Prologue: decadence or rebirth?

> Напрасно так мало обращают внимания на декадентов, это болезнь времени, и она заслуживает серьезного отношения.
>
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To understand the way in which the first rumour of decadence, the cultural malaise which prepared the ground for Symbolism, reached the wider Russian public in the early 1890s, we must set the origins of Russian Symbolism in the context of contemporary art and literature and see it for what it was: a vigorous offshoot from the gnarled and ailing tree of European culture.

By the second half of the nineteenth century Europe had become unprecedentedly powerful in science, industry and technology: a small continent which had thrown a net of diverse influences over the rest of the world, passing on its faith, imposing its laws, spreading its culture. Yet long before the cataclysms of the twentieth century, a sense of oppression, a growing unease, was felt. Dostoevsky said simply: 'everything is undermined'. 'Life has gone dry at the source', was how his 'Silver Age' disciple Vasilii Rozanov put it. Max Nordau, one of the sturdiest European defenders of positivism and progress, called it 'a slight moral seasickness'.[1]

The cause? Of the many causes, perhaps the most basic was the crisis of faith. It is well to remember, when we consider Russia specifically, that this easternmost bastion of Europe had passed through the age of faith, missed the Renaissance, but was exposed, through its educated upper classes, to the full force of the Enlightenment. The Orthodox Church, however, and the mass of the people were at first scarcely affected by it – an anomaly which created a curious cultural fault, extending right through to the Revolution of 1917. The Russian Intelligentsia, which came into being during the first half of the nineteenth century when

* 'It is a mistake to pay so little attention to the decadents, it is a sickness of the time and deserves serious attention.' Lev Tolstoy.

individuals of 'other ranks' (in Russian, the 'raznochinstsy') began to make their mark in educated society, straddled this fault. Culturally, even those who had emerged from the people, the priesthood or the 'dark kingdom' of the merchant class, were on the same side of the divide as the ruling classes. Politically, even those who stemmed from the Establishment were opposed to the status quo and wanted, or believed they wanted, to see the people invested with dignity and power. As members of the Intelligentsia, writers and artists of the Silver Age* still bestrode the cultural fault, which was felt – by the turn of the century – to be fast becoming a chasm. As individuals, they shared fully in the European crisis of faith, yet felt, like Dostoevsky's Versilov, that, being Russian, they still 'had a choice': to return to the faith of the people.

For the materialists it was, of course, desirable to educate the people in their own atheism, necessarily militant in countries kept in order by an established church. For the agnostic liberal progressives, however, materialism appeared coarse, a threat to their culture, and they embraced other systems: idealist or positivist. Both the chaos of unknowing and the possibility of faith were tidied away 'beyond the limits of cognition', but it was strongly felt mankind could not do without 'moral law' ... without some sense of individual worth and purpose. For many thinking men this need was filled by Kant's 'categorical imperative' or modifications thereof – and by a residual sense of awe in the face of 'the starry heavens above', about which it was unnecessary to think because demonstrably impossible to think with any precision.

For a while, this had actually led to an upsurge in confident self-reliance. Applied science had, after all, given man a hitherto undreamt-of control over his environment, a control which was clearly on the increase. That mankind – armed with the categorical imperative – would know how to exercise that control in the interests of the majority was scarcely doubted. Religion had inculcated a residual morality which was now supposed to show itself in reasonable concern for others: 'Altruism, as preached on every note in the scale by the new generation, is that same love that was proclaimed by Christ, but in a higher, more perfect form', wrote Anna Pavlovna Filosofova, a Petersburg society hostess and philanthropist of the radical 1860s.[2]

Yet in 1898 Anna Pavlovna's home was to become the headquarters

* The flowering of Russian culture in the early nineteenth century, associated primarily with Aleksandr Pushkin and the elaboration of modern literary Russian, is known as the 'Golden Age'. The term 'Silver Age', with its connotations of art, dusk and the reflected brilliance of moon and stars, is normally applied to the last twenty-five years of Tsarist culture (1892–1917), though there are arguments in favour of variously calculated overlap into the Soviet period (usually until 1921).

