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## Introduction

*The* Symbolists in Moscow and Petersburg in the early twentieth century dreamed of a new era that would fundamentally revolutionize the Russian way of life. These poets, philosophers, and mystics looked for signs in the sky, especially in radiant sunrises. They sensed that tsarist society was on the threshold of an apocalyptic upheaval. Before them they saw great syntheses led by Russia between Eastern and Western culture and among various art forms.

The Symbolists based themselves on Vladimir Solovyov and Friedrich Nietzsche. Solovyov had spoken in Gnostic terms of the World Soul that was attempting to break out of the prison of matter, of Sophia, the divine wisdom inherent in creation that the poets were summoned to find and give a name. Through his mouthpiece Zarathustra, Nietzsche had proclaimed the advent of a new age and called for rebellion against all conventional values.

Influences came from elsewhere as well. Like the “men of the 1860s” before them who had been awakened by Darwin and Marx, the Symbolists were impatient to see their new ideas translated into reality as soon as possible. Beneath their enormous ambitions was an unmistakable streak of Russian maximalism. They pinned their exorbitant expectations on the political revolution of 1905.

The circle around Andrey Bely in Moscow welcomed him as the modern Messiah when in 1902 he made his literary debut with an experiment in poetic prose emanating from his ecstatic visions during the first year of the new century. He aspired to nothing less than fusing his life with his art to become the harbinger of the great transformation.

## *Introduction*

In the essays here I attempt to introduce the Symbolists and their feverish expectations in greater detail. There was a time when for a brief moment everything seemed possible. Then came the rude awakening. It is described better than anywhere else in Bely's powerful prose masterpiece *Petersburg*, which serves as the connective thread and recurrent point of reference throughout the present collection. Written in the early 1910s just before the world war that was to culminate in the so-called October revolution, the novel portrays the collective experience of the Symbolists as an attempted political parricide.

These dreamers came back down to earth in different places. The experience had been so all-encompassing that it generated the need for a wide variety of powerful substitutes. There was enormous intellectual turbulence. Like Bely, some became Anthroposophists. One converted to Catholicism and another to Orthodoxy, and these two ended up as hybrid Catholic-Orthodox Uniates. Another evolved into a Stalinist and yet another became a Nazi.

The symptoms of the pathology were remarkably intertwined with Symbolist culture's rich artistic production. At the very moment of crisis, newly introduced depth psychology came to the rescue of some of the visionaries. In certain cases the result was a conceptual cross-fertilization, since the survivors of the calamity had a unique experience to communicate to their therapists.

Here as well there is a story.

## ANDREY BELY AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S NEPHEW

**I**t is difficult to overstate the significance of the philosopher and poet Vladimir Solovyov's nephew Sergey for Andrey Bely. In his own memoirs, Bely calls it "colossal." The two men merged with and complemented each other. More and more, Sergey came to resemble Bely's double. Indeed, Sergey's maternal grandmother, Aleksandra Kovalenskaya, described them as two halves of a single personality. This relationship becomes especially clear when we consider Bely's literary figures, some of whom blend features of both.

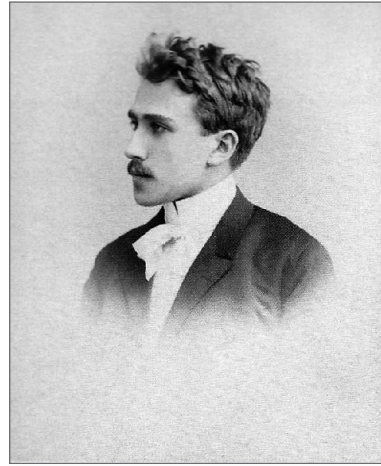
They first met in late 1895, 15 and 10 years old, respectively. For the young Boris Bugaev (Bely's real name), the Solovyov family that had recently moved into the building in the Arbat in Moscow became an alternative or antithesis to the stifling reserve of his own family under the command of his professor father. He came to look upon publisher Mikhail Solovyov as a second father and Olga Solovyova, an artist, as a second mother. Albeit in different ways, both Mikhail and Olga were receptive to the new literary currents. In Sergey he found a surrogate brother who immediately was able to understand and respond to his improvised fantasies and play with symbols. Here in this family he was no longer tongue-tied and was allowed to express himself.

