

ANDREJ BELYJ'S "THE MAGIC OF WORDS" AND *THE SILVER DOVE*

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Andrej Belyj, poet, prosaist, theoretician, and literary critic, is often hailed as the "Father of Russian Formalism" for his pioneering studies in versification and poetic rhythm found in *Symbolism* (*Simvolizm*, 1910). Little attention, however, has been directed to his almost equally acute interest in formal devices of prose. For Belyj, the basic unit of prose was the word, and his fascination with words is evident in all genres and during all periods of his creative life. His first experiments in literature, *Symphonies* (*Simfonija 2-aja, dramatičeskaja*, 1902 and *Severnaja simfonija 1-aja, geroičeskaja*, 1904), were attempts using the sound element of words in poetic prose to imitate musical compositions.¹ In his later work, *Glossalolia: A Poem on Sound* (*Glossalolija: Poëma o zvuke*, 1922), Belyj explored the curious relationship between the sounds and meanings of words on the basis of etymology, eurythmy, and onomatopoeia. Belyj's final contribution to literary scholarship was in his own words a dictionary of style, *Gogol's Craftmanship* (*Masterstvo Gogolja*, 1934). Belyj's finest and most enduring achievements in verbal manipulation are found in his novels. The best known of these is *Petersburg* (*Peterburg*, 1916) in which the author's mastery of the word medium is a major element in the novel's success. The key to understanding Belyj's prose technique, however, is to be found in the author's first conventional novel, *The Silver Dove* (*Serebrjanyj golub'*, 1909),² which is less well known, but which for the study of Belyj's development as a prose writer, is equally important.

The writing of *The Silver Dove* coincided with Belyj's initial interest in the actual study of formal devices in both prose and poetry. On the one hand, he was assembling and interpreting the data on poetic rhythm to be published in *Symbolism*; at the same time he offered his comments on prose style in his article, "Gogol," published in honor of the one-hundredth anniversary of the writer's birth.³ In a letter to R. V. Ivanov-Razumnik, Belyj reviewed his own literary career and noted that the period beginning in 1909 was a time when "instead of 'The Theory of knowledge' I was interested in — 'The Problem of the word' (rhythm, Potebnja, philosophy of language)."⁴

The Silver Dove thus marked a crucial point in the transition from the musically oriented *Symphonies* to the later novels so markedly dependent upon Rudolf Steiner's theory of eurythmy. Because it is the most conventional of Belyj's novels, *The Silver Dove* lends itself more readily to an analysis of the author's use of words.

As Kiril Taranovskij has shown, there is a clear relationship between Belyj's theoretical studies and his poetry.⁵ The same is true of Belyj's prose. The philosophical foundation for the word experiments in *The Silver Dove* is contained in the article, "The Magic of Words" ("Magija slov"), also written in 1909.⁶ In this article Belyj claims that the word is a necessary condition for the existence of man and the very essence of mankind. In Belyj's metaphysical system there is a distinct separation between the external world of objects or phenomena and the internal world of experience or perception, yet the one can not exist without the other. In order to reconcile the two, man relies on words — sounds which unite the "world" and the "I":

If words did not exist, the world would not exist. My "I" isolated from the environment does not exist at all; the world isolated from me also does not exist; "I" and the "world" arise only in the process of combining them in sound. (*Simvolizm*, 429-30.)

A word is the name given to an object as it is perceived by an individual; by this process of naming, man affirms the very existence of the object and comes to know and thereby subjugate the world of objects to himself. In Kantian terms, Belyj joins the phenomenal and noumenal worlds to arrive at reality, and this reality exists only in words.

Just as words ensure the existence of the individual, they also constitute the "quintessence" of mankind. Words are the only means, according to Belyj, of social intercourse. Man communicates through language, and thus words are the foundation of human relations. Through words men exchange the innermost secrets of life — the combination of the world and the individual experience of that world. By means of the constant acquisition of this knowledge and its transmission to others, mankind fulfills its purpose, which is the continuous propagation of life.

