

20. See especially Bely's letters of 20 November 1915 and 23 June 1916.
21. See especially Bely's letters of 16 June and 27 July 1917; 27 February 1918; 17 November [?] 1923; 6 February 1924.
22. See A. Bely, "Volnaya filosofskaya assotsiatsiya," in *Novaya russkaya kniga*, no. 1 (Berlin, 1922): 32-33. See also "Rakurs dnevnika" (1899-1930), at TsGALI, fond 53, opis 1, ed. Khr. 100. Quoted in Bugaeva, "Letopis zhizni i tvorchestva."
23. See A. Bely, "Pochemu ya stal simvolistom . . .," 1928, at TsGALI, fond 53, opis 1, ed. Khr. 74, section 14. "In 1922 it [Volfila] was obliged to reduce its activity, and in 1924 it was forced to cease its existence."
24. All Anthroposophists: Klavdiya Nikolaevna Vasileva (1886-1970), later to become Bely's second wife; Vladimir Ottonovich Nilender (1883-1965), poet and literary critic, a friend of Bely's from their early "Argonaut" days; Sergey Mikhaylovich Solovyov (1885-1943), Symbolist poet and translator, one of Bely's oldest friends; Mikhail Pavlovich Stolyarov, a member of the Anthroposophical circle and deputy president of the Moscow branch of Volfila.
25. E. F. Nikitina, organizer of the Moscow publishing house Nikitinskie Subbotniki, which published several of Bely's works, including the novels *The Baptized Chinaman* (two editions 1927, 1928), *The Moscow Eccentric* (1927) and *Moscow in Jeopardy* (1927). The reprint of *Petersburg* referred to in the letter appeared in 1928.
26. Letter of 3 October 1927.
27. Letter of 8 December 1924.
28. Mikhail Osipovich Gershenzon (1869-1925), literary critic and philosopher. See letter of March 1925.
29. Letters of 25 December 1927 and 7-10 February 1928.
30. Letter of March 1925.
31. Letter of 27 September 1925.
32. Letter of 27 September 1925.
33. Letters of 27 September and 19 October 1925.
34. Letters of 6 and 18 March 1926.
35. See note 6 above.
36. Letter of 20 February 1927.
37. Squire, *Memoirs*, pp. 103-4.
38. Ivanov-Razumnik had written "Dec. 1930" in error.
39. See the following letters to Ivanov-Razumnik: 3 July, undated, 19 July, and 31 August 1931.
40. See the letter from Bely to Aleksey Sergeevich Petrovsky of mid-March 1932, at GPB, fond 60, ed. xp. 56, published in *Novy Zhurnal* 122 (New York, 1976) 159-62.

"The Bely-Zhirmunsky Polemic."

Andrey Bely: A Critical Review, Gerald

Janecek, ed. (University of Kentucky: 1978)

205-13

THOMAS R. BEYER, Jr.

THE BELY-ZHIRMUNSKY POLEMIC

Andrey Bely, the brilliant apologist of Russian Symbolism and one of its most ardent and capable polemicists, asserted most emphatically in his study, *Rhythm as a Dialectic*, that he was a "formalist prior to the formalists in Russia" (p. 28). Although Bely's book has been largely ignored or dismissed by later critics, his assertion has been echoed by several noted literary historians. Thus, for example, Oleg Maslenikov in *The Frenzied Poets: Andrei Biely and the Russian Symbolists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), p. 81, declared that Bely's first investigations of the formal aspects of verse in *Symbolism* "laid the foundation for the Russian formalist school of criticism. . . ." Contemporary scholars have often repeated or paraphrased the statement of Maslenikov, such that it has become a generally accepted cliché.¹ Although few if any question the validity of the claim, there still has been no comprehensive study of Bely's influence on Formalist poetics, nor of the relationship which existed between Bely and those whom he considered his legitimate offspring.

A few scholars, it should be noted, have devoted attention to the issue of Bely's influence on Formalist writings. Victor Erlich in *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine*, 3d ed., Slavistic Printings and Reprintings (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), p. 38, briefly examines the historical role of Bely in the evolution of formal literary criticism and concludes that "in spite of their deficiencies Bely's studies in versification were an important milestone in the development of Russian scientific poetics." Erlich, however, concentrates on the uniqueness of Russian Formalism, a view which

the Formalists themselves were eager to espouse and uphold; consequently his remarks on Bely are limited to a reiteration of their comments. More recently, Ewa M. Thompson in *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971) provides a more balanced evaluation of Bely's philosophical and theoretical principles which inspired the Formalists.