of the first journal of the Silver Age, Diagilev's *Mir Iskusstva* (The World of Art), and her Europe was already the Europe of Schopenhauer, Baudelaire, Dostoevsky's *Chelovek iz podpol'ia* (The Man from Underground). 'Let all the world go hang, but let me always have tea to drink', exclaims the 'Man from Underground'.[3] To Dostoevsky's contemporaries the remark suggested moral insanity, but to the generation that succeeded him it appeared merely honest. 'The human being', said Friedrich Nietzsche, 'is that which must be overcome'.[4] As faith faded, altruism was no longer respected. Why, it was asked, should we help the weak to flourish? Simply to make ourselves morally comfortable? Planned or enforced by society, the bearing of one another's burdens would surely sap initiative and self-sufficiency and lead to the tyranny of the very strong over the very weak – devitalisation. Yet the alternative of a jungle society 'red in tooth and claw' was too harsh to contemplate.

There was, not surprisingly, a strong negative, in part escapist, reaction in the face of these terrible alternatives. Nietzsche recorded the dereliction of his generation: '... there is no longer for you any rewarder or recompenser, no final corrector – there is no longer any reason in what happens, no longer any love in what happens to you – there is no longer any resting-place open to your heart ...'[5] Deeply disorientated, people began to grope for short-cuts to lost certainties.

For some, there was a strong inclination to Parnassian retreat: the world of art was consciously preferred to the world of nature. For others, there was a reversion to curious cults, spiritualism and table-turning. Those of a more scholarly turn of mind explored the possibilities of older cultures, the religions of the Orient and the revival of myth from a time when humanity had been more in tune with the natural world. A kind of refined atavism, more bookish and potentially pernicious than the Romantic 'back to nature', pervaded the cultural climate. For the vulnerable and psychologically unstable, there was the possibility of experimenting with drugs, drink, sexual perversion and every kind of 'evil' not immediately and inevitably punishable by law, behind which there often lurked an obsessive desire to prove the existence of Supreme Good 'from the opposite': 'Aimes-tu les damnés, dites, connais-tu l'irrémissible?'[6]

Such were the negative reactions to the moral and religious crisis. Science and the philosophy of the ancients suggested another, cataclysmic but more positive direction. After all, our own green and populous planet had originally been hurled into space by a solar explosion and there were those who recalled with a thrill of hope Plato's thinking on the 'infinity' of matter which can yet be shaped and moulded to resemble the Forms: the doctrine that cosmos was born of chaos.

So there arose a new kind of nostalgia: for the distant, the far future

which would come into being after some great catastrophe. This took many forms: apocalyptic foreboding; national Messianism of all shades and hues; the emergence of such concepts as the Master Race and the Superman; a yearning towards some new, more vital culture conjured out of catastrophe by a superhuman effort of will. Marxism, with its hopes for the 'withering away of the state' after the Revolution, as understood – or perhaps misunderstood – by many, had much in common with such voluntaristic cults, although it denied their 'mysticism'.

The very acceptance of the ethos of revolution suggested a readiness to welcome dissonance, albeit as the necessary prelude to harmony and, in the early years of Russian decadence, Rimbaud's call to 'change life' seemed compatible with – although, to the poets at least, more drastic than – the Marxist call to change society. How the two blended in their minds can be seen from Osip Mandel'shtam's account of his private pilgrimage, in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1905, through wasted villages and smouldering baronial estates, to visit the grave of Ivan Konevskoi, 'the morning sacrifice of Russian Symbolism', who had drowned in the river Aa in the summer of 1901. Mandel'shtam, a romantic schoolboy who loved the poetry of Bal'mont but carried the Erfurt Programme in his pocket, felt that reading the political treatise brought him closer to his predecessor than poeticising after the manner of Zhukovsky:

