ANDREJ BELYJ’S REMINISCENCES OF RUDOLF STEINER: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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Critics and literary historians have long recognized the enormous significance of Rudolf Steiner in the life and works of Andrej Belyj. The nature of that influence, on the other hand, has been a source of constant and often contradictory reevaluation. Thus a welcome addition to the controversy is the opinion of Belyj himself contained in a volume of memoirs translated from the Russian by Swetlana Geier entitled *Verwandeln des Lebens: Erinnerungen an Rudolf Steiner*. The full import of this work becomes apparent seen against the background of what has been previously known and written on the subject of Belyj and Steiner.

Until the publication of this book, Belyj’s own references to Steiner have been brief and random. In *Simvolizm* we find cited the French translation of Steiner’s *Das Christentum als mystisches Tatsache und die Mysterien des Altertums*. In the collection of critical articles, *Arabeski*, we find mention of “the powerful theosophical mind of Rudolf Steiner.” A more complete account of Belyj’s earliest contacts with Steiner’s work is contained in a letter to Aleksandr Blok dated 1/14 of May 1912.

Belyj along with Asja Turgeneva first came face-to-face with Steiner in Cologne in May of 1912. Arriving from Brussels specifically for the purpose of meeting Steiner, Belyj and Asja were admitted to a closed lecture and after an impassioned letter (still unpublished) by Belyj to Marie von Sivers, the Russian companion and future wife of Steiner, Belyj and Asja were granted an audience with the Doctor. Following the meeting the course of Belyj’s life changed and for the next two years he first followed, as was the custom, the Doctor from city to city. During this time, in October 1913, he underwent “the most significant experiences of my life.” Later he participated in the building of the first Johannesgebäude at Dornach, Switzerland, which would become the center of the Anthroposophical movement. Some of the events of this period are recounted in Belyj’s article, “Iz vospominaniy.” In addition, many have attempted to find fact amid the fiction of Belyj’s novel, *Zapiski čudaka*, which is primarily an account of the hero’s departure from Dornach and return to Russia in 1916. One can follow the intellectual influence of Steiner on Belyj in such works as *Rudolf Steiner i Gете v mirvozrenii sovremenosti* (1917), *Na perevode: Krisis žizni, Krisis mysli, Krisis kultury* (1918-1920), *O smysle poznanija* (1922) and *Glossolalia* (1922).

After five years in Russia Belyj again departs for the West in 1921 hoping for a reunion with Asja, who had remained in Dornach, and with the Doctor. Both confrontations end in apparent failure, but Belyj is uncharacteristically silent about these meetings. He does note in *Zapiski čudaka* “I saw Nelli recently, she had changed.” In the Afterword to the same work written in September 1922 he writes of “the terrible sickness which I had from 1913 to 1916.” In a letter written in 1927 to Ivanov-Razumnik Belyj explains that a healing process had begun in 1923 through the intercession of Klavdija Nikolaevna (who would become his second wife): “in March 1923 the Doctor clarifies for me ‘everything’ which had seemed unclear.” In the same letter Belyj mentions that from October 1926 until January 1927 he had written a rough draft of *Vospominanija o Stejnere*. Looking for other references to Steiner, critics often identify the horrible Doctor Donner of the Moscow novels as a caricature of Steiner. Belyj’s own final statement on the subject of Steiner comes in a deposition of July 1, 1931 in which he “refutes the slander” imputed to the activity of Rudolf Steiner.

The only other first hand account of what transpired between Belyj and Steiner is contained in the writings of Anna Alekseevna Bugaeva-Turgeneva. In an article published in *Mosty* Asja attempts to refute the assertions of Fedor Stepan that Belyj used the figure of Doctor Donner as a means of expressing “malice and hatred” for Steiner. Asja describes in detail her early years with Belyj, their first encounter in 1905 and the 1909 meeting soon after which they would form an inseparable union leading to their eventual marriage and common life until 1916. Asja corrects inaccuracies in Konstantin Močul’skij’s account of Belyj’s first meeting with Steiner, which took place in Cologne in May 1912. Asja is less specific about her own role in the years following their separation of 1916 and is silent on the issue of why no reconciliation took place. At best she hints at the troubled state of Belyj’s unbalanced mind. She does, however, document Steiner’s intentional avoidance of Belyj in Berlin during 1922, but notes a later meeting in Stuttgart: “After the conversation with Steiner in Stuttgart, before his departure for Russia, Bugaev told my sister, that that which the Doctor had given to him in parting would be of help to him for the rest of his life.” Asja tries to
dismiss the figure of Doctor Donner, explaining it not as a caricature, but as the direct opposite of Steiner. She points to Belyj’s published memoirs as containing subtle hints of his admiration for Steiner, and claims the lack of explicitness is due to Soviet restrictions. In her own reminiscences of Steiner, Asja covers some of the same ground, but concentrates mainly on the years spent in Dornach with the Doctor.14