Around the turn of the century, "Borya's" and "Seryozha's" mutual mythmaking drew increasingly on Vladimir Solovyov's prophecies. It was thus that Bely's debut work, the prose poem *The Second Symphony (the Dramatic)*, emerged. When it was published in 1902, many in his intimate circle believed that the sixteen-year-

old Sergey was the author. To some extent, in fact, he was, but he was also and equally the hero, a young mystic by the name of Sergey searching in passionate visions for the "Woman Clothed with the Sun," Solovyov's apocalyptic Sophia symbol. Bely later called his hero "a projection of the future Seryozha Solovyov."

It was Mikhail Solovyov who, on his own initiative, printed *The Second Symphony* with logotype borrowed from the publishing house Scorpio (The Scorpion) and gave the young debutant his pseudonym Andrey Bely—"Andrey the White." The work issued directly from Boris and Sergey's mystical rapture in the Arbat during the winter and spring of 1901. Their cult of dusk and dawn on the threshold of the new century and their ecstatic expectation of an approaching transformation of the world were rooted entirely in Vladimir Solovyov's poetry and philosophy. These sensations were so strong that they had a determining influence on their lives and writing—a point to which they constantly returned and in various forms attempted to interpret and recreate. In the fall of 1901, Bely began writing his third symphony, *The Return*, in which the Nietzschean abdication of reason that was perceptible as early as his first work became increasingly alluring. From the very beginning, Bely had been interested in psychiatry and mental border-crossings.

In 1901 Sergey introduced Bely to the poetry of Aleksandr Blok (his second cousin), and in 1903 the two writers became personally acquainted. Blok's poetic invocations of a higher feminine principle seemed to concretize Bely's own expectations of the new century. At the same time, Mikhail Solovyov died, and his wife, who had for some time been psychologically unbalanced, shot herself. Sergey was forced to seek help from the well-known psychiatrist



*Sergey Solovyov, 1904.*



*Sergey Solovyov and  
Andrey Bely in Dedovo,  
1905.*

Ivan Sikorsky, who knew his relatives in Kiev. Soon Bely's father also passed away, thus linking Bely's fate once again to that of his friend.

When Bely was drawn into his great Petersburg drama with Aleksandr and Lyubov Blok amid the revolutionary ferment of 1904-1906, Sergey was the whole time at his side as a extremist instigator, urging him on much as in the games they used to play with symbols. They were both in love with Lyubov, the original object of Blok's Sophia cult. When Blok proved to be inadequate as both a theurgist and a husband, Bely attempted with Sergey's active assistance to take his place. The consequences were catastro-

phic, but they also had an extraordinarily stimulating impact on Bely's writing.

As for Sergey, now a philologist at Moscow University with an interest in antiquity, he fantasized about marrying a peasant girl as a revolutionary symbolic act. In the poetry he soon began publishing, he drew on his broad learning to interweave classical and Biblical motifs with Slavic folk mythology.

Bely's first prose work in a larger format, the novel *The Silver Dove*, harks back to his and Sergey's shared experience of the revolutionary mystique that culminated in 1906. The hero, the Symbolist poet Daryalsky, sallies out into the depths of the people and allies himself with a woman in a mystical sect on his mission to resurrect Russia. Besides reflecting Bely himself, he is modeled on Sergey to such a degree that when the latter became familiar with the writing of the novel, he even offered to pose for the role. Sergey was at the same time composing a prose work of his own with a similar theme, which, however, he never finished. In a poem written in January 1909, just as Bely was beginning the novel, he had addressed Sergey as his "beloved brother" and reminisced about



their shared visionary ecstasy in 1901 and Russia's subsequent tribulations. The pair, the poem declared, were united by a force beyond the grave.

In the end, Sergey was understandably of two minds about the novel, and the first crack in their foster-brotherhood came into view. The rift surely also had to do with the fact that Sergey did not share Bely's (and Daryalsky's) affinity for occult doctrines.

