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This book is the first detailed history of the Russian Symbolist movement, from its initial hostile reception as a symptom of European decadence to its absorption into the mainstream of Russian literature, and eventual disintegration. It focuses on the two generations of writers whose work served as the seedbed of Existentialism in thought and of Modernism in prose and the performing arts, and reassesses their achievements in the light of modern research. Because the Symbolists' philosophy aspired to art, their poetry to music, painting to poetry and theatre to liturgy, this study pays proper attention to developments in art, theatre, thought and religion. It also considers the historical background of revolutionary hope and foreboding, and the patronage of the fading court and the rising capitalist class. At the centre of the study are the Symbolists' literary works. Prose is quoted in English translation and poetry given in the original Russian with prose translations. There is a valuable bibliography of primary sources and an extensive chronological appendix. This book will fill a long-felt gap, and will be invaluable to students and teachers of Russian and comparative literature, symbolism, modernism, and pre-revolutionary Russian culture.

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Avril Pyman

Reader in Russian literature, University of Durham



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In memoriam

Nikolay Efremovich Andreyev
Dmitrii Evgenevich Maksimov

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Preface

This book has changed several times during the twelve years it has been in the writing. It sprang originally from material gathered for a Ph.D thesis on the 'Origins of Russian Symbolism with Special Reference to D. S. Merezhkovsky 1892–1985', Cambridge, 1958. Most of my work since, however, has been devoted to twentieth-century Russian literature, and the need for a history of the Symbolist movement as a whole is apparent. This was my contract for Cambridge University Press. At the same time, work on the origins of the movement left me with an abiding interest in the thought, or perhaps I should say in the unanswered questions raised by the thought, of the *fin de siècle*. New publications from and about the period in Russia, especially the flood of new material about Andrei Bely and Pavel Florensky, have reanimated this interest and confirmed my conviction that the literary movement calling itself Russian Symbolism was not an imitation of the French, who first laid claim to the term and experimented with the techniques, but part of a wider European attempt to give expression to this thought, these questions. As Shestov says: 'the most important and meaningful thoughts are born into the world naked, without verbal form: to find words for them is a special, very difficult task – an art in itself'.¹

For those who 'felt in their bones' that the veneer of humanist Enlightenment was paper thin, it seemed essential to probe beyond the bounds of reason, to 'open windows' and to move freely in the sphere of 'the unbounded' (V bezbrezhnosti). They chose to do this through the medium of the arts. Here, even the 'unsaid', the perfectly timed and orchestrated pause, could be meaningful. It was possible to venture beyond the certainties of the here and now because art is necessarily subjective, often imprecise. Words, colours, sounds and shapes could be used not so much to explain as to suggest, to provoke echoes and reactions, to awake memory and stir premonition.

To begin with the Symbolists (in Russia as elsewhere) were laughed out of court by a solid majority who considered that art had no 'philosophical' function but should be confined to the useful or the decorative, a

recreation for serious persons concerned with 'real life'. The Symbolist notion that the artist sees the world as transparent and that art can afford insights beyond the bounds of scientifically established truth seemed childish, irresponsible, downright destabilising. Slowly and painfully, at first by isolated individuals, then by small, intimate groups a new language was forged, a language in which the word was 'symbolic', equal to more than itself, mindful of its roots and capable of growth, change, transfiguration. From these scattered groups sprang a vigorous, outgoing literary movement which, gathering force like a river, emptied itself into the sea of Russian literature, opening out before it did so into a delta of many streams: Acmeism, Futurism of various descriptions, neo-realism and ornamental prose, Russia's early literature of the absurd ...