Since the goal of mankind is the propagation of life, the aim of language is the creation of "living words." Belyj divides words into three distinct categories: "living word" (*živoe slovo*) or "word-image" (*slovo-obraz*); "word-term" (*slovo-termin*); and "half-image — half-term" (*poluobraz — polutermin*). The first group is characterized by figurative speech in which sound and sense are ideally combined in a single living word — the symbol. By "sense" Belyj means the joining in a single word of both the signification(s) of an object (denotation) and the association(s) called forth by the individual's perception of that object (connotation). The category of "word-terms" consists of words in which a single denotation has become so crystallized that it precludes any new connotations and is

seemingly divorced from its sound. Both groups, according to Belyj, comprise only a small minority of all words in a language, but both are essential to language: "word-terms" are the skeleton or backbone which support the flesh of "living words" (434). The third, and by far the largest, category contains the "ordinary prosaic word — a word which having lost audio and video figurativeness and not yet having become an ideal term is a stinking, decomposing corpse" (436). In order to revitalize these words and raise them to the level of living speech, it is necessary for both the writer and the reader to create new symbols by combining new associations or connotations with existing words while at the same time restoring an awareness of the relationship of sound to the denotation. Belyj concedes that critics have accused writers who manipulate words in such a manner of doing little more than engaging in word games. Rather than dispute their assertion, he eagerly embraces the metaphor:

... let them tell us, that such an exercise is a game; is not a game an exercise in creative work (*tvorčestvo*)? All concrete diversity of forms flow from the game; the game itself is a vital instinct (*žiznennyj instinkt*); in strenuous games one exercises and strengthens muscles; they are needed by the warrior in his meeting with the enemy; in living speech the creative power of the spirit is exercised and strengthened; it is needed at the moments of dangers threatening mankind. (434-35.)

While some may feel that word games are "aimless," to Belyj they are "full of meaning: the combination of words, irrespective of their denotation (*logičeskij smysl*), is the means by which man defends himself against the pressure of the unknown" (437).

In his article Belyj identifies the problem and outlines the task of writers; in his novel he provides the practical implementation of these theories into his own unique prose style. *The Silver Dove* is the playground in which the metaphor of word games is transformed into reality. The expression "word games" is a particularly apt description of the major stylistic technique employed in the novel. The novel is an exercise book or primer for those who seek to embody words with new combinations of sound and sense. The reader is constantly confronted with examples of word play designed to heighten his consciousness and awareness of the multiformity of words; any former preconception of words as mere carriers of referential or denotational information is eliminated as if by magic. Belyj, the novelist, offers a variety of verbal tricks and sleights-of-hand. These are intended, however, not to conceal the magic of words; rather, the reader is invited into the magician's workshop where Belyj reveals the essence of the conjuror's art so that the reader may penetrate the enclosure in which the deeper secrets of the novel are concealed.

Belyj's first task is to convince the unbelieving reader, who is accustomed to perceive only the signification or denotation in a word, of the intimate connection between the sound and the deeper sense of words. One