In the fall of 1910, Bely began planning a new novel to be entitled *Petersburg*. It was another retrospective look at 1905-1906 and his desperate attempts to weave the Sophia cult into the Revolution. The theme of patricide in the work may have ultimately come from a talk Sergey had just held on the Oedipus motif in connection with a performance of *The Brothers Karamazov* at the Moscow Art Theater. Dramatizing reality as Symbolists were wont to do, Sergey was now active in Moscow's theatrical world. He had been dragged into a complicated and painful love affair with a woman with whom he had been close friends since childhood, the subsequently famous actress Sofya Giatsintova. The romance had a dramatically unhappy ending. Overwrought, he made a couple of suicide attempts and was admitted to a psychiatric clinic.

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis was making inroads in Russia around this time, not least in Sergey's environs at the Moscow University Clinic and at the sanatoria in Kryukovo and Podsolnechnoe near his family's summer home in Dedovo. In the winter of 1912 he underwent psychoanalysis by Dr. Yury Kannabikh at Kryukovo, which may make him the first writer in Europe to receive Freudian treatment.

Bely, whose heroes are constantly on the brink of mental breakdown, was in contact with Sergey's first physician in the fall of 1911 as he continued to work on *Petersburg*. These conversations doubtless gave him material for the novel, the basic theme of which, via the autobiographical relationship with his father and his conflict with Blok, is the destiny of Russia. The bomb thrower Dudkin—just like Sergey at the clinic—feels persecuted by an "oriental face" (that grows into his demon and destroyer of Russia, the chief terrorist Lippanchenko). And just like Sergey, Dudkin hovers on the verge of spiritual disintegration until his mind finally



*Andrey Bely, 1916.*

splits. Thus, albeit not as obviously as in *The Silver Dove*, in this case as well Sergey lends features to Bely's revolutionary activist characters. This does not become entirely clear until the end of the epilogue, when Senator Ableukhov's likewise mentally unstable son Nikolay (whose assassination plot has come to nothing) is reborn in the Russian countryside with Christlike physical features reminiscent of Sergey, who was now cured of his phobias. Just before finishing the novel, Bely had in fact met Sergey in Volhynia in the spring of 1913, in the company of his newly wedded wife Tatyana, the

younger sister of Bely's unofficial wife Asya Turgeneva. At first, both he and Bely had been in love with Asya. Upon his release from Kryukovo, Sergey—in emulation of Bely—married the then merely sixteen-year-old Tatyana and set off on a honeymoon to Italy, as had Bely and Asya two years before.

Despite these imitations, in 1913 Bely and Sergey were moving away from each other again, and this second time the ideological gap was deeper. Sergey was increasingly involved with Orthodoxy, Byzantinism, and Slavophilism, and would eventually take holy orders, whereas Bely had already entered the newly founded Anthroposophical Society in Berlin. As Symbolism was now breaking down completely, both were in reality simply attempting in different ways to carry on Vladimir Solovyov's heritage.

After Bely's return from his long sojourn abroad with the Anthroposophists, they met again. In 1917 Bely lived off and on with his friend in Dedovo. The February Revolution inspired hopes in Sergey that the Eastern and Western Churches might be reunited, much in the spirit of Vladimir Solovyov. He spoke of a cosmic resurrection. After the October upheaval he wrote a thoroughly somber poem entitled "To My Friend Boris Bugaev"

in which the perspective had undergone a drastic change. He now readied himself for humiliation and "stoning." He sought support from his friend, who at this moment was far less insightful than he (and who would soon, in the poem *Christ is Risen*, even interpret the revolutionary events in Aleksandr Blok's mystical spirit).

It was at this point that Sergey Solovyov's long passion really began. His marriage tragically dissolved in 1920, after which he again needed to seek psychiatric treatment. Like his uncle he converted to Catholicism, but after a few years of vacillation he went halfway back and joined the Uniate Church, which observes the Orthodox liturgy but is in communion with Rome. He lived a destitute and vulnerable life yet in addition to his activity as a priest, he was remarkably productive. He translated mostly classical authors from up to seven different languages, he wrote theological essays and finished a major monograph on his uncle—*Vladimir Solovyov's Life and Philosophical and Artistic Evolution*—in which Solovyov's East-West idea is central, as it always was to Moscow Symbolism.

