

Olga Kirillova

Russian Symbolism: the Loss of the Symbolic

The philosophical system of Russian Symbolism continues the discussion between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers, the search for *L'ideé Russe* being its logical conclusion. Where nineteenth century Westernizers referred to the West as a source of the conceptions of the Enlightenment and of social progress, Russian symbolists were enchanted with Western culture as an existential prism. In his travels in Europe Belyi sought to see the world through Wagner; Ellis, writing about Russia, turns to Baudelairean metaphors. For the Symbolists Western culture was a paradigm of perception.

Nevertheless, Western rationality totally failed in the symbolist world. In the Symbolist cultural space anything rational was turned into parody. In his novel *Иемепбъпъ* Andrei Belyi visualizes the 'rational' as increasingly absurd and an inevitable *mise-en-abîme*. For the symbolists all the signs of Western rationalization and civilization are included in a diabolical symbolic play - having lost their initial meaning they achieve a mystic one.

Russian symbolists referred to the idea of Vladimir Solov'ev of an exceptional role and place of Russia in the world. In fact, they supported views of XIXth century philosopher Peter Chaadaev who denied the possibility of Russia's definite historical entity. He called it the 'tabula rasa', a land of opportunity, not tradition. This too was an appropriate starting point for the symbolist desire 'to start anew', to build a new Russian history which was the core of the symbolistic Utopia.

The symbolist version of the national idea cannot be regarded as a mere continuation of the discussion of Slavophiles and Westernizers. The approach of the symbolists was different because of their emphasis on subjectivity. An additional, emotional, dimension was added to the strict world of ideas. In other words, reality was doubled. Their perception is similar to that of expressionists. In their ways of description in discourse they never defined the concrete, material details. But those descriptions are always bright, colourful. For example, the colour becomes the symbol itself (red as the symbol of revolutionary Russia) The horrors of war were depicted in Leonid Andreev's 'Red Laughter', revolutionary 'Red Russia' in Belyi's 'red domino'. Symbols linked by a common colour were not just symbols of the Revolution, of the infernal. The colour signifies not political orientation but anxiety,

approaching tragedy. Belyi defined the revolution as the coming of Anti-Christ, encrypted in the 'Red jester'. Those symbols seem to be just colourful stains in the middle of the discourse. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan regards those stains, spots of colour as the metaphor of the threatening Gaze which is felt everywhere – and nowhere.

And their whole style of writing to be so paradoxical because they seem to be trying to grasp the lacanian Real. Their writings are first of all psychological writings in a sense they tried to explore the most dark and mysterious elements in human psyche.

The relation to the West shaped cultural patterns of perception of Russian symbolists. Western culture, to begin with the Greco-Roman antiquity to the most recent symbolist tendency was for them not only the source but the way of interpretations. For example, Belyi interprets his travel impressions through a Wagnerian frame applying the plots of his operas (e.g. *Parsifal*) to the mixture of German and Roman history in different parts of Sicily. Moreover, the Western frame was assimilated for the estimation and description of the East as well as the West. Khodasevich in his characteristics of Briusov's poetry says that he appropriated the Baudelairian patterns in the description of the Eastern exotics in his verses which was incompatible in a way with the general atmosphere of the pre-revolutionary Moscow. The main point is that Western Europe was the cradle of the symbolism as a movement and of the *art nouveau* as a new life style. First of all, Western Europe was a pattern for the symbolists. The most "progressive" and "Westernized" of Russian symbolists Valerii Briusov proclaimed some French symbolists such as Baudelaire, Verharne, Rimbaud and others as patterns for copying their style directly. Russian symbolists also inherited the motif of nostalgia for the past of Europe from European symbolism.

Russian symbolists had a cultural nostalgia for something which never existed in their own national culture. But Russian symbolists felt that there was break between their own culture and a Western one. The West moreover, seemed to be a more natural sphere for their cultural existence. Dmitrii Merezhkovskii explained this phenomenon when speaking about the 'Russian soul' as a 'pan-European' one:

“Европейцы в Европе — англичане, итальянцы, французы, немцы; только русские — европейцы всемирные. Гениальной особенностью Пушкина, самого русского из русских людей, Достоевский считает эту способность ко

всемирности, “всечеловечности”, к чудесным перевоплощениям, вхождением русской души в души всех других народов. (...) У нас две родины, наша Русь и Европа (...)”.

The symbolists engendered an idea of the East which was new, whether in its interest in Tatar-Mongol antecedents of the Russians or in its emphasis on the East (in a very general) as a source of Russian spirituality. The East was the threatening, mysterious, non-verbalised element corresponding to the Lacanian notion of the horrible Real, which is out of symbolisation. This paranoid perception of the East descends from Vladimir Solov'ev's concept of *panmongolism* which means the total power of Easterners: Tartars, Japanese and others. Solov'ev insists in his work called “Panmongolism” on the intention of the Easterners to banish the whites out of Asian territories and to found their own “Middle Kingdom” (*Sredinnoye Tsarstvo*) over the Universe.

