen, had numerous strong, complex, and formalized ties with Rome. However, for all his tremendous knowledge of things Roman, he could in no way identify with the Roman spirit because he was indifferent to the imperial ideal so crucial in Roman experience (Rudich 1986, 278). Even more surprising then is the fact that Ivanov found a special affinity with Vergilian epic. In the *Roman Sonnets*, the collection of poems written immediately upon Ivanov's voluntary exile from post-revolutionary Russia to Rome, Ivanov equates himself with Aeneas. In the Trojan fire the poet sees the new life growing out of destroyed civilization. In Ivanov's perception of Rome the *Aeneid* is mostly seen as a narrative of a far-reaching triumph brought about by divine guidance and promoting world unity.

With Joseph Brodsky the journey of Aeneas acquires yet another dimension that has little to do with the universal mission of Rome but is focused more on the human price and the brutalizing effect of Aeneas' heroic plight. In his poem “Dido and Aeneas” written in 1969, Brodsky is explicitly concerned with Aeneas' destiny and duty. Brodsky, the persecuted poet, identifies with Aeneas, the vanquished hero, through the act of *podvizhnichestvo* (martyrdom achieved through heroic feat expressed in Russian with word of the same root - *podvig*) but there is an undisguised feeling of shame and self-contempt connected with abandonment of the hero's human ties (Torlone, 2003).

