Rarely does a figure totally capture the imagination of the literary intellectuals of his age and yet disappear completely without apparent trace. Such a person, however, was Aleksandr Mikhailovich Dobroliubov (1876-?), the erstwhile Russian decadent turned religious seeker and holy wanderer. Information about the life and activities of this early decadent is, at best, obscure and scantily documented. What is known is largely based on several eye-witness accounts, records of early friendships, fragmentary letters and, not the least, on rumor. His literary output was extremely modest, but in any case his influence should be attributed not so much to his poetry as to his symbolic biography or life-style. This is what so impressed his contemporaries.

In large part it is thanks to Valerii Briusov that we have any information at all about the early activity of Dobroliubov as a decadent and the first stages of his conversion to sectarianism. However, it is to the famous Russian scholar of religion and sectarianism Aleksandr S. Prugavin, who provides an examination of some of his major teachings after his religious conversion, that we owe our greatest knowledge of Dobroliubov the sectarian.

According to Briusov’s Дневники, Dobroliubov appeared on the

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1. Although a number of critics and authors have made passing reference to this extraordinary figure, the more important sources of reference are the following ones: Андрей Бельский, Начало века (М.-Л., 1933), стр. 363-366; Валерий Брюсов, Дневники 1891-1910, ред. И.М. Брюсова (М., 1927); Б. В. Гиппенрас, «А. Добролиубов», История русской литературы, ред. С.А. Венгерова (М., 1914), I, 272-287; Дмитрий Мережковский, «Революция и религия», Полное собрание сочинений (М., 1914), XIII, 84-93; К. Мочульский, «Александр Доброюбов», Новый журнал, XXXII (1953), 137-148; А.С. Пругавин, «Декадент-сектант», Русские ведомости, № 282, 7 декабря 1912 и № 287, 13 декабря 1912; А.С. Пругавин, «А. Доброюбов и его последователи», Непридуманные и реальные миры. Очерки религиозных исканий (М., 1918), стр. 272-287; F. D. Reeve, “Dobroliubov and Briusov: Symbolist Extremes,” The Slavic and East European Journal, VIII, 3 (Fall 1964), 292-301.

2. Natura naturans. Natura naturata (СПб., 1895); Собрание стихов (М., 1900); Из книги Невидимой (М., 1905).

3. Prugavin claimed that for many years he followed the activities of Dobroliubov and the dobrolubovtsy in the districts of Samara, Perm and Orenburg. Through his close association with various sectarians Prugavin apparently was able to gather a sizable number of Dobroliubov’s manuscripts and especially letters during his lifetime.
literary horizon as a decadent poet as early as 1894. Although Dobroliubov was then three years younger than his aspiring decadent colleague, he nonetheless gave Briusov a great deal of helpful advice concerning poetry and decadence in general, for which he was apparently most grateful. No doubt Briusov, who was striving to organize a school of decadent-symbolist poetry in Russia during the mid-1890's along the lines of his French counterparts, discovered for himself a worthy model of decadence in the younger man's fashionable life style, based as it was on an espousal of artificiality and an indulgence in narcotics and immorality. Quite clearly Dobroliubov had assumed the all-important Wildean "silhouette," or as Mochulskii aptly suggests, the ultimate decadent archetype of J.-K. Huysmans' Des Esseintes in A Rebours.

Dobroliubov's career as ascendant decadent was cut short soon after he was expelled from the university for, as rumor had it, encouraging two young people to commit suicide. It appears that, having reached the furthest extreme of a decadent philosophy, he preached the ultimate act of suicide as consummating the ecstatic entry into Nirvana. This final stage in the pursuit of a philosophy of decadence must have precipitated a crisis in the poet's life, for even by 1896 Briusov was disenchanted with his former idol, who had begun to shun his decadent past. It is difficult, due to the lack of documentation, to place a precise date on Dobroliubov's conversion. However, from Briusov's memoirs especially, and from a letter written by Dobroliubov to his "evil genius" V. V. Gippius, we know that by 1898 the crisis had definitely come to a climax. Following is the text of the letter sent to Gippius from Petersburg on May 21, 1898, describing this crisis as the third most significant which the youthful Dobroliubov had yet experienced:

4. Брюсов, стр. 17-18.
5. Мочульский, стр. 138.
6. This particular episode in Dobroliubov's career reminds one, of course, of Dostoevskii's Бесы, where Kirilov preaches the doctrine of suicide as the final test of whether man fears death or not. If one can commit suicide then one is capable of becoming absolutely free, denying God and becoming the Godman himself. This ultimate stage in the formulation of the decadent's (or nihilist's) credo impressed others beside Dobroliubov. The concept provides the rather depressing conflict for the plot of Mikhail Artsybashev's incredibly gloomy and derivative novel У последней черты which first appeared serially in the journal Земля from 1910 through 1912. In this novel the exponent of suicide is Naumov who appears to be a synthesized imitation of the Dostoevskian characters Petr Verkhovenskii and Kirilov.
7. According to Briusov's testimony, Dobroliubov's mother claimed that it was V. V. Gippius who "perverted" her son. One is immediately tempted to view the relationship between Gippius and Dobroliubov in terms of Petr Verkhovenskii and Kirilov in Dostoevskii's Бесы, although of course this is somewhat of an exaggeration.