Certainly the most colorful, and the most often quoted of all second hand descriptions of the Belyj and Steiner relationship are provided by two of Belyj’s acquaintances in Berlin in 1922-1923. Marina Cvetaeva recalls Belyj’s confrontation with Asja and her new companion (Kusikov), a meeting which Belyj considered to be pure “revenge” on the part of Asja. Cvetaeva also recalls Belyj’s vain and frantic search for a misplaced manuscript, the loss of which his disturbed mind attributes to the Doctor: “Isn’t this the doing—of the Doctor? Didn’t he command my manuscript to disappear from there: to fall from the chair and pass through the floor? So that I can never write verse anymore, because now—of course, I won’t write even a single line. You don’t know this fellow. He is the Devil.... There is only one Devil—Doctor Steiner.”15

Vladislav Xodasevič lays the blame for Belyj’s “hysterics” directly at the door of Steiner. He describes only a brief exchange of words in Berlin in 1922. He recalls that thereafter Belyj became the laughing stock of Berlin with his peculiar “foxtrot” and utterances. “At every occasion he returned with his thoughts to Steiner.” Once riding the subway he exclaimed: “I would like to go to Dornach and scream at Dr. Steiner, like the little street urchins scream: ‘Herr Doctor, Sie sind ein alter Affe!”16

Early Russian critics were quick to find signs of Steiner’s influence on Belyj. Ivanov–Razumnik points to the role of anthroposophy in the first version of Peterburg written in 1913, but sees this role diminishing in the 1922 version.17 Viktor Šklovskij seemingly contradicts himself stating that Belyj’s ornamental prose, which was a result of an attempt to provide an “anthroposophical multiplaned prose” eventually eclipsed those anthroposophical elements: “In the struggle between anthroposophy and the device, which had been summoned by it, the device devoured anthroposophy.”18 Šklovskij also sees a diminishing role of anthroposophy in Belyj’s writings of the 1920s: “Anthroposophy is not to be heard in the most recent work of Andrej Belyj. Anthroposophy has played its role, it created a new relationship to the image and its own unique dual plane of an artistic work.” But Šklovskij goes on to note the tragedy: “Belyj’s attempts to live parallel to anthroposophy will remain his own individual misfortune.”19

In addition to his many inaccuracies Konstantin Močul’skij has a similar negative opinion of Steiner and his teachings. Much of Močul’skij’s problem can be traced to his almost exclusive reliance upon the fictional Zapiski rudeika. His condemnation of Steiner, no doubt influenced by his own Orthodox beliefs, is unrestrained: “The indescribable ‘event’ which could have become for Belyj a path of salvation and sanctity, led him to a terrible catastrophe, almost to destruction. His mystical experience was distorted and perverted by the anthroposophical heresy and by occultist mists. It was not Christ, the God-man who appeared to him, but his tempting double, invented by Doctor Steiner.”20 Močul’skij also propagates the idea that Belyj distanced himself from the Doctor after his departure for the West in 1921. He concludes, mostly on the basis of the accounts of Cvetaeva and Xodasevič, that: “The anthroposophical period of life—the idyll with Asja in Dornach and the building of the Johannesgebäude—ended in grandiose collapse.”21 Like Ivanov–Razumnik Močul’skij echoes the opinion that between the 1913 and 1922 versions of Peterburg “Belyj was transformed from a fervent pupil of Steiner into his sworn enemy.”22 Steiner is also identified as the ignominious Dr. Donner and the “dammned devil” in Belyj’s “Posle razluk.”

