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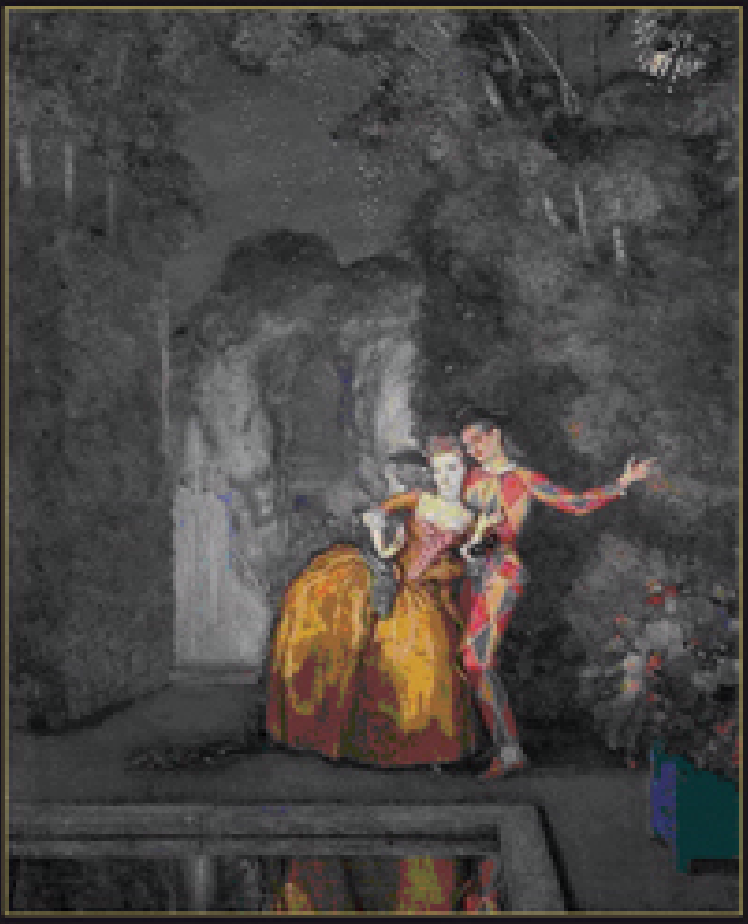

The Silver Mask

Harlequinade in the Symbolist Poetry of Blok and Belyi

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Introduction

Russian symbolism has always been a popular topic of research; the intoxicating spirit of waning decadence that infused Russian culture at the turn of the twentieth century has inspired various critics and cultural historians.[1] It may seem that it has been examined to such an extent that no room has been left for any original ideas or innovative thoughts. However, the focus has chiefly been on its literary practitioners. Little attention has been paid so far to the deeper inner changes that brought forth the radical shift in the mode of thinking which affected the artists and scholars of the Silver Age and provided a turning point in the Russian arts as a whole.

Symbolism did not originate in Russia, and the first writings of symbolist authors (such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Maeterlinck and Ibsen) became known to the Russian audience only in the 1880s. However like all major European movements before this, very quickly the trend found its way into Russian artistic thought, and then flourished in its cultural arena. Newly influenced Russian writers were elaborating on the European model, while trying to find a voice for their specific concerns. In the West, as well as in Russia, Symbolism was born in a revolt against rapid industrialisation that transformed the *fin de siècle* society, against bourgeois morality and its destructive effects on the human soul. Russian symbolists discarded everything related to the established way of life (which they sincerely despised) and wanted to break from the dogmatic rule of the Realist tradition that had dominated the cultural space since the 1860s. Instead of

1 Some major publications on the subject being: R.E. Peterson, *The Russian Symbolists: an Anthology of Critical and Theoretical Writings* (Ann Abor: Ardis, 1986); A. McMillin, *Symbolism and After* (London: British Classical Press, 1992); A. Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); B. Hellman, *Poets of Hope and Despair: The Russian Symbolists in War and Revolution* (Helsinki: Institute for Russian and East European Studies, 1995); I.I. Garin, *Serebrianyi vek* (Moscow: Terra, 1999).

making everything as true to life as possible, they aspired to develop new, more effective means of expression, to reach the audience in a way that made them think, act, and communicate with each other and with the rest of the world.

Though not much different from their European predecessors, Russian Symbolists were also driven spiritually and politically by the idea that an artist has a firm moral duty to rebuild a 'corrupt' society through his unique capacity of 'seeing more clearly' than others. Across Russian and Western European Symbolism there was a common concept concerning the new ethos of art, which was supposed to put meaning and soul back into their world. It was a purely intellectual phenomenon founded upon a shared belief that by reaching individuals through art they would be able to reconnect with each other as well as with the universe as a whole.