of the novel's word games which occurs with great frequency is the use of puns. The author focuses attention on individual words which are related to a single root and are similar in sound: "Ne budem pominat' prošloe: čto bylo — prošlo" ("We won't mention the past: what's been — has passed," II, 182).⁷ In this sentence the reader cannot help but recognize the word *prošloe* as being derived from *prošlo* — a recognition achieved by exploiting the similarity in sound. A more subtle example of this juxtaposition of related words introduces greater complexity into the game: "Vot i sudite, kakoj èto graždanin: nu, posmotrite že na ètogo graždanina, obsudite ego graždanstvo: ne graždanstvo, a poddanstvo. Baronessin poddannyy on i dovol'no ob ètom" (I, 147; "Here then judge what sort of citizen this is: well, look at this citizen, consider his citizenship: it's not citizenship, but subjection. He is the Baroness's subject and enough about this"). In this sentence the reader progresses from *graždanin*, "citizen," to *graždanstvo*, "citizenship," to *poddanstvo* which also means "citizenship": (but is here translated as "subjection") to *poddannyy*, "subject"; one is likewise struck by the alternation of *sudit*, "judge," and *obsudit*, "consider" or "discuss" in which the convergence in sound does not fully correspond to the variation in the denotations. In contrast to the above pairs in which the sound is related to meaning because of derivation, Belyj presents several pairs of words in which sound similarity is fortuitous and unrelated to the signification of the individual words. Some examples are "proletarij i est' tot, kto, značit, proletit po vsem punktam, tois' vyletel v trubu" (I, 26), "My-de sami s usami" (I, 32), and "Ljudi stepennye proživajut v Celebeeve: vo-pervyx, Ivan Stepanov" (I, 32). The problems for the translator of Belyj are both obvious and formidable here. Any literal English translation obscures the sound level of *proletarij*, "proletarian," and *proletet*, "fly by," and *vyletet*, "fly out," but which also means to "smash" or "go bankrupt" in the expression *vyletet* v trubu. Equally frustrating is to find substitutions for *sami*, "ourselves," and *usami*, "moustaches," or *stepennyj*, "staid," and *Stepanov*, the surname "Stepanov." This deceptive duality in puns is paralleled by several tautologies of the type *tait'* tajnu, "conceal a secret," and *šutku šutit'*, "play a trick," in which the sound and signification are related to a single root. In contrast to these is the phrase *dušu dušit*, "suffocate the soul," in which both words sound alike and derive from a single root, but in which the denotations have diverged so as to be unrelated.

Belyj's bag of tricks is not confined to puns easily recognized because the elements are present in a single phrase. At one point in the novel Belyj delights in the interplay of *čaj*, "tea," *čajnik*, "teapot" and *čajnaja*, "tearoom": the irony is revealed when a character pours vodka rather than tea from his teapot in a tearoom. Other puzzles demand greater concentration: a close look at the phrase *legendarnyy general*, "legendary general," uncovers an anagram, "general" being contained in the word "legendary."

Onomastics also plays a role in the toponyms of the novel, *Celebevo* and *Lixov*, the obvious references of which Belyj takes care to point out to the unsuspecting reader: "uže ona v mestax, svjatyx, celebnyx — celebeevskix" (II, 54) and *lixie ljudi* (II, 226). For the more adventurous Belyj provides a fill-in-the-blanks contest: *otr. . .* (II, 235). Here the reader must recall that the speaker, Luka Silyc, whose walls are *otravleny bolezn'ju* (II, 40), has been actually poisoned by his wife. His final utterance *otr* is an attempt not to invoke his wife's maiden name, *Otrigan'eva*, as the text indicates, but to reveal that he has been poisoned (*otravili*), the solution found in italics (II, 61).⁸ Other elements of Belyj's prose designed to amuse the reader (or drive him to despair) are dialectical peculiarities such as *akan'e* and the replacement of *g* by *x* and such words as *skubent*, "student," and *sicilist*, "socialist." Most demanding of these are the utterances of General Čižikov who suffers from a speech defect and is unable to pronounce *l* or *r*, resulting in such sentences as "Vsjudju v akgestnosti ag'jajnye bezpogjadki: b'jagopojučno gi u vas?" (I, 190 for "Vsjudu v okrestnosti agrarnye besporjadki: blagopolučno li u vas?" and "Goubi pojavilis', goubi. . . Sekta goubej: ispgavnik mne govouj, budto sekta èta mističeskaja i vmeste s tem gevojjujcionnaja — goubi!" (I, 195) for "Golubi pojavilis', golubi. . . Sekta golubej: ispravnik mne govovil, budto sekta èta mističeskaja i vmeste s tem revoljujcionnaja — golubi!"

Several conclusions can be drawn concerning the purpose of these word games, the samples here of which are by no means complete. One obvious result of the intentional complexity in prose style is to force the reader to proceed more slowly. Indeed, at a later stage in his literary career Belyj asserted that criticism was "the art of slow reading."⁹ The reader is compelled to examine words more carefully as he becomes aware of the various manipulations in style embodied in the text. Thus the reader assumes the role of co-creator of the literary work as he attempts to solve the author's puzzles. The problems, solutions, and hints provided by Belyj in the body of the work all amount to a correspondence course on how to read a Belian novel. These games, however, which are important in themselves to the extent that they provide mental "exercise," do not represent the ultimate group of words. Because they concentrate primarily on the connection or reunification of sound with signification, these words constitute only an intermediary or preparatory stage. They do, nonetheless, condition the reader to discover the central leitmotif of the novel, *golub'*, a word which by virtue of the multiplicity of meanings deriving from the union of sound, significations, and associations becomes a "living word."