While both Erlich and Thompson offer valuable, though admittedly incomplete, information on Bely's impact, neither focuses specifically on the Formalist reception of Bely. More significantly, neither mentions Bely's lengthy explanation of his own position vis-à-vis his critics. This neglect to include or consider Bely's opinion is symptomatic of the general failure of Bely to attract serious scholarly attention as a literary critic. Notwithstanding the continuing applications and implications of Bely's pioneering efforts, there remains this lacuna in the history of Russian literary criticism. Essentially little has altered since 1953 when Kiril Taranovski lamented the fact that "today the contributions of Bely to the science of verse have already begun to be forgotten."² Bely himself was disturbed by what he considered a conspiracy of silence on the part of the Formalists concerning his role in the formulation of their new aesthetics and methodology. This so-called silence constituted one of the major issues raised in the controversy, which had as its starting point Viktor Zhirmunsky's celebrated *Introduction to Metrics* (1925).³

In his examination of the history of Russian poetics Zhirmunsky provided the most comprehensive discussion and criticism of Bely's *Symbolism* to that time. His survey was the first to examine in some detail the new scope of scientific poetics created by Bely's pioneering work. Previously, *Symbolism* had evoked only one serious analytical review when it had first appeared: Valery Bryusov's highly antagonistic "On a Single Question of Rhythm" (1910).⁴ The fifteen-year interval between publication and objective evaluation was indicative of *Symbolism's* continuing importance and impact on literary studies; but more important, the new evaluation pointed to the incomplete and inconsequential quality of the criticism previously directed at Bely. Such criticism as had existed was largely confined to passing references, allusions, or footnotes employed by apologists of Bely seeking to declare their affinity to his work, or by his detractors, chiefly the Formalists, seeking to

pronounce unconditionally the independence and novelty of their own efforts.

Zhirmunsky avoided the obsequiousness of the first, meticulously granting recognition to Bely in those areas where deserved, and the protestations of the second, carefully refraining from labels and unsupported allegations. Describing the growth of the Formalist school in his article, "Formprobleme in der russischen Literaturwissenschaft," the critic had written: "Die formale Methode ist in der russischen Wissenschaft zuerst bei der Behandlung *metrischer Fragen* angewandt worden. Begründet wurde hier die neue Richtung durch die Arbeiten des Dichters *Andrej Belyj* über den russischen vierfüssigen Jambus."⁵ Zhirmunsky continued in *Introduction to Metrics* his tradition of conscientiously assigning to Bely his rightful position as one of the initiators of formal literary studies, while opposing Bely's theories and practices on what he considered to be matters of substance. Thus Zhirmunsky tempered his praise by noting that although Bely was the first to make the necessary applications for the study of rhythmic deviations (*otstuplenie*), he was not original in his discovery of this phenomenon. In summarizing his opinion of *Symbolism* Zhirmunsky affirmed: "It is impossible not to recognize the outstanding significance of Bely's works for the study of Russian verse" (*Introduction to Metrics*, p. 40).

The author's praise was counterbalanced with his objections to Bely's research. First, Bely's diagrammatic method was limited to unstressed syllables where stress was expected in the iambic line. These tabulations, according to Zhirmunsky, provided an inaccurate representation of the data because of the total disregard for verse and stanza delineations. Second, Bely had relied on 596 lines of poetry as the basis for his statistics; a quantity judged by the critic to be insufficient. Third, he attacked Bely's frequent practice of offering both subjective and prescriptive statements, which for Zhirmunsky were indicative more of personal preference or inclination of Symbolist poets than of empirical reality. Finally, Zhirmunsky expressed dismay at Bely's haphazard, inconsistent, and often confusing use of terms to describe his data. Although Zhirmunsky's objections appeared to have some merit, they have had little effect on the later practitioners of Bely's methods. The insistence upon the separation of poems into stanzas has been ignored in the major computations of Boris Tomashevsky and Kiril