To a large extent Bely lived retrospectively in the new Soviet state, writing memoirs in various forms and backward-looking novels. In May 1921 he wrote *The First Meeting*, a narrative poem that portrays the mystical transports of 1901, exactly twenty years before. The title itself plays on Vladimir Solovyov's poem "Three Meetings," about his three visions of Sophia. Central to Bely's work is his portrait of Sergey, which tersely captures his young friend's combined angelic and precocious personality.

Bely and Sergey went on meeting each other from time to time, and they continued to respect each other despite their utterly different ideological positions. On several occasions Bely spent the night in Sergey's spartanly furnished rented room in Moscow. In the summer of 1926, they met in Koktebel on the Black Sea. Toward the end of the decade both men became absorbed in writing memoirs about the early years. In 1930, Bely finished the first part of his reminiscences *On the Border of Two Centuries*, which concludes with a brilliant portrayal of Sergey and the mythmaking of their childhood and youth. Now, Bely writes, the two are united in an indestructible thirty-five-year-old friendship, even love (which was

surely reinforced by their shared political difficulties). Bely was well aware that at the time Sergey was living dangerously. In 1929, the Communist Party had launched a violent anti-religious campaign. The small Catholic congregations had been dissolved, and Sergey had been forced to begin leading a kind of catacomb existence.

In February 1930, a little over a month after Bely finished *On the Border of Two Centuries*, the persecuted Sergey seems to have visited him in Kuchino outside Moscow. That he did so is evident from a poem Bely dedicated to him, characteristically entitled "To My Brother," the manuscript of which I obtained from Sergey's daughter Olga when I once met her in Moscow. This poem, written in Bely's typical broken verse lines, is yet another retrospective work. It portrays Sergey as akin to his uncle, a winged being from a different dimension. Ever since the turn-of-the-century Dionysian blizzard thirty years earlier in the magical year 1901, he had followed Bely like a blood relative, a mystical stimulus on both sight and sound. At this moment the two friends sense the approach of death, and Bely urges Sergei to lift his gaze to the heavens, where a star is dimly visible. It is not the Star of Bethlehem as in the *Second Symphony*, however, but instead a tear, their shared bitter experience. But soon they will find their Solovyovian "azure blue home," the eternity of their dreams. In a number of Vladimir Solovyov's poems—especially "Three Meetings," azure is linked to Sophia and a revealed reality beyond our own. Bely played on the connection as early as the title of his first poetry collection *Gold in Azure*: the golden sun against the azure blue sky.

Sergey Solovyov's days in freedom were numbered, and both he and Bely knew it. A few days later, on the night between 15 and 16 February 1930, he was apprehended in a wave of anti-Catholic arrests. Later that spring, Anthroposophists in Bely's circle, including his wife, were imprisoned. For the time being he was left alone.

In the GPU's interrogation rooms Sergey plunged once and for all into schizophrenia. He was paralyzed by feelings of guilt, believing he had poisoned the entire world. When Bely died in 1934, he was once again in a mental institution. He had intervals of lucidity but relapsed periodically into morbid passivity. He

*Andrey Bely and the Philosopher's Nephew*

finally died in 1942 from self-imposed starvation after having been evacuated to Kazan early in the war. He was buried there in the middle of the bitterly cold winter, ironically enough—considering his own background—on the initiative of Evgeny Feinberg and Vitaly Ginzburg, two young physicists of a decidedly materialistic outlook. Feinberg was the brother of Sergey's son-in-law. Feinberg's friend Ginzburg, incidentally, would go on to be awarded the Nobel Prize in physics.

Symbolism integrated life and art. It was not least an experiment with fluid identities in which personalities—often with dramatic conflicts as a result—blurred into each other. Andrey Bely and Sergey Solovyov's "collective being" is an especially obvious example of the phenomenon, which lies at the very heart of Russian Symbolism.