Although *Serebrjanyj golub'* is commonly rendered in English by the title *The Silver Dove*, any translation of the word *golub'* fails to convey adequately the series of meanings with which it is linked in the novel. The accepted English variants, "dove" or "pigeon," only serve to hint at the curious alternation between the poetic and the prosaic, or the heavenly and

the mundane. One Russian language dictionary defines the word as "a bird with grayish-blue or white plumage and a large crop."¹⁰ Neither definition accounts for the manifold and complex associations evoked by the word *golub'* on the levels of sound, sense, and symbol. As sound, *golub'* is not only closely related to *goluboj*, "pale blue," but is in fact the etymological source for the color epithet. On the level of sense or meaning, *golub'* is only the beginning of a list of inhabitants in Belyj's aviary. In addition, the role of *golub'* as symbol is evident to anyone familiar with traditional Christian symbolism in which the dove represents the Holy Spirit, *Svjatoj Dux*, and this spirit, *dux*, becomes the third major motif of the novel. Belyj succeeds in uniting with a single word colors, birds, and spirit — all three of which constitute the predominant themes of *The Silver Dove*.

The aspect of color is introduced in the opening paragraph of the novel by reference to *goluboj pokoj*, "blue peace," and *sinjaja bezdna*, "blue abyss" (I, 9).¹¹ The connection between *golub'* and *goluboj* is stated explicitly in describing the vestments used in the sacred or sacrilegious rituals of the Dove sect: "kusok ogromnyj golubogo šelka, s na nem našim čeloveč'im serdcem bisernym golubem" ("a huge piece of blue silk, with a human heart sewn on it in the form of a beaded dove"; I, 102). While on the one hand *goluboj* enhances and multiplies the sound and sense associations of the word *golub'*, the color epithet also becomes a key element in the elaborate color symbolism of the novel. The aforementioned *goluboj pokoj* and *sinjaja bezdna* are intangibles characteristic of the ethereal or ideal concepts described by the color blue. In contrast to the blue is a series of concrete images accompanied by the color red. Belyj underlines the importance and distinction of the two in the following manner: "i uže net ni d i t i, ni krasnogo, ob'jatogo plamenem šara: sverxu — goluboe nebo" ("and there was no longer either the [Dove]child, or the red sphere [earth] enveloped in flames: above — the blue sky"; II, 155). Having exhausted the potential of the word *goluboj*, Belyj turns his attention to the word *krasnyj*, "red." There is a seemingly endless array of red objects: shirts, kerchiefs, apostles, devils, barons, etc. Once again the author intends to prevent any assignment of a single denotation or referential meaning to the word. Red is thus associated with a rich symbolism of fertility — the *krasnyj petux*, "red cock," on Matrena's tablecloth — and this same *krasnyj petux* is a figurative expression for "fire" or "arson" which the leaders of the Dove sect plot in the *krasnyj ugol* which in turn becomes red in the light of sunset.¹² The association of the color red with fire is further exemplified in the character of *Ivan Ogon'*, "Ivan the Fire," who has a red face with red eyes and red beard.

Just as *goluboj* is used to develop an ever-expanding set of verbal associations, so does *golub'* increase one's perception of the magical world of words. The duality present in the rendering of the word as either "dove" or "pigeon" parallels variant readings for other words related to *golub'* on