> I felt all the world as an economy, an economy run by humanity [. . .] and yes, my quick sense of hearing, alerted by the distant threshing machine out in the fields, caught the sound not of barley swelling to ripeness and growing heavy in the ear, not of the northern apple, but of the world, the capitalist world, swelling before it fell![7]

But after the old world fell: What then? Would man conquer death, disease, personal tragedy, his own shortcomings? And was even a just and materially successful society really the summit of man's ambition? Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, one of the first ideologists of Russian Decadence, Symbolism or Modernism (the terms were used successively and often interchangeably), wrote that to relieve man of social injustice would be like curing a consumptive of toothache. It would simply set his mind and senses free to feel more acutely the anguish of mortality in the uncreated, purposeless void of existence.

For those who persisted in asking these eternal, accursed questions (the 'children's questions', as Aleksandr Blok called them), the quest led out into the realm of tragedy. Lev Shestov once wrote that – in this realm – even positivists accept the possibility of effect without cause. Tragedy replaces juridical guilt by the irrational but not unreasonable concept of

'tragic guilt'. The tragic hero can be slain by society, but can only be judged by the gods. 'Despair', Shestov wrote, 'is the most solemn and the greatest moment of our life. Up till now we have had to do with people and the laws of humanity, now – with eternity and the absence of all laws.'[8] Eventually, this road via 'the absence of all laws' was to lead back to a new acceptance of the moral imperative: whether as tragic courage, existential choice or acceptance of the implications of the cross of Christ . . .

This took time and, to a society built on rationalism and belief in progress, the way seemed retrograde. In the years before the emergence of Symbolism, European literature had concentrated on depicting man in society. Literature – particularly in Russia – was acknowledged to be of interest only in so far as it pursued useful aims and its form was that of discursive argument and realistic or satirical description. Reading lyric poetry was considered a pastime, forgivable in pretty misses and young men in love. It was, therefore, scarcely surprising that the intellectual establishment – in Russia as in Europe – resisted both the *fin-de-siècle* mentality as such and the art-forms which a new generation was elaborating not only to express, but to help overcome, their own isolation.

This resistance was perhaps most trenchantly advocated by Max Nordau, a polyglot Hungarian Jew who lived in Paris and wrote in German, practised medicine and combined a particular interest in criminal psychology with a wide-ranging curiosity about literature, painting and the performing arts. This enlightened 'universal man' was one of the first to diagnose and seek to eradicate 'degeneracy', a term borrowed from the forensic psychiatric studies of his friend Cesare Lombroso of the University of Turin.

Nordau defined the subject of his book *Entartung* (Degeneracy, 1892) as a pathological condition not inconsistent with talent, or even genius. He considered its appearance in art in the second half of the nineteenth century as symptomatic of a social disease which in France (and afterwards in all other civilised countries) had been labelled 'fin-de-siècle', but which might be more justly termed 'fin-de-race', or even 'fin-de-classe'. The symptoms of 'degeneracy' Nordau defined as unhealthy nervosity, moral idiocy, 'cyclic' states of depression and exaltation, mysticism, childishness, atavism, an intellect so enfeebled as no longer to be capable of thinking in terms of cause and effect, and extreme subjectivity, sometimes passing into diagnosable egomania, combined with a tendency to congregate in groups – all, he insisted, abnormalities of the criminal mind well known to forensic psychiatrists. The perverted inclinations of the artistic as opposed to the criminal degenerate, Nordau maintained, do not

express themselves in actual crimes. Rather, the artist infects the healthy body of society with his own dangerous dreams and cravings. To do this he deploys techniques and methods suggested by his sick mind: synaesthesia, association of ideas and the babbling musicality of the lunatic who strings words together for the sake of their sound without regard for meaning. All these devices were associated with the theory and practice of Symbolism.

