A HISTORY OF RUSSIAN SYMBOLISM

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Ronald E. Peterson

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Foreword

The appearance of Ronald E. Peterson's long-awaited *History of Russian Symbolism* should elicit feelings of elation and sadness, for the volume is the author's *magnum opus*, a book to which he devoted many years of research and which he succeeded in completing shortly before his tragic and untimely death in April of 1986. While friends, colleagues and scholars of Symbolism will surely lament the author's passing, they will be heartened to welcome this invaluable contribution to Russian letters.

A History of Russian Symbolism 1892-1917 represents the first comprehensive study of the multi-faceted turn-of-the-century Russian movement. Broad in its approach, the volume encompasses a thorough look at the rise and fall of Russian Symbolism. Charting its rise with figures such as Merezhkovsky, Hippius, Balmont, Bryusov and Sologub, Ronald Peterson provides a historico-philosophical and cultural background to Symbolism's heyday with the leading writers, Blok, Bely and Ivanov. These literary figures collectively forged a new way of perceiving the world, indeed "changing the face," to borrow Peterson's words, of Russian culture. Peterson illustrates the pivotal impact of journals, including *Severnye Tsvety, Mir Iskusstva, Novyi Put, Zolotoe Runo, Vesy, Apollon,* to name a few, without which Russia's richest period of cultural exchange would have been impossible. Indeed, the success and failure of Symbolism often coincided with the successes and failures of such journals.

Few periods have been more misunderstood than Symbolism. Its exponents were too diverse in temperament, not to mention style, to constitute a cohesive group. Russian Symbolism owes its first stirrings as a movement to Valery Bryusov, who sought methodically to head the "new school," by raising Baudelaire's "correspondences" to aesthetic heights, while members of the so-called "second wave" turned to Goethe and Nietzsche, likening their art to theurgy. And yet on one point the Symbolists all agreed, namely that the task of Symbolism was "to create a new poetic language, to work out a new the means of peotry," citing Bryusov himself.

Just as Symbolism was much more than "just literature," so this volume is much more than "just history." Ronald Peterson's breadth of knowledge spans such diverse subjects as comparative philosophy, the plastic arts and literary criticism. Although he focuses on the Symbolists' contributions in poetry, prose and drama, the author illuminates his study with side glances of what was occurring politically and socially, eschewing cliches and yet meticulous about detail. At the same time, he provides indispensable biographical material, underlining the inextricable bond between life and art. Ultimately, Ronald Peterson's *A History of Russian Symbolism* will prove to be as important a contribution as Georgette Donchin's *The Influence of French Symbolism on Russian Poetry* and James West's *Russian Symbolism*.

Olga Muller Cooke
Texas A & M University

Preface

This book attempts to fill a long-standing need in literary and scholarly criticism, a history of Symbolism in Russia. The era of Russian Symbolism, 1892-1917, broadly defined, has been called the Silver Age of Russian culture, and even the Second Golden Age. Symbolist authors are among the greatest Russian authors of this century, and their activities helped to foster one of the most significant advances in cultural life (in poetry, prose, music, theater, and painting) that has ever been seen there.

Much has been written about Symbolism in Russia, but it is difficult to formulate universally acceptable and accurate generalizations about this literary and artistic movement that appeared on the scene in the early 1890s and flourished in the first two decades of this century. There has been a tendency in the USSR to de-emphasize scholarship on this topic because the Symbolists' views are generally antithetical to the official dogma of Socialist Realism. When works published there do address Symbolism, the discussion tends, especially in the official histories of Russian literature, to denigrate the Symbolists and favor the more "acceptable" realist authors. In the West, scholars recognize the importance of the movement, but have treated it in terms of individual authors, or from a limited perspective, or the studies are simply too superficial.