Taranovski.⁶ In addition, Bely's own computations based on only 596 lines of verse per poet have achieved new credibility in the much more comprehensive and definitive studies of Taranovski.⁷ Finally, the attack on Bely's terminology pales when viewed in light of Tomashevsky's own complaint of "terminological arbitrariness" (*terminologicheskyy proizvol*) in the field of scientific poetics.⁸

Zhirmunsky's assessment of *Symbolism* was restrained, well organized, and for the most part a judicious appraisal; nevertheless, it became the referent for Bely's impassioned response in *Rhythm as a Dialectic*. In this work the author offered a refinement of his older techniques, a proposal for a new mathematical study of verse, and an attempt to clarify and define his own opinion of and relationship to the Formalist school. Bely ignored the essence of Zhirmunsky's criticism, only briefly refuting the charge of careless terminology. Instead he chose to denounce all of his detractors in an embittered and often ironic tour de force reminiscent of his style during the first decade of this century, when he had clashed with the "mystical anarchists." Apparently not content with the numerous accusations and vilifications interspersed throughout his text, Bely included an afterword aimed at discrediting the entire Formalist movement and in particular Viktor Zhirmunsky.

Bely contended that he had been engaged in studies of formal aspects of poetry long before the appearance of the Formalists. Relying on the historical sequence of events to justify his claim, he noted that his article on the "Principle of Form in Aesthetics" (1906)⁹ was one of the earliest attempts to initiate a formal approach to literary analysis at a time when "Prof. Zhirmunsky was merely . . . a schoolboy" (p. 29). Bely then suggested that his readers consult bibliographical evidence if they doubted his declaration of primacy in the field: "from 1910 (year of publication of *Symbolism*) until 1928 in the place where nothing had stood there grew a monumental library written for the most part by formalists . . ." (p. 38). Bely's argument is convincing even today. One need only inspect any respected study, such as the work by Edward Stankiewicz and Dean S. Worth, *A Selected Bibliography of Slavic Linguistics*, vol. 2 (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), pp. 398-401, to ascertain that *Symbolism* chronologically precedes the voluminous literature devoted to questions of Russian metrics and rhythm in the twentieth century. Having established himself as a forerunner of formal criticism, Bely quickly disavowed any mutual borrowing from the later

writings of the Formalists. While conceding that they had made significant advances in the area of nomenclature for the classification of poetic phenomena, he insisted that they had added little to the study of rhythm as he had first proposed. In order to insure the distinction between his own work and that of the Formalists Bely supplied the word "real" (*realno*) (p. 20) to characterize his own investigations. Furthermore, he suggested that the Formalists who had accused him of mysticism were themselves unscientific because they refused to seek or even to admit the existence of some "principle" in their studies.

On the basis of Bely's perception of his role in the history of formal aesthetics it is not difficult to understand his dismay and consternation, which he subsequently translated into contempt toward his calumniators. Convinced that his own contributions to the field had been intentionally ignored, he offered the following sarcastic reply:

A surprising thing occurred: Andrey Bely had already begun in 1910 that which others went on to develop; and he then vanished into silence. These others, under the guise of "criticism" of Bely's absurdities have usurped from him his point of departure, and the not-too-distant, nice guy Bely thanked them and bowed to them in silence.

The story of how poor Bely "futilely endeavored" for ten years to construct his "little work" on rhythm would make a rather interesting historico-cultural document on caste mores; for 100 years there had been no professors of "metrics" in Russia; and a poor poet, in the absence of a "professorate" began to cleanse the Augean stables of their filth; the place was made clean; and suddenly there appeared an excessive quantity of professor-"describers," . . .

It is not good to be the cleaning man for another's filth; you leave soiled: on the cleansed spot arrive *good-looking* gardeners, and they will not allow you near the gardens. You . . . stink. . . . (pp. 43, 44)

In spite of the exaggerated tone of the excerpt, there was considerable truth in the allegations. Although the Formalists referred to Bely more than to any other critic, their comments were always equivocal, extending praise in one sentence and revoking it in the next. Thompson correctly commented on these inconsistencies in Formalist writings, noting that "their denunciations of Bely sometimes sound too emphatic to be credible."¹⁰ Thus Boris