Similar sentiments are expressed by Soviet critics. V. Orlov writes that “Anthroposophy sucked Belyj in like a swamp and destroyed the artist in him.”23 T. Xmel’nickaja, noting the author’s disenchantment with Anthroposophy, suggests that “Belyj sees in Steiner ‘the evil spirit’.”24 As recently as 1975, in spite of Asja’s own comments to the contrary, Aleksandr Baxrax gives the impression that Belyj experiences in Berlin “an attack of hate against anthroposophy” which results in a complete reversal of his earlier convictions.25

The negative reaction of these critics is somewhat balanced by Johannes Holthausen in an article which illustrates that Belyj did not abandon the anthroposophical groundwork of his novel Peterburg. He also takes exception with his predecessors claiming that “Belyj was not willing to simply toss the ‘Dornach’ period of his life (1912-1916) on the rubbish heap.”26 The most favorable opinion of Belyj and Steiner is contained in a brief commentary written by L. Murav’ev to two letters from Berdjaev to Belyj. Murav’ev notes the false impressions of others, but does point to Belyj’s disturbed state of mind. The passage is little known but valuable because in light of Belyj’s manuscript on Steiner it appears that Murav’ev has provided an essentially accurate portrayal, notwithstanding Stepin’s violent reaction.

Having learned that Belyj was preparing to come to Germany, Rudolf Steiner for his part did everything possible to facilitate his entry into Germany. After several meetings with A. Belyj in Berlin, Rudolf Steiner saw that it would be better to postpone for a while a conversation with him and set an appointment for him in Stuttgart. The meeting in Stuttgart was a rather lengthy one. After the meeting Andrej Belyj said that he could now...
It is interesting that this note was viciously attacked by Fedor Stepun. This reply of Stepin's then served as the stimulus for Asja Turgeneva to break her silence on the subject, a silence she had maintained for forty years.

A less glowing, but still positive picture of Steiner emerges in the biography of Belyj written by John Elsworth. Elsworth points to Belyj's disappointment in Berlin, but also to the restoration of faith after the Stuttgart meeting in 1923 from which Belyj retained "a different impression, much more in the manner of his former view of the Doctor." Elsworth also successfully deals with the image of Dr. Donner:

It is certain that on some occasions in Berlin Belyj made some very derogatory remarks about Steiner, but it does not follow from this personal estrangement, however violent its nature, that Belyj abandoned his belief in Steiner's ideas or in his role as a spiritual leader. In adapting the material of his life for use in his novels, however, Belyj was under no compulsion to present a balanced version of his relations with others. In first volume of Moscow he incorporated a version of his sufferings during the two years in Berlin... Part of this suffering was the estrangement from Steiner, during which the image of Dr. Donner took over from the image of the Doctor in Dornach.

In the most recent pronouncements on Steiner and Belyj Gerald Janecek has traced the influence of Steiner in "Anthroposophy in Kotik Letaev" (Orbis Litterarum, XXIX (1974), 245-67). Certainly the most complete account is to be found in an unpublished dissertation of over 1000 pages by Frederic Kozlik "L'influence de l'anthroposophie sur l'oeuvre de l'Andrei Belyj" (University of Paris, 1979).

What is most surprising, given the interest and attention paid to Belyj and Steiner, is the total silence of Slavic scholars which has greeted the appearance of Belyj's memoirs on the subject. Originally published in 1975 and already in its second printing (1977) Verwandeln des Lebens has not been reviewed in a single Western scholarly journal. Belyj scholars have been either unaware or inexplicably close-lipped about the manuscript. Two factors have probably been at work. The book appeared through the Zbinden Verlag, a Swiss publishing house with a good working relationship with the International Anthroposophical Society. Thus while the book received widespread acceptance and admiration among Anthroposophists, it was never presented for reviewing to Slavic journals. The silence of literary scholars and Belyj specialists stands in stark contrast to the numerous reviews and translated excerpts of the book to be found in the Anthroposophical presses. A second factor is, of course, language. Belyj's Russian manuscript has yet to be reprinted. The work has appeared only in German, in a masterful translation by Swetlana Geier. Unfortunately the German language edition limits the audience even among Slavic scholars. What few excerpts have appeared in English will serve only to whet the appetite, rather than satisfy the hunger.