This book is designed to serve as an introduction to Symbolism in Russia, as a movement, an artistic method, and a world view. This is no simple task, because there are many differing views of Symbolism, and in fact the Symbolists themselves very often disagreed about the essence of Symbolism. Symbols, of course, have been used for centuries to unite the external sign with the thing it signifies, to "throw together" these two concepts, as the Greek etymology indicates. As generally interpreted by the practitioners, a symbol connotes a sign that needs to be deciphered and therefore invites the participation of a reader or a viewer to penetrate the mystery. Though the Symbolists' views of the correspondence between what is

below, and what is above, behind the "cover" of this world, are at times not terribly conducive to interpretation, often these "mysteries," "symbols," and "emblems" are not difficult to comprehend. Ideally, their poetry and other writings should be appreciated for the merit each work possesses, rather than for any "mysteries" that might be hinted at.

Symbolism is a rather approximate label, a misleading and yet quite convenient term. The name itself, moreover, was not always used in the movement; the terms "Decadence" and the "new art" also had currency, though they are just as imprecise, because not all the works produced were decadent, and the strong interest in ancient art among the Symbolists did not necessarily make their art "new."

It is generally acceptable, however, to refer to Symbolism in Russia as a tendency, that is, a tendency for the author to have a subjective relationship to the world, a tendency for such an author to look beyond the borders of his or her country to Western European contemporaries and forerunners, to look back to earlier Russian literature and indeed ancient history and literature, a tendency to concentrate on poetry and lyricism, though other genres were also cultivated by Russian Symbolists. Particular success was achieved in prose and drama.

Symbolism can be seen as the result of an individual perception of the world and a personal approach to life. There was, in addition, an identifiable tendency among the Symbolists to try to extend the movement to include an approach to the whole world, through Symbolism, to make it a way of life, to equate the objective world with a façade that had to be overcome in order to attain a higher reality, in agreement with Goethe that "Alles vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis." This tendency in literature was eventually admired and imitated by other Russian writers who normally devoted themselves to more socially oriented and realistic works, and of course by epigones who sometimes saw adopting certain aspects of the Symbolists' writings as a way of gaining quick popularity. There were many who disagreed with the Symbolists and found opportunities for criticizing this movement, and this approach is still alive today, but a recounting of the events connected with Symbolism in Russia can help to provide a greater basis for properly appreciating and understanding this phenomenon.

In this examination of Russian Symbolism, the primary emphasis is on the history of the movement itself, on what happened. Attention is devoted to what the Symbolists wrote, said, and thought, and on how they interacted. In this context, therefore, the main actors are the authors of the

poetry, prose, drama, and criticism. There are, in addition, important connections between the literary figures and artists, philosophers, and the intelligentsia in general; space is devoted to these connections as they relate to the development of the movement. Those readers interested in acquainting themselves with what these individuals wrote about Symbolism while it was an active force are encouraged to consult a companion volume, *The Russian Symbolists*, an anthology of critical and theoretical essays, printed in 1986.[1]

In the chronicle of events associated with Russian Symbolism that follows, the synthesis of the material available gives the reader a comprehensive picture of this very important movement. This broad, detailed, and balanced account of this period can, I hope, serve as a standard reference work and encourage further study and research among scholars and students of literature, because the goals of the Russian Symbolist movement, most especially a commitment to aesthetic excellence and freedom of creativity, which can produce works of lasting value, will never go out of fashion.

* * *

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the American Philosophical Society, the University of Oregon Graduate School Research Office, the Ohio State University Center for Slavic and East European Studies, and Occidental College, which awarded me a MacArthur Research Professorship so that I could complete work on this history. The generous aid has made it possible for me to conduct research in libraries in the United States and Europe.

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A Note on References, Transliteration and Translation

References in the text to the months and years of publication for these works by Symbolist authors are taken from the Chronicles of Literary Events in *Russkaia literatura kontsa XIX — nachala XX veka*, gen. ed. B. A. Bialik, 3 vols. (Moscow, 1968-72). These detailed chronicles are based on extensive surveys made in the USSR and on official government records of publications (issued weekly) during the period before the Revolution. When these works are listed in the Notes, they are accompanied by the year of publication shown on the cover.