This diversification simply separated, deepened and intensified various currents which had jostled along together in the main stream. Acmeism – domesticated, refined, translucent – emphasised that 'homesickness for World Culture' which had manifested itself from the very beginning in the Symbolist rebellion against utilitarianism and simplistic belief in progress. Futurism – romantic, primitive and turgid – continued to explore the matter of language, the roots and incantatory power of the word and the quest for a new poetics to express new science and technology. Formalism – essentially a critical rather than creative movement, eager to analyse and define – elaborated the emphasis on form and structure. Neo-realists extended the idea that every symbol is rooted in particularity freshly, subjectively perceived; ornamental prose, which overlapped with neo-realism, pursued the reinvigoration of language through neologism and archaism to provincialism and dialect. The Absurdist took the Symbolist polemic against cause and effect, rationalism and dogma to its logical conclusion, darting on in arbitrary twists and turns, disappearing into the abyss only to bubble up again with unexpected vigour, seeping away into the sand ... Even Viacheslav Ivanov's 'realistic' Symbolism, ardently supported by Bely, which outlasted the 'crisis of Symbolism' by two or three years, seems, in retrospect to be but one of the many branches of this delta, though we may assume that it was in fact the remnant of the mainstream, rolling along in its depth the idea of the 'more real', always the unattainable goal of the movement, always beyond the grasp of art.

By piecing together the story of the Symbolist movement up to 1910, the year in which it was first challenged from within and its chief protagonists went on to concentrate on producing works of art, I have essentially sought to provide a map of this river from the source to the beginning of the delta, to chart the tributary streams, and it is this empirical approach which has dictated the structure of the book. Since I write here for students of Russian literature, rather than for specialists, I

have endeavoured to establish the main characters of my story one at a time before showing how they interacted with one another. The chronology at the end should act as a corrective to any confusion this may cause, especially at the beginning, where I was very conscious in writing of the dichotomy between earlier-established Petersburg Symbolists and their Moscow counterparts, with whose more declarative début the story of the movement is often begun. Briusov published the first two collections of *Russkie simvolisty* in 1894, whereas Hippius's first poems in her 'new manner', though written earlier, were published in 1895; but the battle for the Symbolist aesthetic, begun in 1892 with Merezhkovsky's 'On the causes for the decline . . .', and continued on the pages of *Severnyi Vestnik*, was well underway in *Mir Iskusstva* before Briusov achieved maturity and recognition as an artist in his own right, or sufficient financial leverage to unite Petersburg and Moscow Symbolists about the 'Skorpion' publishing house and on the pages of its almanac *Severnye Tsvety* at the turn of the century. *Vesy*, begun in 1904, the last year of *Mir Iskusstva* and *Novyi Put'*, though of central importance, was founded only after the literary debut of the so-called second generation of Russian Symbolism (Viacheslav Ivanov and Bely in 1902 and Blok in 1903), and its function was primarily to assess and explain, not to pioneer and promote the 'new art'.

So much for the overall plan or layout of this book. The approach, broadly speaking, has been that of the chronicler rather than the critic. I have sought primarily to present texts in context, to present thought, prose and poetry (the last both in the original and on-page translation) in a meaningful way as the work of particular people at a particular time in history and in a particular country, but also as text, as something that stands on its own, the appreciation of which can be heightened by an awareness of structure and device. The word 'strategy' (which I acknowledge can be useful in special articles for the specialist) does not enter into the vocabulary of this book. It is not an attempt to take foes at unawares, but to present friends to a new generation of readers and, having introduced them, to let their voices sound for themselves in the context of their time.

Acknowledgements

I would like to record my gratitude – in the chronological order suggested by the genesis of this book – to Henry Gifford, editor of Cambridge Studies in Russian Literature, who commissioned it, was my first reader and supported me with help and advice when it turned out a different kind of book to that envisaged by the original contract; to Malcolm Jones, his successor, another early reader unstinting in his support and advice; to William Harrison for unfailing help and support and to the University of Durham for allowing me to take six months leave and keeping up my superannuation contributions while I wrote and researched Parts III and IV; to my friend the editor Catherine Carver who helped, out of the goodness of her heart, to cut and shape the first version of the text and whose approbation, constructive criticism and wonderful eye for bunkum of all kinds kept me going through times of discouragement; to Katharina Brett of Cambridge University Press for supporting my applications to the British Academy and to my own university for subventions; to the British Academy and the University of Durham for the generous subventions granted – without which the book could not have been published in its present form; to Julian Graffy for impeccable constructive editing far beyond the call of duty and for invaluable suggestions for the bibliography; to Christine Cumming for her unfailing patience and efficiency in typing and retyping from manuscript; to Kevin Taylor of Cambridge University Press for picking up where Katharina Brett left off and for advocating the publication of this book in its present form.