Nordau attacked Théophile Gautier's influential preface to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, most particularly the assertion that 'Poetry cannot, under pain of death or degradation, assimilate itself to science or morals.' With the innocence of pre-Freudian man, he insisted that morality 'has become, in the course of thousands of generations, an organised instinct'. It was, he maintained, dangerous for society when respectable people like newspaper critics took the part of degenerate artists. The task of the 'critical police' (Nordau deliberately extended the forensic analogy) was to expose and ridicule the propagators of such pernicious opinions.

Yet the influence of such degenerates, particularly Baudelaire, Nordau warned, had come to dominate not only the French but 'a portion also of the English', and, albeit to a lesser degree, Germany – though here artists had been longer protected than in 'the civilised nations of the West' thanks to the comparative dearth of industry and large cities. Neither Scandinavia, North America nor Russia (though presumably further even than Germany from the infections of civilisation) could be pronounced immune. Ibsen Nordau pilloried as a 'moral idiot' and Tolstoy he saw as a spoilt nobleman, foolish enough to envy the peasants their simple faith rather than their healthy minds: one who asks childish, unanswerable questions like 'What is the aim of life?' when all sensible, grown-up people have long since known that life has no aim.

Of the Russians, Turgenev gets a comparatively clean bill of health. At the time Nordau wrote his *magnum opus*, he appears to have been happily unaware of Dostoevsky. The English Pre-Raphaelites, however, incur his wrath no less than does Oscar Wilde, and Wagner is the subject of a separate and particularly scathing chapter.

The atavism of his contemporaries seemed to Nordau mere bestiality: beginning with Wagner, all the characteristics of whose art seemed to him 'to point not forward, but far behind', and ending with Nietzsche – 'enthusiastic over the "freely roving beasts of prey"'. But Nordau, in his way, was quite as ruthless as Nietzsche. If, he argued, it were true, as some critics dared to suggest, that degenerate sensibility was essential to the artist, then mankind would continue to build the good society without art, although this 'would, doubtless, destroy a charming delusion'. Science, he said, 'has not hesitated to pronounce faith a subjective error of

man and would, therefore, suffer far fewer scruples in characterising art as something morbid if facts should convince us that such is the case . . .'[9]

I have dwelt at length on Nordau, not only because his book might well serve as a negative compendium of the cosmopolitan sources of Russian Symbolism and because his views were typical of the so-called 'liberal censorship', in Russia as well as in western Europe, but because *Entartung* alarmed and directly influenced the doyen of Russian Populist critics, N. K. Mikhailovsky, who reviewed the first German edition in the January 1893 number of the journal of *Russkoe Bogatstvo* (Russian Wealth). Although he rejected Nordau's assessment of Tolstoy, Mikhailovsky took to heart the idea that ordinary citizens should be safeguarded against 'the very small minority who honestly find pleasure in the new tendencies [. . .]'. The old radical's convictions were perfectly attuned to Nordau's idea that 'the power to exercise an irresistible boycott' should lie not with the policeman, nor yet with the church, but rather with literary critics and 'all healthy and moral men'.[10]

In the very next number of the journal, Mikhailovsky felt called upon to exert this power of boycott against a Russian author, in the interests, as he no doubt honestly thought, of the healthy youth of his own country. In doing so, he conferred instant notoriety on the first serious discussion of 'the new trends' to be published in Russia. Its author was in fact an ex-disciple of his, the scholarly young poet and essayist Dmitrii Sergeevich Merezhkovsky.

In Mikhailovsky's view, Merezhkovsky's publication, at his own expense, of two lectures delivered on 7 and 14 December 1892 in St Petersburg under the title 'O prichinakh upadka i o novykh techeniiakh sovremennoi russkoi literatury' ('On the reasons for the decline and on the new trends in contemporary Russian literature'), was an event to be deplored. More particularly was it to be deplored because the author, who had made his name with the Populists as critic and poet, had in the same year of 1892 elected to bring out his first collection of poems with the conservative publisher Suvorin and to call it *Simvoly* (Symbols).[11]