The transliteration system employed in the text is quite close to J. Thomas Shaw's System I, used "when the audience sought is not comprised solely of specialists in Russian studies," and in the Notes, System II, the Library of Congress system, with the diacritical marks omitted; see J. Thomas Shaw, *The Transliteration of Modern Russian for English-Language Publications* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), pp. 3-4, 8.

All translations are mine, unless specified otherwise.

1. Introduction

> Russian symbolism is part of the general cultural upheaval that changed the face of Russian civilization between 1890 and 1910. It was at once an aesthetic and mystical movement; it raised the level of poetic craftsmanship, and it was united by a mystical attitude towards the world, which is expressed in the very name of symbolism.
>
> Mirsky

The Russian Symbolist movement was indeed a major factor in the "cultural upheaval" at the turn of the century that Prince Mirsky mentions in his comments about this important era in literature, art, and philosophy known as the Silver Age.[1] From its beginnings in 1892-94, through the phase of its greatest flowering and influence in 1904-10, to its conclusion in a period of world war and revolution, Russian Symbolism accomplished much in its efforts to improve the standards of literary technique and of thinking in Russia. The degree to which all the Symbolists accepted a mystical attitude toward life can be (and, in fact, was) disputed, but the Symbolist movement itself was much more than "just literature" for many Russians in the first decades of this century. It can certainly be said that Symbolism changed the face of Russian culture, and scholars generally agree that some of this century's best Russian poets are numbered among the Symbolists. This chapter is devoted to the contexts of this multi-faceted movement, to tracing its roots, and to a brief characterization of its major tendencies, with the ultimate goal of indicating why it was such a significant cultural phenomenon.

The Silver Age, which lasted about two decades, from the end of the 1890s to 1917, not only demonstrated the outstanding capabilities of artists, writers, performers, and others active in Russia at the time, it also marked

an age of cultural rebirth in that country.[2] In the 1880s and early 1890s, there was a widespread feeling of stagnation and lack of vitality in Russia's social and cultural life. The reigns of the last two Romanovs, Alexander III and Nicholas II, were a period of reaction, of attempts to suppress various types of activism. There is a Russian term applied to the 1880-90s: "timelessness," which refers not to a sense of "eternity" or "infinity," but more to a lack of progress, a failure to move forward with the times.[3] The so-called Golden Age of Russian prose had ended in the early 1880s with the deaths of Fyodor Dostoevsky (1881) and Ivan Turgenev (1883); Leo Tolstoy by then had turned away from his great novels and was devoting his energies more to religious topics. There was an almost overpowering tendency against strictly imaginative literature in Russian at the time; critics on the left demanded (and often got) socially relevant and "progressive" literary works. Their opposite numbers on the conservative side also wanted useful literature, writings that exhibited moral good.[4] And it was difficult to oppose this notion of utility, but the Symbolists and a few others were able to do so, in large measure because most of what they published was demonstrably well written. Because the Symbolists were involved in a variety of related activities, and their interactions with counterparts in other cultural fields was fruitful, it is necessary to examine the history of Russian Symbolism against a number of different backgrounds. The main contexts that will be cited here include political and philosophical views, the fine arts, theater, and of course poetry, prose fiction, and literary criticism.

Contexts: Philosophy and Politics

In Russian philosophical thinking, the political concerns of the thinkers have tended to exercise a stronger influence than in other countries. In fact there was rather little substantial philosophy there before the latter half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Before this time, we see a long-running polemic between the so-called Westernizers and the Slavophiles, which occupies an important role in the philosophy of the Russians.[5] As the names suggest, the major differences of opinion were developed according to one's preference for (or aversion to) borrowing Western ideals, including democratic and liberal notions. The Slavophiles focused on the historical mission of the Russian land and its people as a superior, even Messianic nation; they strongly favored Orthodoxy and harmonious integration. They were opposed to the supposed flaws of the Roman

Catholic countries (rational thinking and concern for authority), and the Protestants were seen as even worse examples of straying from the true path. The Westernizers, however, a more diverse group, shared the belief that Russia's history should be closely bound to Western European developments. They tended to favor such Western ideas as constitutionalism and were often anti-religious or atheistic.