## BELY AND ALEKSANDR BLOK

**A**ndrey Bely's *Second Symphony (the Dramatic)* was born in the spring and summer of 1901. Of special significance to its fiery red visions of dawn is the mythologem of "the Woman Clothed with the Sun" from *Revelation* 12, who brings forth a man child who is to rule all nations with a rod of iron, vanquish the Beast, and save the world. In one of his three lectures in memory of Dostoevsky, Vladimir Solovyov had observed that the writer had been especially inclined to apply this apocalyptic symbolism to Russia and what he thought to be Russia's mission, namely, to bring forth the child of the dawn, the redeemer of the world. For Bely, these notions were closely tied to Nietzsche's "blond beast" of the new world.

Early in the fall of 1901, Sergey Solovyov introduced Bely to Aleksandr Blok's still unpublished poetic incantations. They made an enormous impression on him, and he increasingly set his hopes on this brother poet, of his same age, who appeared to be about to give a name to Sophia, the Divine Wisdom, the World-Mother. Blok seemed to have assumed the role of conjurer of the higher reality, an undertaking in keeping with Solovyov's notions of the verbal artist's new mission, which was to awaken the dormant World Soul. It was as though at this moment he was Bely's better self, someone who perhaps was capable of accomplishing what Bely was attempting but could not entirely manage.

Important in this context is the fact that Blok was in Petersburg, the site of the mighty visions of Aleksandr Pushkin, Nikolay Gogol, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. It was also Bely's mother's city, which she often contrasted with the academic Moscow milieu she did not like. Bely later reported that, initially, he imagined Blok standing on the

banks of the Neva gazing into the sky. Here he quite emphatically links Blok to Pushkin's poem *The Bronze Horseman*, the point of departure for the entire Petersburg myth, with its apocalyptic keynote and famous apostrophe to Russia.

Blok and Bely's backgrounds seemed to have so much in common. Both were born in October 1880, both were sons of prominent university professors and had grown up in an academic environment, both were receptive to the new literary currents, and around the turn of the century they were equally impregnated with the philosophy of recently deceased Vladimir Solovyov. Bely's own mystical pretensions always encompassed a duality that included a satirical and self-mocking corrective. Blok seemed less ambiguous,

It took a while before they became personally acquainted. In the meantime Blok sent new poems to his second cousin Sergey that merely reinforced Bely's first impressions. Then something happened that both Bely and Blok came to regard as particularly significant. They sent letters to each other that evidently crossed in the mail and arrived simultaneously. Blok had been deeply impressed by "The Forms of Art," an article Bely had just published that commented philosophically on the new mysticism, and he, as the visionary, addressed some questions to Bely as the theoretical authority. As for Bely, in his letter he wanted to know more about Blok's cultic relationship with "Her." After this exchange they began corresponding intensively. In a way, they created a new genre in these letters, which were often very extensive and mingled personal messages, confessions, mystical exegesis, and drafts of literary works.

In the summer of 1903 Blok married Lyubov Mendeleeva, daughter of the creator of the periodic table of elements. Bely, informed and supported by Sergey, was already aware that it was she who was the object of Blok's cult poetry. He was himself invited to the wedding as an usher but was unable to attend due to his father's death and funeral. Sergey took his place and returned with ecstatic descriptions of the event as a cult ceremony in the service of his "Eternal Friend." Everything seemed to be charged with symbolism and significance. It was not for nothing that the bride's name was Lyubov, which means "love." The daughter of a great materialist,





*Lyubov and Aleksandr Blok. 1903.*

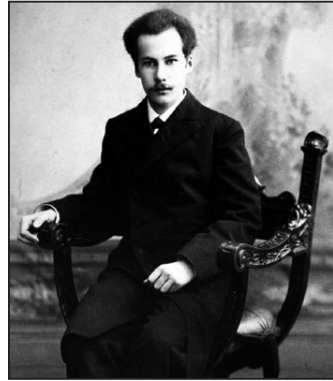
she appeared to be—to use yet another Solovyovian epithet—“the radiant daughter of dark chaos.” As before, playfulness mixed with deep seriousness in the speculations of the young Moscow friends.