The story of this extraordinary manuscript will perhaps never be fully known. The only mention of such a work is Belyj's own previously cited reference to "Reminiscences of Steiner" in his letter to Ivanov-Razumnik. Klavdia Nikolaevna Bugaeva in a bibliographical article mentions early plans for a fourth volume of memoirs to cover the years 1912 to 1916 as part of Belyj's scheme in 1922-1923. Nowhere is there mention of the Steiner memoirs, although she must have been aware of their existence. The 503 typewritten pages with corrections by hand of the author are dated 4 January 1929 with the notation (in 12 days). The "Instead of an Afterword" is dated 20 January 1929. It was not until 1972 that the manuscript made its way to the West from the Soviet Union where it had been precisely guarded and preserved. Swetlana Geier, a well-known translator of Russian works into German including Belyj's Vospominanija o Bloke, was contacted first to verify the authenticity of the manuscript, and then contracted to do the translation. The lengthy work finally appeared in 1975 as Verwandeln des Lebens a title chosen by the translator from Belyj's own use of the Symbolist phrase "tvorchestvo žizni."

Reminiscences of Rudolf Steiner contain Belyj's long awaited answer and rebuttal to the questions of Stepin who searches in vain for a "living image" of Steiner in the author's writings. Belyj is unequivocal in his claim that Rudolf Steiner was the determining factor in his artistic and personal life after their first meeting. As could be expected of a writer of his talent, Belyj captures and transmits the "aura" which surrounded his "spiritual teacher" and "spiritual leader." In scene after scene Belyj presents the reader with Rudolf Steiner, the man, in all of his manifestations: as lecturer, actor, director, confidant, spiritual advisor. The picture of Steiner which emerges is both a human and humane one. For Belyj Steiner was nothing less than the "main unexpected happiness of my life... even in the 'pains' which he unwittingly caused me." After years of separation Belyj wishes to "bear witness: I recall the Doctor with joyful clarity: not a single shadow, not a single spot, compels one to doubt him." These are strong words; there is no attempt to disguise his love and admiration for Doctor Steiner. The unforgettable and positive portrayal of Steiner has caused nothing less
than a complete reversal of positions by Anthroposophists, who have abandoned their doubts about Belyj. As one reviewer notes: "He was ours. He is ours." The Anthroposophists are equally enthusiastic about the sketches of those close to Steiner during the formative years of their movement—Christian Morgenstern, Dr. Carl Unger, Michael Bauer, and Marie Steiner-von Sivers. The book, however, is not merely a eulogy to everyone and everything. Belyj criticizes certain negative aspects of the Anthroposophical Society and the "Dornachers" whose history he traces. His claim that many strayed from the original teachings of the Doctor also provides a partial explanation of why Dornach had become for him a "Dorn" (German for "thorn").

Of greater importance for Belyj scholars is the fact that much of the book concerns Belyj and clarifies his movements between 1912 and 1916. The book is a gold mine of information for those seeking insight into questions which arise from Belyj's years with Steiner. There was, of course, the problem of language. What German Belyj did know was certainly insufficient to follow the complicated lectures of Steiner. Belyj recalls language classes and special sessions devoted to vocabulary acquisition. In addition, the scripts of Steiner's "Mystery Dramas" were read to him beforehand and translated so that he could follow the performances. Belyj also notes with some amusement that everyone must have "forgotten" to check the status of Asja and him. He had had no intention to become a member of the movement on his first visit to Steiner. Yet because they had been invited by the Doctor to his series of lectures in Munich for July 1912, they were regularly admitted to closed "esoteric" lectures for the remainder of the year with no one questioning their membership. Belyj also claims that the "secret agents" described by him in Zapiski cudaka were actually modeled on the suspicious characters who kept an eye on Dornach after the outbreak of World War I. Of great importance to scholars is the additional information supplied by Belyj which will help to corroborate and provide a more accurate picture of those lectures which he attended and of those works of Steiner which were particularly meaningful for him.

The series of lectures at Christiana in October 1913 and the meeting with Steiner in Stuttgart in 1923, the two most important events in Belyj's relations to Steiner, are both described in detail. From 1-6 October 1913 Belyj attends the series entitled "Aus der Akasha Forschung: Das fünfte Evangelium." In these few lectures Belyj sees a new Steiner and he experiences a mystical and religious conversion: "For the first time I understood myself; and for the first time I understood Jesus. . . . Jesus is a Friend, whom I had forgotten, but who had not forgotten me." Along with the acceptance of Christ (coming coincidentally in Belyj's thirty-third year) there is a corresponding re-evaluation of his prior life, especially of his early troubled childhood. The experience is one of rebirth.