We find not only the beginnings of first-rate philosophical thought in Russia, toward the end of the nineteenth century, but also a major precursor to the Symbolist movement, in the mature career of Vladimir Solovyov, considered by many as Russia's leading philosopher. His connections with the Symbolists will be covered in greater detail in later chapters, but here it should be mentioned that he was concerned about religious topics, especially mysticism and the various branches of Christianity (Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism). Unlike the Slavophiles, Solovyov took a decidedly universalist position and did not necessarily believe that the Russian way was the only path to saving the world. In addition to his philosophical treatises, he wrote some rather amusing plays and mystical poetry, and the poetry bears some relation to the Symbolist movement; but Solovyov died in 1900, just as the movement was starting to be taken seriously, and so he was prevented from having greater interaction with the Symbolist authors.[6]

German philosophy toward the end of the nineteenth century had a certain influence in Russian intellectual circles. Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy ran counter to the prevailing trends in Russian thought, particularly the notion that citizens must work together for the common good. Nietzsche was much more concerned with personal destiny, with using force and power to attain goals; he was less worried about morals and was not inclined to see all people as equal. In many ways he is the opposite of Vladimir Solovyov, yet the same Symbolists admired both, though usually at different stages in their careers. And it has not been demonstrated conclusively that Nietzsche's legion of Russian admirers truly understood the totality of his message, especially in regard to Christianity, which Nietzsche saw as an overly meek and sexless doctrine that led humanity to servitude. And though intelligent Symbolist authors claimed at times to be Nietzscheans, one wonders how much of Nietzsche they actually read (his works were quite popular and widely translated in the 1890s).[7]

Vasily Rozanov and Lev Shestov, two Russian thinkers whose names will reappear in this study, were contemporaries of the Symbolists; the

former took some initial inspiration from Nietzsche and generally came down on the conservative side of the political debate, favoring individualism and personal freedom, by and large opposing positivistic, rational thinking.[8] One of the early leaders of Symbolism in Russia, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, also belongs in this same group with Rozanov and Shestov, in terms of his concerns, though they were more profound thinkers than he. Merezhkovsky and other Symbolists were among the "authorities" at the meetings of the Religious-Philosophical Society in the first decade of this century, and Symbolism as a whole shows a fairly strong connection with mysticism and religion, but not within the limits of the official Orthodox Church.[9] Though much of the early inspiration for Russian Symbolism was Western in origin, and the Symbolists maintained strong and frequent contact with Western European culture, there was as well a view among some Symbolists that Russia was indeed a special place, and these Symbolists displayed a deep appreciation for native literature and art. The Symbolists were especially active as speakers, lecturers, and leaders of opinion, including philosophical opinion, during their hour upon the stage.

Art

In the Silver Age, the ties between art and literature grew even stronger than they normally are in Russia. Prior to this time, realism was in vogue, represented particularly successfully by the group of artists known as the Wanderers (*Peredvizhniki*), who dealt primarily with the problems of Russian history and society on their canvases, often echoing the sentiments of the utilitarian thinkers. Many of the Wanderers favored critical realism and were largely inclined to paint only Russian scenes. There were a couple of reactions to the realistic style of painting: one was the so-called Slavic Revival, or neo-nationalism, a grouping of artists who favored interest in Russian themes, often derived from folklore, but who executed their pictures with less realism. The other major reaction against the Wanderers' brand of realism in art was led by an association of artists who exhibited under the name World of Art (*Mir Iskusstva*).[10]

Once again, more will be said about the activities of the World of Art, and its connections with Symbolism, but here it is important to note that the aesthetic function of art (painting and illustrating particularly) were emphasized. The World of Art artists helped to revive interest in Russian art of the past, including icons, and most notably in Western European

(especially French) art of an earlier era. The evolution of this group later led to the founding of truly avante-garde art in Russia and to the immensely successful Ballets Russes in Paris before World War One. Their combination of interests, both Russian and Western, is seen as well in the Symbolist movement.