Since the days of Plato, the human intellect has been mystified by the enigmatic notion of the *beyond*, yearning towards the eternal and the unattainable that transcends any concrete and measurable horizons. At the turn of the century, interest in this uncharted cognitive dimension emerged with overwhelming strength. In contrast to Romanticism, the independent and egocentric subject, enveloped in his own private emotions and concerns, victimised and abused by the world outside him, was no longer the centre of philosophy. Symbolist authors assumed a more open position; and the concept of man as an all-embracing subject of the universe, as an intimate link in the chain of correspondences, was emphatically put forward. Needless to say, such a major change in the domain of self-awareness and reflection was bound to have repercussions in the sphere of artistic thought. The desire to bring together the diversity of objective reality and the uniqueness of its personal perception shaped the new aesthetics of that period; and the dialogue between *self* and *other*, man and the world, defined the principles of creative writing.

This dialogue will form the focus of this book. In an attempt to examine the first stages of its formation and expression we shall concentrate on the pre-1910 poetry of symbolist authors, as it offers valuable material for the analysis of their developing views. It was a time of trial and error, of uncertainty and experimentation – a time when the dialectics of *self* and *other* that later became one of the

keynotes of the symbolist artistic outlook had not yet found their direct manifestation, but were initially explored through a spectrum of new themes and motifs, induced by a changing configuration of the cultural space. Necrophilia, the baroque metaphor *theatrum mundi*, dehumanisation of society and its intoxication by Dionysian forces contributed significantly to the thematic palette of the time and appeared to be highly indicative of its fundamental concerns.

One of the dominant idioms that emerged in the artistic space of the Silver Age was the notion of 'theatricality'. The ancient vision of the world as a play was of course preserved in the symbolist interpretation of the old trope *theatrum mundi*. However, this emblematic image was incorporated into their writings only to be hollowed out and re-inflected, and the nature of this re-inflection revealed a fundamental historical and philosophical transformation. The baroque concept of man as a spectacle for the gods involved the sense of an ordered world, where supernatural agents determined human destiny, and where reality was a place of illusion in contrast to a higher non-attainable realm. The 'roles' implied in this metaphor were the ones that people suffered, not created, and these roles were enacted for a gaze that was beyond one's comprehension or ownership. All in all, the metaphor pointed to the limits of agency, the hubris and vanity of people's projects: their emptiness, illusion and powerlessness.

Understandably, the effects corresponding to this metaphor were those of melancholy and despair, but when considered from a different angle, the concept offered a rather more subversive set of ideas and implications. In its literal sense, the stage is defined by semiotic instability or, more precisely, reversibility: it can mean anything, can represent any other space from a forest to a court, and can assume whatever meaning one imputes to it through theatrical convention. There is, moreover, an obvious split between actor and role: a man can play a woman and a commoner can mimic the gestures and authority of a king. But if these features can be easily counterfeited, this casts doubts on whether they were so authentic anyway. The identities that had seemed pinned to particular categories turn out to be transferable or 'put on'. In the symbolist views, 'the theatrical', therefore, becomes the domain of liberty and experimentation, the new emblem of

creativity and artistic expression. Not only did it undermine the authenticity of the much venerated tradition, but allowed one to be cut loose from such ties, to enter the world of *others*, and to merge with it through the process of progressive self-stylisation and self-invention.

In the following chapters the topos of 'theatricality' will be discussed in its extreme and most vivid form of expression, namely in the form of the harlequinade. We shall trace the integration of the harlequinade into all areas of Russian culture,[2] as at that time the majority of Russian authors took up their cause in a variety of ways. Each of them was likely to be a combination of an essayist, poet, dramatist and critic; they often worked alongside others, and the literary world was an integral part of a multi-dimensional movement. Then the focus will be narrowed to the poetry of Blok and Belyi – the two major figures of the movement, in whose writings symbolist theory found its maturity and perfection. The detailed analysis of a series of harlequinade poems by Blok and Belyi will be divided into three parts, each one constituting a separate chapter. We shall demonstrate that the poems in question are conceptually focused on the dialectical unity of *self* and *other* and that their complex dichotomy is reflected in the symbolism of the verse, in the principles of text construction, as well as in the linguistic features and poetic devices employed by the authors. Taking into account the fact that symbolist authors made sound-organisation one of the basic principles of their writing, we shall look closely at the phonetic qualities of their works to establish a correlation between the auditory and non-auditory

2 Without underestimating other works in this area, it is worth drawing attention to three major studies that complement and extend this work. *The Triumph of Pierrot* by Martin Green and John Swan (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1993) looks at *commedia dell'arte* as an international phenomenon and gives a broad overview of its role in European modernism. In the Russian context, the most natural outlet for the harlequinade topos was examined by J. Douglas Clayton (*Pierrot in Petrograd*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), who traced the integration of *commedia dell'arte* into Russian drama. Catriona Kelly's book, *Petrushka. The Russian Carnival Puppet Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), serves as an important counterbalance to this study; she draws on the sociological aspect of the question and analyses Petrushka theatre as a spontaneous expression of popular culture.

modes of text perception. Such a comprehensive outlook should provide a more insightful approach to the reader's interpretation of the verse and reveal some new perspectives in terms of its meta-textual appreciation. At the same time, I believe, it will help to make Symbolism cohere more clearly in Russian artistic thought, and in this way to offer a certain contribution to our understanding of both the phenomenon as a whole, as well as its individual manifestations.