Nevertheless, the Eastern was not only an external threat. The Eastern was regarded as an internal, hidden, vicious, anarchic element inside every Russian that deconstructs him from inside. The Eastern was equivalent to that part of human psyche which is totally out of control. Andrei Belyi shows this “internal East” by explaining the genealogies of Russian noblemen who all descended from Tartars. His Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov in *Петербург*, a bureaucrat of Russian Empire, had ancestors who “служили в кигриз-кайсацкой орде, откуда (...) поступил на русскую службу мирза Аб-Лай, прапрадед сенатора, получивший при христианском крещении имя Андрея и прозвище Ухова”, and the most respected ancestor of his was “Сим, то есть сам прародитель семитских, хесситских и краснокожих народностей”. Alexander Blok in his famous poem “The Scythians” defines Russians as having substantially Asian nature: «Да, скифы – мы! Да, азиаты – мы!» Blok sees that *being an 'Easterner'* scared of one's own nature as the most terrifying paradox of Russian national self-identification, a trauma and eternal curse.

Between these two internal and external factors Blok found a spiritual gap that created the paranoid world of symbolist culture and was characterized by the *abyss* — the commonplace of Russian symbolism.

Therefore, for the symbolists, ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ are not geographical definitions, or national categories included into the social order, but elements of the inner psychological structure of a Russian.

In the binary opposition (introduced by Friedrich Nietzsche) of two main elements: Apollonic and Dionysian that are present in human nature, the East corresponds entirely to the notion of Dionysian – dark, spontaneous, uncontrollable. Nevertheless, the Dionysian was especially favoured by Russian symbolists, as opposite to the fair and rational Apollonic. Here is the main paradox.

The blessed West, nevertheless, corresponds to the blamed notion of Empire, the engendering of the rationalism. The Empire, for symbolists, is a symbol of repression vices. Their works dwell on the darkest figures in Russia's imperial history. And it is symbolic that the main paternal figure of Empire, its founder who embodied the total Symbolic Law – I mean the emperor Peter the Great – was regarded by Russian symbolists mainly in the Dionysian aspect. The resulting image of Peter is one of the untamed tsar-giant who sees his subjects as victims. The symbolists never praised him for his role in incorporating Russia in the system of European politics and culture, they viewed him romantically and dramatically through the prism of Pushkin's *Медный всадник* where he comes as inescapable Fate, a Commandor, after the souls of his victims. In Belyi's *Петербург* he comes to the house of the revolutionary Alexander Ivanovich Dudkin to destroy him. In this case two cultural myths are combined: that of *Медный всадник* and of *Don Juan* where similarly the statue of Commandor comes as a destroying guest. On the other hand, this is the revenge of the Father (from the capital letter), the Dead Symbolic Father to the rebellious son for the attempt to his life (if not his own but his representative, as what Dudkin is conceiving is the murder of the Senator in Petersburg by an explosion).

And the counterpart of Peter in the imperial binary opposition created by symbolists is a grotesque figure. Whereas Peter was the symbol of foundation and consolidation of Russian Empire, of creation it out of nothing, his antagonist symbolized the Empire's total decay of its very core. The first one was the beginning, the second was the end. This second figure that attracted the imagination of Russian symbolist was the favourite of the last Russian tsars Grigorii Rasputin. Rasputin's image inspired many writers of the symbolist period as an incarnation of the rotting decadent epoch. For example, Blok, in his diaries, defined Rasputin as his *alter ego*, who was destroying him from inside: "Ночь, как мышь, юркая какая-то, серая, холодная, пахнет дымом и какими-то морскими бочками, глаза мои, как у кошки, сидит во мне Гришка, и жить люблю, но не умею". Rasputin was for the

symbolists the incarnation of the sect of Хлысты, they were highly interested in. The contemporary Russian researcher Alexander Etkind wrote about this craze of the epoch and the phenomenon of Rasputin's influence in his monography called "Хлыст" (1998). Andrei Belyi in his memoirs wrote about his conversation with a Muscovite lady who "считала Мережковского утонченным хлыстовством".

The vicious nature of the imperial was linked to its *genius loci*. Saint Peterburg as a city-fiction is a key to the fiction of the Empire. The repressive mechanism of this 'rational' element is expressed by Belyi in his metaphorical opposition of the mainland (the 'core' of the Empire) and the islands (anarchic, obscure lands): «...обитатель хаоса угрожает столице Империи в набегающем облаке... (...) непокойные острова — раздавить, раздавить!»

But Russian Empire as a parody of European rationality is only a weak reflection of the authentic, vicious, European Empires. In his later work *Записки чудака* Belyi defines Great Britain as the Empire of Empires, which is the apotheosis of evil. The United Kingdom in this case stays totally apart from England and English culture as such. When describing London in, Belyi shows the apotheosis of the bureaucratic imperial mechanism. The cultural paradox for Belyi is that he cannot find the point of reconciliation between the refined English culture, which he felt like, with the inhuman perfectly functioning machine of bureaucracy whose final aim is the destruction of any human being.

In other words, Russian symbolists felt the closest relation to the European cultural heritage but rejected European civilization as rational, oppressive, symbolic.

In this view Russian Symbolists considered that the true Russian idea should appear neither from the Eastern nor from the Western but from their synthesis. The Russian idea created for them not as its ready-made concept but its anticipation. This anticipation of the Russian national idea was first formulated by Vladimir Solov'ev in his famous work *L'idee russe* and became the basis of the Symbolists' conception of Russian idea as its anticipation. The idea of the messianic role of Russia on the world stage was accepted and elaborated by symbolists, becoming even stronger and clearer after the October revolution. Symbolist theories of the national idea continued to be developed in writings published outside Russia, especially by the philosophical circle lead by Merezhkovskii and Gippius. The new national idea required total recreation of state, religion, human being. In other words, the national idea of the symbolists appears in the light of the dawn – their favourite metaphor in poetry.