Eykhensbaum in his historical sketch of the Formalist movement admitted: "Naturally, such books as A. Bely's *Symbolism* (1910) meant immeasurably more to the younger generation than monographs without principle by historians of literature. . . ." In the same article he attacked Bely and the other Symbolists for their "subjective esthetic and philosophical theories."¹¹ Boris Tomashevsky, whose own studies owed an obvious debt to investigations by Bely, could not deny the critic's historical primacy; but he attempted to illustrate his own originality with the unproven assertion that "the material for my article on iambic tetrameter was developed over a year before the publication of A. Bely's book, *Symbolism*, which initiated a new epoch in the study of Russian verse."¹² These brief examples indicate the quandary in which the Formalists found themselves. Their own works showed such a marked similarity to those of Bely that they could not avoid mention of him; but they consistently refused to dignify *Symbolism* with serious scholarly criticism, preferring instead to utter repeated disclaimers of any significant influence on the part of Bely.

Corresponding to his belief in a conspiracy of silence directed toward him, which he considered had deprived him of an address for rebuttal, Bely filed a more serious accusation: "you took from me all rights to interfere in that field of studies which I had initiated before you, . . . from 1910 until 1928 I did not have an opportunity to publish my works on poetics . . . without interference" (p. 43). The author presented no evidence to confirm that his adversaries had excluded him from the arena of formal literary investigations. An examination of Bely's bibliography does, however, confirm an inexplicable absence of writing on literary themes during the years he mentioned. The only notable exception is a series of four articles which Bely had published in *Gorn (The Forge)* between 1918 and 1920 when he had been allied with the Proletkult.¹³ Bely had, of course, published prolifically during his years in Berlin and only slightly less after his return to the Soviet Union; writings in this period were confined to poetry, novels and memoirs, with no investigations of literary form.¹⁴ Many reasons may be offered for this silence, including Bely's lack of attention to aesthetics because of other endeavors. A case against the Formalists may exist if one considers that the market for literary studies of a strictly formal nature was obviously limited and at the same time overwhelmingly dominated by the Formalists, who welcomed no work by Bely in

their own publications. Consequently there is some indication to suspect that Bely's complaint was not totally unfounded.

Bely's final indictment was his most vicious: Zhirmunsky and, by association, the Formalists were guilty of plagiarism. Bely noted that already in 1910 and 1911 his Rhythmical Circle had refined and corrected the inconsistencies first presented in *Symbolism*. He then claimed a "complete and pitiful concurrence" of his own revised system with that presented by Zhirmunsky in *Introduction to Metrics*. Bely alluded to his *Register*, the record of substantive corrections to *Symbolism*, which Zhirmunsky had failed to mention "in case he had become acquainted with our *Register* of 1911, which had some distribution from hand to hand; indeed, the work on registration had been given life by me; if we accidentally coincided, then why did Prof. Zhirmunsky who personally attended my course in the Leningrad *House of the Arts* in 1920, at which I mentioned more than once my mistakes of transcription in *Symbolism* (if my memory does not betray me—also referring to the *Register*),—why did he not find time to express his observations to me at that time" (p. 243). It is impossible to resolve this issue without access to the *Register* or to Zhirmunsky's notes of the period, if indeed copies of these materials exist. What is most striking is the maliciousness of the charge which clearly expressed Bely's almost hysterical reaction to his critics.

Zhirmunsky did not allow this challenge to his integrity pass without comment. His reply was contained in a searing review entitled "Apropos the Book *Rhythm as a Dialectic*."¹⁵ The author displayed his own talents as a polemicist first softening the blow and lulling Bely with a somewhat exaggerated restatement of his earlier opinions: "I have always considered it unjust to forget the debt of gratitude in regard to the author of *Symbolism*, as have done several representatives of the new literary studies in the heat of polemical alienations . . ." (p. 203). He then offered his condolences and pity to Bely for most of his statements and vigorously denied that he had come in contact either with the *Register* or with any reference to improvements on the data in Bely's work. Instead he opened a counteroffensive by claiming that Bely had raised no objections to Zhirmunsky's own work in 1925 when it had been discussed at a meeting of writers and critics. Zhirmunsky concluded his arguments with a spiteful allusion to Bely as "the well-known Muscovite mystic Boris Bugaev" (p. 208), a rejoinder

to Bely's sarcastic use of "Professor" Zhirmunsky. After this review the conflict apparently ended never being mentioned again in print although both Zhirmunsky and Bely continued to work in the field of poetics after this time. Bely in a review article "Poema o Khlopke," *Novy Mir* 11 (1932): 229-48, returned to the methodology of *Rhythm as a Dialectic* but failed to comment on Zhirmunsky's article. Interestingly, Bely was extremely generous with his praise for some of the Formalists, particularly Boris Eichenbaum and Viktor Vinogradov, in his posthumously published scholarship entitled *Gogol's Craft*.