Fresh from his defence of Tolstoy against Nordau, Mikhailovsky could hardly be expected to admit that conditions in Russia were such as to allow for the spontaneous rise of literary decadence. 'We are still too young,' he wrote, 'to be so disillusioned with life and to fear it so.' Not only France, Mikhailovsky warned, but 'Europe generally' was suffering a reversion to 'mysticism', with 'magi', 'neo-Buddhists', 'theosophers' and the like cropping up at every turn. The artistic expressions of these trends, he continued, were 'symbolism' and 'impressionism'. However: 'France is one thing and Russia is another.'[12]

Although Merezhkovsky's poetry was Symbolist in name only, it did express some *fin-de-siècle* attitudes. Also, the title was a declaration of intent and of solidarity with the French school, recently described with some sympathy by Zinaida Vengerova in the influential periodical *Vestnik Evropy* (The Messenger of Europe).[13] Mikhailovsky made this connection in his polemical reply to Merezhkovsky's pamphlet. In developed capitalist countries like France, he conceded, the appearance of Symbolism and other symptoms of cultural exhaustion such as extreme individualism and aestheticism, was justifiable as a 'protest'. But here, in pastoral, primitive Russia: what was Mr Merezhkovsky protesting against?

Essentially, of course, Merezhkovsky was protesting against people like Nordau in Europe and in Russia who regarded art as expendable, faith as a subjective error, and morality as a prejudice so 'useful' it must be defended with staves and clubs. He was protesting against the entire line of people whom his future ally Vasilii Rozanov, writing in that same year of 1892, had labelled 'the sad utilitarians of the last two centuries, [...] joyless organisers of human happiness'.[14] He was also protesting against philanthropists whose love for their fellow men Nikolai Minsky, like Merezhkovsky a 'turncoat' populist, was to characterise as 'a shop window, lukewarm love which does not burn themselves'[15]. Merezhkovsky did not, however, make his protest as an advocate of contemporary art from abroad. 'It is an unforgivable error', he wrote, 'to think that idealism in art is some sort of a yesterday's invention of Paris fashion. It is a return to the old, the eternal, the immortal.'[16]

Merezhkovsky, as another early ally, Akim Volynsky, was quick to point out, is not here using the term 'idealism' philosophically, but 'with the naïveté of a schoolgirl', as a blanket term to express 'the search for the ... inexpressible, the dark, the subconscious', and 'love for the people, based on profound and ardent subjectivity and not on utilitarian politics or economic calculation'.[17]

Merezhkovsky advocated the 'new techniques' in art, because, thanks to 'mystical content, symbols and the broadening of the artistic sensibility', he considered that these techniques were fitted to express not only 'the brilliantly illumined *terra firma* of science' but also 'the dark ocean lying beyond the limits of our knowledge'. There is here an acceptance of (together with a desperate desire to escape from) Kant's theory of cognition which merits Volynsky's reproach as to the loose use of the word idealism. Merezhkovsky felt that Kant had erected a 'Cyclopean wall' between the life we can observe and comprehend and the meaning of life. To men like Nordau and Mikhailovsky, busy advancing the frontiers of science and improving society, the Kantian wall was a sheltering screen; but not to Merezhkovsky. The task of modern art, as the young critic saw

it, was to explore beyond the realm of pure reason, where the law of cause and effect must always be paramount.

If absolute truth cannot be reached by the deductive process, it can at least be approached through the relativity of symbols. To illustrate his meaning, Merezhkovsky recalled the crumbling remains of a Grecian sculpture of a naked youth leading a great horse. Implicit in the rhythmic proportion of the sculpture was the idea of man's kinship with the natural world and of his stewardship of it: the origin and the purpose, spontaneously and graciously symbolised through beauty. 'Symbols should arise naturally and involuntarily from the depths of reality', he explains. Symbolism, in other words, was not a matter of describing one known thing in terms of another. It was a breakthrough: 'Words only define and limit, whereas symbols express the unlimited aspect of thought.' Symbolism and Impressionism, Merezhkovsky claims, are international movements necessary to enable exploration 'beyond the wall', and also to provide that element of discovery or 'wonder' which both Poe and Baudelaire (and before them Plato) had considered to be an essential ingredient of every human achievement, every true work of art, every new thought.