Theater

Russian drama in the 1880s and early 1890s displayed little inclination to part from the accepted realistic approach, as represented in the plays of Aleksandr Ostrovsky, the leading playwright just before Chekhov.[11] But by the end of the nineteenth century there was increasing interest in Western European drama, in the plays of Maurice Maeterlinck, Henrik Ibsen, Gerhart Hauptmann, Knut Hamsun, and Oscar Wilde. Some of these works had definite Symbolist pedigrees, and to the Russian audiences seemed very modern, compared with the comfortable familiarity of Ostrovsky's plays, which largely dealt with the merchant class milieu of Moscow. Chekhov's four major plays also helped to inject needed vitality and creative innovation into Russian theater, though it has often been pointed out that the success of Chekhov's plays depended to a certain extent on the superior achievements of the Moscow Art Theater in staging these works. And the founding of this theater in 1898 by Konstantin Stanislavsky and others, plus the brief span of Vera Komissarzhevskaya's theater in Petersburg (1904-10), did much to improve the quality of theater in early twentieth-century Russia.

The Symbolists too were active in this field, as we shall see in subsequent chapters; all the major Symbolists wrote plays, though some were certainly more adept in this genre than others. Their first recognition as dramatists came with Vera Komissarzhevskaya's interest in modern drama, starting around the end of 1905; she staged several plays by Symbolists that were hotly debated but by any measure significant for Russian theater in the Silver Age. And by the time of World War One and the revolutions in 1917, Symbolist plays were produced at a number of other theaters and were rightly considered a part of the normal Russian repertoire. There was as well a marked tendency among Symbolist authors for introducing Western European drama from the contemporary period and ancient Greek drama to Russian theatergoers through translations and in a number of important essays that the Symbolists wrote about drama.

Literature

In literary criticism in the latter half of the nineteenth century, we also see a bias toward "civic" writing and tendentious literature. Realism had been pre-eminent for several decades, though the "realism" is a definitely Russian type that stresses a point of view, and this approach still lives today. But the Symbolists were able to effectively counter this trend. By and large they did favor individualism, and this is in fact one of the reasons why Symbolism has to be seen as a fairly loose grouping of individuals. They brought higher standards to literature, especially to poetry, which had reached a low point in the 1880s and 1890s. The Symbolists did borrow the name, and some of the ideas, from French and Belgian Symbolists, including the notions of correspondences between mundane images and metaphysical concepts and the importance of music in literature. But where the French were somewhat limited in their view of Symbolism, seeing it mostly as one approach to writing, some Russian Symbolists wanted to make their Symbolist concepts into a whole philosophical system, a world view that could encompass all thought.[12]

Like their Western European counterparts, the Russian Symbolists put a strong emphasis on the sound value of words, and indeed even individual letters. And it is clear that the first Symbolists in Russia imitated, to a certain extent, the French authors grouped around this "school" particularly in the 1890s and the early part of this century. But as the movement developed in Russia, there was increasing appreciation for Russian authors, for example, Gogol and Dostovsky for Russian, lyrical poets, such as Aleksandr Pushkin and Fyodor Tyutchev, who were recognized for their achievements and reinterpreted (in the case of Gogol and Tyutchev) in a way that revealed more profound understanding of their writings. And though Symbolism reached its high point in France around 1885-95, and in Russia approximately ten to fifteen years later, in many respects Russian Symbolism surpassed the accomplishments of this Western European source.[13]

Normally, when the term "Symbolist" is applied to a group of writers, the first genre associated with it is poetry. Indeed the forerunners of the Russian Symbolists, both those from Western Europe and the sizeable number from Russia, were poets. Several Symbolists excelled in this genre; there was a tremendous broadening of scope, of selecting themes from world history as well as the author's own intimate thoughts and feelings, and an expansion in the formal types of verse (longer poems and cycles

became popular). Though it is somewhat difficult to convey, in translation, precisely how and why the verse of the Symbolists was better than that of many others (several examples of their poetry are given in this study), one must recognize the number of positive evaluations expressed by Russian and Western scholars in this matter. To this judgment one can add, moreover, that there were almost no serious rivals for poetic excellence outside the Symbolist movement from 1900 to 1910.