I would like also to thank archivists in the Pushkin House (Academy of Sciences of the USSR as it was when I worked there); of the Central State Archive of Literature (TsGALI) and the manuscript department of the Lenin Library in Moscow; and of the manuscript department of the Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library in St Petersburg. Of my colleagues, to so many of whom I owe so much, I would like to distinguish the late Zara Grigor'evna Mints of Tartu University with whom I talked in Munich about her plans (and mine) for a History of Russian Symbolism – curiously and quite unbeknownst to one another we often found our-

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selves working simultaneously on the same subjects, and it is a loss to us all that she did not live to complete her grand project; and the late Ronald E. Peterson, with whom I also talked, thought I did not see his pioneering study until it was published in 1993 when this *History* was already at the stage of first proofs. The book is dedicated to the memory of my teachers who supervised my research on the origins of Russian 'Decadence' at Cambridge and on the life and times of Aleksandr Blok in St Petersburg.

Its shortcomings are, of course, my own.

Note on the text

Primary sources, and other sources belonging to the period covered by this book, are listed with full particulars in the Select Bibliography at p. 432, but are cited in condensed form in the Notes; secondary sources are cited in full on their first appearance, and in condensed form thereafter. Real names of authors habitually writing under literary pseudonyms are recorded in the Index; the notes record the name under which a work was first published but, in the case of occasional pseudonyms adopted by authors habitually writing under their own name, the real name is given in brackets; i.e. Nikolai Minsky, Fedor Sologub – but Avrel'ii (Briusov), Anton Krainyi (Hippius). Reference to Symbolists' works are normally given to first publication and to some more widely available publication, the *Collected Works* (*Sobranie sochinenii*) if such exist, or publications of poetry in the Biblioteka Poeta series. In the case of Bely and Bal'mont reference has been made both to the respective Biblioteka Poeta series and to the further commentaries provided by John Malmstad and Vladimir Markov (Munich: Wilhelm Fink 1982, 1988). The fact that the volume of A. Belyi, *Stikhotvoreniia* (1982) containing Bely's *Urna* and *Pepel* is still forthcoming has made it possible to refer only to the earlier poetry in vol. I, but Malmstad's notes in vol. III cover these books also and page references to them are given throughout.

ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations and short forms are identified at the first instance. The following acronyms are used throughout.

ANSSSR	Akademiiia Nauk SSSR (Academy of Sciences of the USSR)
LN	Literaturnoe nasledstvo (Literary Heritage)
MI	<i>Mir Iskusstva</i> (The World of Art)
NP	<i>Novyi Put'</i> (The New Way)
NY	New York
NZh	<i>Novaia Zhizn'</i> (New Life)

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<i>PSS</i>	<i>Polnoe sobranie sochinenii</i> (Complete Works)
<i>SPb</i>	Saint Petersburg (Pb when Petersburg)
<i>SS</i>	<i>Sobranie sochinenii</i> (Collected Works)
<i>STs</i>	<i>Severnye Tsvety</i> (Northern Flowers)
<i>VE</i>	<i>Vestnik Evropy</i> (Herald of Europe)
<i>VZh</i>	<i>Voprosy Zhizni</i> (Questions of Life)
<i>ZR</i>	<i>Zolotoe Runo</i> (The Golden Fleece)

All *Collected Works* (*Sobranie sochinenii*) of Symbolist authors are referred to by author, *SS* and volume number. The last (ninth) volume of Blok's 1962–3 *SS*, published in 1965 under the title *Zapisnye knizhki*, is referred to as *ZK*.