the levels of sound and sense. Thus *golubjatnja* is both a "pigeonhouse" and the nickname of *Anna Golubjatnja*, "Anna the Dovecote," who is responsible for its upkeep; this same pigeonhouse is owned by Luka Silyc, the *golubjatnik*, "pigeon-fancier" or "pigeon-hawk" who covets Anna. Ironically, this "pigeon-fancier" is also the victim of the *Golubi*, "Doves," who gather covertly at his home for religious services and are ultimately responsible for his poisoning and death. The *golub'* also relates to several words of endearment contained in the work: *golubčik* and *golubuška*, "little dove." Considered only on the basis of denotation, the pigeon-dove is only one of the attractions in Belyj's well-stocked aviary, in which can be found over twenty species of feathered creatures, beginning with the *striži*, "martins," mentioned in the first paragraph of the novel. An analysis of the bird symbolism is far too complex to cover in any detail here, but several curious references to birds should be cited. The sentence, "Gogoleŋ vystupal rastoropnyj lavočnik" (II, 203), translates into English as "The efficient shopkeeper strutted about." The phrase *vystupat' gogolem*, "strut about" derives from the basic signification of *gogol'*, "golden-eye bird," but the capitalization achieved by placing the word *Gogol'* in initial position in the sentence also results in the inclusion of the name of the famous Russian writer in a novel which has been considered a continuation of the Gogolian tradition in Russian literature.¹³ Another fascinating bird is the *sinica*, "tomtit," related to the color epithet *sinij*; interestingly, the derivation of *sinica* from *sinij* is an exact reversal of the process by which *goluboj* is derived from *golub'*.¹⁴

The final function of the word *golub'* is to act on the level of symbols, where the dove is a symbolic representation of the spirit or *dux*.¹⁵ As we have previously seen, the new word *dux* becomes in turn a source of new verbal associations; in this case *duša*, "soul," and several words concerned with air or the lack thereof such as *vozdux*, "air," and *dušnyj*, "stifling," or *dušit'*, "suffocate," are all related to the original *dux* by similarities in sound. The duality of all of these expressions is carefully revealed by Belyj to the reader. Thus the *dux* is cited in connection with the Holy Spirit and as the incarnation of the false spirit of the Dove sect when the Doves gather on *Duxov den'*, "Holy Spirit Day" or "Whit Monday." The word *duša* also shares more than a single denotation: it can refer either to man's eternal soul or to the designation in Russia for serfs. Indeed, possible misinterpretation of the sense of this word was one objection raised against the title of Gogol's famous novel, *Mertvyje duši* (*Dead Souls*). Both *dux* and *duša* are further interrelated with a third group of words, as highlighted in the following passage: "odnim nadyšalis' by duxom, odnoju dušoju by stali: dux že edin rizoju svoeju zemlju odel" (I, 77). As an acceptable translation, "they would breathe a single breath, they would become one spirit: the one spirit clothed the earth with its halo," fails to indicate the subtle interaction between the

Russian components of the sentence: *nadyšat'sja*, *dux*, and *duša*. Other word combinations utilized by Belyj include the juxtaposition of *Duxov den'* which is so *dušnyj*, "stifling," as to *dušu dušit'*, "suffocate the soul." The above mentioned forms are really only an introduction to the numerous other words related to *dux* on the basis of sound or sense, for example: *duxovnyj*, *duxota*, *vzdux*, *vzduxnut'*, *dixanie*, *dyšat'*. The regularity with which such words occur is a convincing demonstration for the reader of the multiplicity of levels of meaning in any given word.

In *The Silver Dove* Belyj successfully meets the challenge issued in "The Magic of Words." On the basis of a single word, *golub'*, he creates new bonds connecting sound, sense, and symbol, and thus raises a whole series of words to the level of "living speech." Just as the *golub'* combines in itself the sound of the color *blue*, the image of the *pigeon* or the *dove*, and the symbol of the *spirit*, so does *blue* stimulate further associations with other colors. The *pigeon* and the *dove* similarly join the flock of other birds, while the *spirit* separates into the sacred third person of the Trinity and the sacrilegious god of the Dove sect. In addition to his individual achievement in the novel of breathing new life into words, Belyj organizes a corps of readers who upon completion of the work are equally aware of the enchanting, magical qualities of language. Unfortunately, Belyj's success has been limited to the few persons capable of obtaining and reading the work in the original Russian. The tension of his prose and his verbal gymnastics have proven with one exception to be translators' nightmares.¹⁶ Meanwhile, for those who know Russian "The Magic of Words" is a game that anyone can play, and for readers, critics, and scholars of Belyj it is an essential one to be mastered if we are to understand fully the essence of his art.