Some of these authors were also accorded due respect for their prose fiction, and this is an important area where the Russian Symbolists can be distinguished from other Symbolist groups in Western Europe. A number of significant and influential novels by Symbolists were published in 1905-17, works that had a lasting effect on the later development of Soviet Russian literature. As has been noted, it is rather paradoxical to speak of a "Symbolist novel," and in fact it is not always possible to determine any percentage of "Symbolist" elements in these works by Russian authors affiliated with the movement.[14] There are elements of traditional realism, Romanticism, fantasy, religion, political and social thought, and even lyric poetry in the prose fiction produced by these authors, which includes a fairly large body of short stories in addition to the novels. Nevertheless, one can refer to their works as Symbolist novels, because they did help to promote the goals of the movement in many ways, though, in contrast to the poets, the Symbolists working in prose had to contend with the more established, and more widely circulated, realist writers, led by Maksim Gorky and Leonid Andreev.

Symbolist critics were also able to gain attention and recognition for their views, and here we see a tendency to oppose the "requirement" that literature reflect social, political, and historical attitudes. At the same time, however, the Symbolists disagreed among themselves about how literature, drama, and art in general should be analyzed and commented upon. Despite attempts to define one, there is no single Symbolist theory of art or one Symbolist aesthetics; in fact several of them were put forth by Symbolists.[15] Generally, they focused their attention on the relation of Symbolist art to reality, and not surprisingly, there was a favorable view toward Symbolism as a kind of higher reality, a view that it was somehow more real than the world we perceive with our senses. And though it sometimes has been, Symbolist criticism should not be seen as simply intuitive, as solely based on such slogans as Baudelaire's "forest of symbols" or the "language of hints." It is true that reference was often made to Goethe's lines

Alles vergängliche
Ist nur ein Gleichnis,

but attention was paid to the transitory phenomena as well.[16] Symbolist theoreticians generally did not advocate art for art's sake, and in fact the more serious theoreticians saw creation as a mythic, ritualistic act, which connects the artist with the past and the future. There was intuitive and impressionistic literary criticism, but it was overshadowed by more earnest attempts to arrive at a Symbolist aesthetics, which will be examined in greater detail in this study.[17]

Characteristics

It is now time to introduce the main characters of this "drama" and round out their images to a certain extent, especially in terms of the topics that were important to the Symbolists. One of the most common approaches to Russian Symbolism is to categorize the main practitioners, to place them in various groups. This tendency among scholars is an enticing one and is based on the authors' own proclivities for allying themselves into short-lived camps according to different ideas and issues. It is not possible to attach a label that can remain useful indefinitely because the groupings were fluid for the most part, and writers who might have been in agreement on one topic found themselves on opposite sides a year or two later, when some new wrinkle turned up. Another aspect of trying to generalize according to groups is that distortions inevitably result because the authors have a way of contravening logically defined and symmetrical approaches. A sort of series of adaptable descriptions of these loose connections, whether those that existed at the time or those that have been invented later by others, is needed instead.

The most traditional grouping of Russian Symbolists is by generations or "waves."[18] This by now standard terminology will be used in this study, though it should be understood that relying too heavily on the delineation by "waves" is subject to serious qualification. The first Symbolists who began to publish before the end of the nineteenth century are generally known as the "older generation" or "first wave," that is, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Zinaida Hippius, Valery Bryusov, Konstantin Balmont, Fyodor Sologub, and others. The chief representatives of the "second wave," including Aleksandr Blok, Andrey Bely, and Vyacheslav Ivanov, embarked on their careers in a substantial way after the turn of the century.