Although Merezhkovsky was acutely aware of the tenuous, even dangerous nature of the Symbolist quest, it was the thrill and excitement of emancipation – the right of art to complete autonomy, to freedom from every other discipline but its own exacting discipline of beauty – that he chose to emphasise. Indeed, the 'decline' (*upadok*) he speaks of in his pamphlet is not Nordau's 'degeneracy' or *fin-de-siècle* decadence (*dekadentstvo*), but, on the contrary, the decline in artistic standards brought about by preaching the 'useful prejudice' of morality as though it were sacred truth:

> ... only ugliness, only banality in art are immoral. No pornography, no seductive pictures of vice debauch the human heart so much as the lie about the good, as the banal hymn to the good, as hot tears shed by naïve readers over falsely humane sentiments and bourgeois morality. He who is in the habit of weeping over a lie will pass by truth and beauty with a cold heart.[18]

Merezhkovsky's lectures were heard and read by a mere handful of people. Mikhailovsky's attack upon them echoed throughout literate Russia. It was primarily responsible for the myth, still stubbornly recurrent in studies of the period, that Russian Symbolism was a direct transplant from France, without *raison d'être* in Russian society. Contrariwise, the fact that it was Mikhailovsky who labelled the new 'trends' as 'degenerate' or 'decadent' engendered an equally misleading attribution of the origins of Symbolism in Russia to a purely local reaction against

the utilitarian values of Populism.[19] Although Russian Symbolism was part of a wider European trend it was primarily a creative, poetic movement. Viacheslav Ivanov, in the retrospective articles he devoted to the origins of the school in 1910–12, emphasises the importance of its roots in *Russian* literature: the prose of Dostoevsky and Gogol′ and the poetry of Vladimir Solov′ev, Afanasii Fet and, above all, Fedor Tiutchev. Although, as we have seen, there can be no doubt of the cosmopolitan nature of the 'new trends', there is the unmistakable ring of poetic truth in Ivanov's insistence that 'symbolism does not cut itself off from the soil; its desire is to combine roots with stars and to grow up as a starry flower from familiar, native roots.'[20]

Tiutchev, whom Ivanov identified as the first to elaborate a 'consistently applicable method' based on suggestion rather than communication, began publishing in Pushkin's *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary), but the bulk of his poetry – sonorous, moody, impregnated with German *Naturphilosophie* – was written later. To the Symbolists, most of whom only came to appreciate Pushkin comparatively late in life, he represented an alternative tradition. In 1910, Valerii Briusov wrote of how: 'Tiutchev stands as the great master and originator of the poetry of suggestion, on an equal footing with Pushkin, the creator of our truly classic poetry [. . .]. Only at the end of the nineteenth century did Tiutchev find true successors, who accepted his precepts and tried to approach the perfection of his images.'[21] What fascinated Tiutchev's spiritual heirs, Briusov's contemporaries, was above all his awareness of the difficulty of communication:

> Как сердцу высказать себя?
> Другому как понять тебя?
> Поймет ли он, чем ты живешь?
> Мысль изреченная есть ложь.*

This last line – 'The thought, once spoken, is a lie' – became a Symbolist slogan. However, it was above all Tiutchev's poetic technique which interested his 'true successors', his ability to achieve the impossible, to express the inexpressible, to show how 'Poniatnym serdtsu iazykom, tverdiat o neponiatnoi muke' ('pain beyond understanding is told in a language that speaks to the heart'). The music of his poetry could conjure the sobbing cadences of the night wind and assemble the most contradictory insights and desires in majestic harmonies – as in the famous do/don't invocation:

* 'How can the heart tell all it has to say? / How can another understand you? / Will he understand all that you live by? / The thought, once spoken, is a lie.' From the poem 'Silentium'.