. . . until now you have seen yourself born of Nikolai Bugaev and Aleksandra Egorova, on the Arbat in 1880, but in all of the peripetia of growing up you failed to perceive that everything was changing; for example: you remember how you first addressed your mother: "Mama!" You hear the reply: "Son!" And you fail to perceive that you are not a "son" but a "step-son!" Suddenly it is revealed "33" years after your birth, in October 1913, the "step" is added, changing everything,—immediately, in all of the pictures of your memories; they come off like a shroud: the face of the whole appears, in it is the revolution of a biography: not a son, but a—faster child, I was not born in Moscow: I was never born: I always was. . . in the countenance of the "I."

And this countenance is Jesus!

It is because of this understanding of the "Fifth Gospel" that Belyj recognizes his closeness to Steiner, to such a degree that he sees himself as the adopted son of Steiner. The extraordinary effect of these lectures eclipses all of Steiner's previous work and becomes for Belyj "our first encounter."

The other, hitherto unexplored, aspect of Belyj's life is the period between 1921 and 1923 which he spent in the West. Belyj speaks of the "most difficult moments of my life (1921-1922) when, it seemed, I had lost myself, the way, my friends, 'to the right', 'to the left', when the Anthroposophists were swearing at me (in Berlin, in Stuttgart), when the émigrés were swearing, the 'Soviets' were swearing, they were swearing at me in Dornach and in Moscow." He also speaks of times in 1922 when he "couldn't understand the Doctor. While he did participate in a Hochschulwoche in Berlin in 1922, it was not until March of 1923 that their decisive meeting in Stuttgart took place.

Our last meeting took place in the following situation; in front of me a—throng; and behind me a—throng; the car had already arrived (the Doctor was leaving Stuttgart for Dornach); when he came out to me and lead me into the room, we sat down at a little table; his face—was drawn; it's difficult to listen to a constant turnover of people, each come with what for him is most important; his replies sounded concretely, hitting the target, but they unfolded only in the course of years; all of that came to me in our last encounter; having turned his exhausted countenance with the kindly eagle nose to me, he squinted with an indescribable smile: "Time is short: try to tell me briefly everything in your heart!" The twenty minute conversation lives, like a many-boured one—not because I was able to tell everything, but because he replied to everything bypassing the words: in the last years his reply has come in a series of life's situations.

Only he could reply that way; one had to look through the word to glimpse the thought of the months, the years; and to look beyond the thought to glimpse the sum total of experiences; to discern—my will,—which was unclear to me at that time. Thus he replied to me; he gave replies to my current thoughts; how he must have looked at me? How concrete must have been his relationship to me?

This concreteness surpassed even the force of my love for him.
Of emotions—not a sound; he had demonstrated them to me before the conversation—at the sessions in Stuttgart (1923); in the way that he looked, and in the way that he himself had caught me by the sleeve, with the brochure, in the hall, he jerked at me to turn around, he set the meeting (a time and date), wrote it down in his little book; and he was so, so overwhelmed with hundreds of meetings in the barely see-through cracks of free time: between lectures; and he need not have caught me, I should have caught him; his love was especially evident in that he asked me to tell him everything that lay on my soul; and much lay there, even words... against him; he rumbled in his bellowing light bass, clarifying to me, how I had been incorrect: and I felt: an atmosphere of warmth and heat came from him to me: it was as if it covered me. . .

Thank you, thank you, thank you for everything—everything—everything—

The time to part arrived; and I—it’s somewhat embarrassing to admit this: I kissed his hand. This irrepressible gesture, involuntary, was an expression of filial love.

He understood this: he was not surprised; after all in parting with me in 1916, just as involuntarily: he had embraced, kissed, and made the sign of the cross over me, and this—was a gesture of paternal love.