To these two groups the name of Innokenty Annensky should be added: Annensky began to publish Symbolist works after the beginning of this century, but thematically he is linked more closely to the first wave. There are, of course, more actors who will be introduced later, the minor figures who were often fervent and extremely active participants in the movement.

The characteristics that are often ascribed to these two waves of Symbolism are indicative, if occasionally overstated. The first wave is seen, for instance, as more decadent and more under the influence of French and Belgian Symbolism, they are sometimes described as more egocentric than the later wave of Symbolists.[19] The younger generation, has, moreover, been depicted as more idealistic and religious, they are supposed to have taken more of their ideas from German philosophers than the earlier group, which has allegedly led to the difference in world view that does sometimes crop up between the two waves. But Sologub, who was called the Russian Schopenhauer, and the religious idealism of Merzhkovsky and Hippius are somehow left out of this generalization.

The topics that are chosen for the contrasts are, nevertheless, valid ones and do give an idea of what was important for the Symbolists in the Silver Age. It is true that Blok, Bely, and Ivanov all saw mysticism as an important aspect of a world view, at least at some points in their careers. And certain authors expressed decadent views in their poetry, including Bryusov, Sologub, Balmont, Bely, Blok, and even Hippius, though she claimed at one point to be totally free of that taint.[20] There were Symbolists who advanced a personal approach to life and others who tried to emphasize the collective nature of humanity. Some saw Symbolism as an artistic method, especially Bryusov in 1910, while others felt it was much more than "just art." This last position was argued most forcefully by Ivanov, Blok, and Bely. And there was a perhaps inevitable difference at times in the views of Symbolists who resided in Moscow, as opposed to the Petersburg natives. Despite these divisions, however, and even though these figures all had rather strong personalities and were not afraid of trying to convince others of the correctness of their views, the Symbolists did work together in a significant way and indeed formed a fairly coherent movement that had a definite sense of unity, at least until the major polemic in 1910.

As a movement, Symbolism did help to raise the aesthetic level of literature and indeed even culture in Russia. At the time of its inception, around 1892-94, the literary scene was permeated by a sense that something new was needed in Russian culture. There was a strong feeling of tense

expectation among the Symbolists, a palpable sense of the approach of the end of the century, and a concomitant emphasis on *fin de siècle* philosophy, similar to what had existed in Western Europe. There was, in addition, the expectation that a new era was about to begin; this feeling was reinforced, as was supposed then, by natural phenomena, such as the sunset, the color of which seemed to change (for Bely at least) around the year 1900. And so, Symbolism was accompanied by Apocalyptic forebodings, an attraction toward eschatology, and the hope for fundamental transformation.

At the height of its influence, approximately 1904-10, Symbolism had several publishing houses and journals where their activities could be focused. Various miscellanies were published yearly: the Symbolists' efforts to broaden and deepen the traditions of poetry and appreciation for it were noted, as was the frequent stress on spiritual wholeness, manifested by some, in a politically fragmented world, particularly after the abortive revolution in 1905. Though they had been attacked earlier, and lumped together for that purpose, for idealistic philosophy and a preference for lyricism and music in their poetry, as opposed to the formerly preferable civic poetry, their views came to be influential and even popular among the members of the Russian intelligentsia in general, including the realist authors.[21] The leaders of the movement, Bryusov especially, moved from the position of outcast in the mid-1890s to that of cultural arbiter, and the stigma of decadence, which had been a point of contention in earlier years, was removed or at least overlooked.