In early 1904, Bely and Blok finally met personally. Blok and his wife came to Moscow and were introduced to the young so-called Argonaut circle that had gathered around Bely. Expectations were so inflated and mutual projections so strong that both men were bound to be disappointed and perceive each other’s physical presence as rather trivial. Blok even admitted that he found it difficult to converse with Bely. That summer they saw each other again when Bely and Sergey visited Blok at his summer home in Shakhmatovo, outside Moscow. Bely and Sergey were by this time so immersed in Blok’s poetry that they both fell in love with Lyubov. Blok’s first volume, *Verses on the Beautiful Lady*, whose title aroused associations with the chivalrous romance, came out later that fall. Bely’s own poetry debut, a collection whose title *Gold in Azure* alluded, through Solovyov’s solar incantations, to the color symbolism of icons of the Mother of God, appeared at about the same time. Bely and Sergey fantasized about future scholars finding traces of a “Blokist” sect—themselves, that is.

But something had happened. Blok had early on begun to have doubts about his poetry. The “She” of his visions seemed



to be changing. He confessed in a personal conversation with Bely that he felt doom in his very genes, in what he had inherited from a demonic father figure who abandoned the family when he was just a baby. At the same time there were problems in his marriage. Bely was therefore all the more inclined to attempt to assume Blok's role as both the fore-singer of the new age and the worshipper of his wife. A love triangle on several levels became inevitable, and these tensions were heightened by dramatic current events. Just as Bely was leaving Shakhmatovo, the news came that the dreaded Minister of the Interior Plehve had been killed in the middle of Petersburg by a terrorist bomb.



*Andrey Bely, 1904.*

In January 1905, Bely came for the first time to Petersburg to visit the Bloks. Remarkably enough, his arrival happened to coincide with Bloody Sunday, the prelude to the revolutionary events of that year, which were also a direct consequence of Russia's devastating defeat in the naval war with Japan. The tsarist regime was shaken, and the resounding mystical ecstasy Bely experienced at the turn of the century took on an increasingly political significance. Lyubov Blok seemed to respond positively to his feelings. In the spring he published an article on "The Apocalypse in Russian Poetry" in which he argued that nineteenth-century poets up to Solovyov had attempted to capture the contours of Sophia, the World Soul, and that at this crucial moment the Symbolists were about to accomplish the mission by liberating "the Woman Clothed with the Sun" and thereby freeing the nation from its shackles.

As the revolutionary process was approaching its climax in August, Bely wrote "The Green Meadow," an article in which he applied the symbolism of Gogol's "A Terrible Vengeance" to Russia's predicament. In Gogol's story, Katerina is tightly bound to her diabolical sorcerer father. She remembers her carefree childhood full of circle dancing and games on "the meadow so green." Bely



*Aleksandr Blok, 1907.*

summons Katerina-Russia to free herself from oppression and re-create her pleasant past. On another level he is quite simply beseeching Lyubov Blok to leave her marriage. Later he described this essay as a love letter with specific associations that went over the heads of his readers. Soon after, he made a couple more trips to Petersburg. Without telling Blok in so many words, he hinted in murky fantasies about moving in with them in a new ménage à trois that would be a kind of anarchic mini-commune. When the Revolution was bloodily crushed in the late fall and

the tsarist repression took hold, in Bely's view these events were increasingly linked with Lyubov's still strong ties to Blok, who now seemed prepared to question everything he had once professed. Bely had just become acquainted with Blok's newly written play *The Puppet Show*, in which he had been so bold as to portray himself and Bely as Harlequin and Pierrot and the dream of transforming the world as a farce. Such a drastic dethroning of the earlier ambitions of both men could only serve to intensify the provocation.

In the spring of 1906, Bely drew closer to Lyubov. He dreamed of running away with her to another mythical city of water and canals: Venice. But she withdrew, and once she had made her decision it was irrevocable. Bely's maniacally complex attitudes had played a role. He was capable of at one and the same time dispatching eight letters to Lyubov, three to Blok, and one to Blok's mother, many of them contradictory. Toward the end of the summer

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