Belyj does not provide an explanation for this outpouring of his soul in 1928-1929. He does, however, note prior attempts and failures at a portrayal of Steiner. He also admits that it was first in the years 1926-1928 that he could finally come to grips with the totality of the Dornach years and the figure of Rudolf Steiner, who had passed away in 1925. The haste with which the manuscript was prepared speaks of the urgency experienced by Belyj to leave some permanent record of this experience. The safekeeping of the manuscript for over 45 years attests to the value placed on the memoirs and memory of Andrej Belyj and Rudolf Steiner.

Swetlana Geier has provided the world with its first glimpse of these valuable memoirs. Her translation is accurate, faithful to Belyj, and surprisingly readable—a testament to her own craft. Because of the nature of the Russian original Frau Geier was called upon to decipher and to edit all sorts of misspellings, typographical errors, mistakes in punctuation and even grammar. The temptation to improve Belyj has been successfully avoided. What alterations and omissions do exist are minimal and in no way affect the essence of the text. What readers of Belyj’s Russian may miss is the “chaotic” nature of his prose style, an element which is submerged in the strict rules governing German syntax. Likewise Belyj’s frequent use of capitalization to indicate italics disappears in a language in which all nouns must be capitalized.

An important addition by the translator is the fine set of notes to the work. Frau Geier identifies with capsule biographies the main figures of the Anthroposophical movement and is meticulous in transforming Belyj’s Russian transcription of names back into the correct Latin spelling. To Frau Geier also goes the credit for determining beyond any doubt that this manuscript is the work of Andrej Belyj.

This book is a major find and its translation a major contribution to scholarship of the twentieth century. It will be of interest to all those who follow intellectual history and should be especially welcome to specialists of Belyj. Reminiscences of Rudolf Steiner will certainly not provide all the answers nor even put a definitive end to the controversy surrounding the figures of Rudolf Steiner and Andrej Belyj. The book will, however, ensure that Belyj scholars can no longer ignore the teachings of Steiner nor confine his influence to works written before Belyj’s Berlin crisis. Instead we will have to begin again to seek the answers to Belyj’s prose and poetry there where Belyj sought them: in the figure of Christ as presented to the world by Rudolf Steiner.

NOTES

2 Andrej Belyj, Simvolizm (1910; rpt. 1969, Munich: Wilhelm Fink), 462.
3 Andrej Belyj, Arabeskii (1911; rpt. 1969, Munich: Wilhelm Fink), 286.
4 Aleksandr Blok, Andrej Belyj, Perepiska (M.: Gos. Literaturnyj Muzej, 1940), 293-301.
8 Zapisiki tudaka, II, 235.
10 Belyj, "Letter to Ivanov-Razumnik," 82.
13 Turgeneva, 238.
16 Vladislav Xodasevitch, "Andrej Belyj" in Nekropol' (Paires: YMCA Press, 1976), 89, 90. Xodasevitch was also in possession of a letter fro Belyj to Asya in which he complained that the "Doctor" could have helped arrange a visa to Berlin for Belyj. The letter dated November 11, 1921 was never sent but appears in edited form in "Tri pis'ma Andreja Belgo," Sovremennye zapiski, LV (1934), 256-70.
18 V. Sklovskij, "Andrej Belyj," Russkij sovreennik, II (1924), 232. This article is

19. Šklovskij, 245.
22. Močul'skij, 173.
23. V. Orlov, "Istorija odnoj 'dušbby-vraždy',' in Peresipsko, ili.

Murav'ev's commentary is dated July, 1961. Murav'ev's conclusion is supported by N. Koševatyj, "Vstreči s Andreev Belym," Grani, XVII (1953), 91-98. Koševatyj recalls Belyj on his return to Russia in 1923 saying: "He [Steiner] was for me personally like my real (rodnoj) father, and the years I spent in Dornach were my second university."
30. The following reviews have appeared: Fritz Götte, "Verwandeln des Lebens,” Das Goetheanum: Wochenschrift fuer Anthroposophie, LV, 2 (11 January 1976), 10-12;

Excerpts of the book have been translated from German into English by Maria St. Goar in Journal for Anthroposophy, XXV (Spring, 1977), 45-58; XXVI (Autumn, 1977), 44-62; XXXVII (Spring, 1978), 27-38; XXVIII (Autumn, 1978), 62-77 (partially translated by Arvia Ege); in The Newsletter of the Anthroposophical Society in America (Spring 1977), 5-8.
33. Götte, in Mitteilungen, 40.