Because of the serious disagreement about the true nature of Symbolism in 1910, Ivanov, Blok, and Bely joined forces in an effort to prove to Bryusov that Symbolism was more than simply an artistic method. It was clear soon after this polemic (carried out on the pages of a new journal, as the main Symbolist journal, *Vesy* (*Libra*), had ceased publication in 1909) that Symbolism could not be restored as a vital force, despite the attempts to revive it in the years just prior to the First World War. Symbolism had by then been nudged from its position as the leading movement, replaced by two of its offshoots, Acmeism and Futurism. In contrast to Symbolism, where the main spokesmen and propagators were the major writers of the movement, Acmeism was less important as a movement than its individual representatives, most especially Anna Akhmatova, Nikolay Gumilyov and Osip Mandelstam; and Futurism, though it included such poets as Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, and Boris Pasternak, still received a good deal of its crucial support and promotion from minor figures in vari-

ous fields. To a certain extent, though of course not exclusively, Acmeism was a continuation of the best recent trends in Symbolism; Annensky was considered a spiritual father of the movement, and though Nikolay Gumilyov and Mandelstam tried to create a "gulf" that supposedly separated Symbolism from Acmeism, there was still much in common, particularly the notion of the poet's special role and an individual approach to life, plus the emphasis on maintaining a high level of craftsmanship.[22] Futurism can likewise be viewed as a continuation of some aspects of Symbolism, e.g., the efforts to shock complacent readers and the emphasis on renewing poetry and poetic language.[23] But it would be too much to say that these two movements can be easily and solely defined as post-Symbolist movements, as mere continuations of Symbolism, because they also contributed in their own ways to the richness of the Silver Age.

From a later vantage point, it is perhaps easier to see flaws in Symbolists' writings and thinking than it may have been when there was, according to various witnesses, "Symbolism in the air." The positive accomplishments, of course, significantly outweigh the shortcomings; and the influence the Symbolists had on Russian literature is undeniable. Even the Soviet critics, who are forced (or may prefer) to see Symbolism as a symptom of "bourgeois decline," take pains to admit that it was a stimulating intellectual movement. Because of the reactions by various individual Symbolists to the Socialist Revolution in 1917, it has been difficult at times for Symbolists to gain proper recognition and appraisal in their native country, but there has been a good deal of attention devoted to Symbolists in the West, which has compensated for some of the gaps that have existed in Soviet scholarship and publishing decisions. And once again, Prince Mirsky accurately renders the proper judgment about this movement and its importance for Russian culture:

> the Symbolists combined great talent with conscious craftsmanship, and this makes their place so big in Russian literary history. One may dislike their style, but one cannot fail to recognize that they revived Russian poetry from a hopeless state of prostration and that their age was a second Golden Age of verse.[24]

2. The Beginnings of Symbolism in Russia 1892-1895

It has been customary and indeed logical to name the year 1892 as the beginning point for Symbolism in Russia. During that year Dmitry Merezhkovsky published a volume of poetry called *Symbols* and delivered lectures in Petersburg and Moscow on the subject of "The Reasons for the Decline and the New Currents in Contemporary Russian Literature." In September of 1892, a major article on Symbolist poets in France appeared in *Vestnik Evropy* (*The European Herald*), and later that year a series of articles about Nietzsche began to appear in a journal devoted to philosophy and psychology.[1] At this time Valery Bryusov was still a student and was not publishing any of his works, but he was translating pieces by Maurice Maeterlinck and Paul Verlaine into Russian. The publication of three slim volumes of poetry, edited and partially written by Bryusov, entitled *The Russian Symbolists* (1894-95), is also considered another "inception" of Symbolism in Russia. The two beginnings made by Merezhkovsky and Bryusov are in fact very different. Their Symbolist-oriented works (and the critical articles about them, printed in periodicals of the 1890s) did not appear in isolation, nor did they immediately alter the trends then current in Russian literature. The focus of this chapter will be on these somewhat modest beginnings and on the context that surrounds the appearance of Symbolism on Russian soil.

Merezhkovsky and Hippius

Merezhkovsky already began his literary career as early as 1878; he met Dostoevsky in 1881, shortly before the great writer's death, and published his first poem in an anthology that same year. He printed poems in various journals until 1888, when his first volume of verse, called *Poetry, 1883-1887*, was published in Petersburg.[2] During these years he wrote what is now called populist poetry on social themes which were then in vogue. He