NOTES

- 1 Gerald Janecek, "Literature as Music: Symphonic Form in Andrei Belyj's *Fourth Symphony*," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 8 (1974), 502, notes that in the Fourth Symphony: "He [Belyj] intends to approximate symphonic musical structure in a verbal medium." Janecek also comments that the other symphonies "employ essentially the same compositional elements. . ." (501).
- 2 Andrej Belyj, *Serebrjanyj Golub'*, intr. Anton Hönic (Slavische Propyläen, 38; Munich; Wilhelm Fink, 1967). The novel was originally serialized in *Vesy*, 3, 4, 6, 7, 10/11, 12 (1909) and reprinted in 1910, 1917, and 1922, the last reprinted in the Slavische Propyläen series.
- 3 Andrej Belyj, "Gogol'," *Vesy*, 4 (1909), 69-83. Although as we have mentioned, Belyj's interest in words spans his entire career, it is only in 1909 that he begins a methodical study and analysis of form. See Andrej Belyj, *Meždu dnuh revoljucij* (1934; rpt. Russian Studies Series, 60; Chicago: Russian Language Specialties, 1966), 352, 364.

- 4 A letter dated 1 March 1927 reprinted by Georges Nivat in *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*, 15 (1974), 64, 65.
- 5 Kiril Taranovskij, "Četyrextopnyj jamb Andreja Belogo," *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics*, 10 (1966), 127-47.
- 6 Andrej Belyj, "Magja slov," *Sinvolizm* (1910, rpt. Slavische Propyläen, 62; Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1969), 429-48. Belyj notes that the article was written in 1909 (618).
- 7 *Serebrianyi Golub* is divided into two parts, each of which is paginated separately in the 1922 version; therefore, the parenthetical citations refer first to the part, "Kas'!" and then to the page. All translations are my own because of the unreliability of the English version, Andrej Biely, *The Silver Dove*, tr. George Reavey (New York: Grove Press, 1974).
- 8 This technique of placing the clue in italics is duplicated by Vladimir Nabokov in the novel *Lolita*. For a more complete explanation see Carl R. Proffer, *Keys to Lolita* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), 70, 71.
- 9 Andrej Belyj, review of *Energija* by F. Gladkov, *Novyj Mir*, 4 (1933), 274.
- 10 S. I. Ožegov, *Slovar' Russkogo Jazyka*, 4th ed. (M.: Gos. izd. inostrannyx i nacional'nyx slovarnej, 1960), 133.
- 11 Although *goluboj* and *sinij* express different shades of blue in Russian, they are not differentiated in Belyj's color symbolism. See Andrej Belyj, *Glossalofija: Poëma o zvjke* (Berlin: Epoxa, 1922), 127.
- 12 Before the revolution *krasnyj ugol* identified the place of honor in a home in which one or more icons could be found. Thus Belyj's usage is ironic; the sacrilegious conspirators meet in a sacred corner. Apropos the color *red*, it is interesting to note the association of this color with *Martena*, the mother-to-be of the Dove Child, as opposed to traditional Christian symbolism which depicts the Virgin Mary in blue.
- 13 For a more complete discussion of the role of Gogol' and of the critical reaction to the novel see my article, "Belyj's *Serebrianyi Golub* 'Gogol' in Guleva," *Russian Language Journal*, 30 (1976), 79-88.
- 14 Max Vasmer, *Etimologičeskij slovar' russkogo jazyka*, tr. and additions O. N. Trubačev (4 vols; M.: Progress, 1964-73), I, 432; III, 625.
- 15 The representation of the Holy Spirit in the image of the Dove can be found in the Gospel of Saint Luke (3:22): "I Dux Svyatoj nišel na Nego v telesnom vide, kak golub' . . ." In addition to its appearance in this novel the identification of the Spirit with the dove can be found in Belyj's poem "Golub'!" written in 1918.
- 16 The exception to the rule is the fine translation of *Kotik Letaev* by Gerald Janacek (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1971).