The controversy was unfortunate because of the childish attitude displayed by both participants, but also because Bely's work failed to attract attention on its merits. Although little was proven by the polemic, the writings involved constitute a valuable historical record of the intensity of emotion raised by the question of Bely's relationship to the Formalists. Always a controversial figure, whether as aesthetic theorist, novelist, or memoirist, Bely aroused the same love-hate response in his literary investigations. Perhaps due to the often caustic character of the writer, his critical writings have not attracted serious scholarly review. Although the history of Bely as a literary critic still remains to be written, there can be little doubt concerning the lasting quality of his contributions to the study of poetics. Perhaps more than any other work, *Symbolism* has had a continuing impact on the study of Russian verse, as is evident in ongoing research by Kiril Taranovski and James Bailey.¹⁶ Thus while many of Bely's statements in his own defense may be viewed in perspective as hyperbolic, he is still more highly regarded today than most Formalists were ever willing to admit.

NOTES

1. Cf. Marc Slonim, *From Chekhov to the Revolution: Russian Literature 1900-1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 195: "His [Bely's] works on Symbolism, on the principles of Russian prosody, on rhythmic in poetry, all laid the foundations for a special branch of formal criticism . . ."; R. H. Stacy, *Russian Literary Criticism: A Short History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1974), pp. 136, 137: "his [Bely's] early pioneering experiments and studies had already laid the foundation for important areas of formalist poetics."

2. Kiril Taranovski, *Ruski dvodelni ritmovi I-II*, Posebna izdanje No.

217, Otdelenje literature i jezika No. 5 (Beograd: Srpska akademija nauka, 1953), p. 353.

3. *Vvedenie v metriku*, Voprosy poetiki No. 6 (Leningrad: Academia, 1925).

4. "Ob odnom voprose ritma," *Apollon* 11 (1910): 52-60.

5. Viktor Zhirmunsky, "Formprobleme in der russischen Literaturwissenschaft," *Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie* 1 (1925): 130.

6. Taranovski, *Ruski dvodelni . . .*, and Boris Tomashevsky, *O stikhe* (Leningrad: Priboy, 1929).

7. See Tables 2, 3, 4 from Taranovski, *Ruski dvodelni . . .*

8. Tomashevsky, *O stikhe*, p. 95.

9. A. Bely, "Princip formy v estetike," *Zolotoe runo* 11-12 (1906): 88-96.

10. Ewa M. Thompson, *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 14.

11. Boris Eichenbaum, "Teoriya 'formalnogo metoda,'" in *Literatura: Teoriya, kritika, polemika* (Leningrad: Priboy, 1927), pp. 119, 120.

12. Tomashevsky, *O stikhe*, p. 326.

13. These include one review in *Gorn* 1 (1918): 83-85; one article on prose rhythm, "O khudozhestvennoy proze," *Gorn* 2-3 (1919): 49-55; and two on poetics, "O stikhakh Aleksandrovskogo," *Gorn* 1 (1918): 79-81; "O ritme," *Gorn* 5 (1920): 47-54.

14. Those articles which did appear on Andreev, Blok and Khodasevich are of an aesthetic-philosophical nature and do not belong in the corpus of Bely's works on aspects of literary form.

15. Viktor Zhirmunsky, "Po povodu knigi 'Ritm kak dialektika': Otvet Andreyu Belomu," *Zvezda* 8 (1929): 203-8.

16. In addition to the work of Taranovski already cited see his *Ruski četvorostopni jamb u prvim dvema decenijama XX veka* (Beograd: Južnoslovenski filolog, 1955-1956) and "Chetyryokhstopny yamb Andrey Belogo," *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics* 10 (1966): 127-47. James Bailey has continued the work of Bely and Taranovski in "The Evolution and Structure of the Russian Iambic Pentameter from 1880-1922," *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics* 16 (1973): 119-46.