

Ada Steinberg, Words and Music in the Novels of Andrey Bely.

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Andrey Bely (pseudonym of Boris Bugaev, 1880-1934) has recently attracted greater attention in the West with the translation of several of his works into English and the appearance of significant critical studies by American and European scholars. Even the Soviets, who have chosen to overlook the contributions of their "genius-eccentric," have issued new annotated editions of his brilliant novel, *Petersburg*, which has often served as the springboard for comparing Bely to James Joyce and *Ulysses*. As a poet, theoretician, critic, and novelist, Bely explored the limits of Russian language and literature. He was a central figure in Russia's Symbolist movement, laid the foundation for the critical school of Russian Formalism, provided a striking, though highly subjective, portrait of his contemporaries such as Aleksandr Blok and left his enduring mark on Russian literature with his novels.

Ada Steinberg's scholarly analysis focuses on one unifying element of Bely's output, his fascination with the word and its musical possibilities. She presents a comprehensive overview of the integration of theory and practice, music and poetry and sound and sense in his writings. Steinberg's two-part study is well-informed and contains a broad vision of the world of music and literature at the turn of the century and an in-depth treatment of Bely's own works. In Part I, "On the Relationship between Music and Poetry," the author examines the historical connection of the two art forms and then considers Bely's ties to Mallarme and Verlaine and to the music of his time. Part II examines Bely's musical devices, concentrating on his own individual orchestration, then on his use of dissonance and polyphony, and finally on the role of synaesthesia in Bely's critical and creative works.

The origins of Bely's thoughts on music can be found in his 1902 article on the "Forms of Art" in which music is declared the ultimate art. Shortly thereafter he published his own *Symphony*, an attempt to reproduce literarily the sonata form by the development of several recurring themes. Bely's hope was to approximate music through words; his dream was to be the Russian Wagner. The intricacies of Bely's verbal orchestration increased throughout his career even though he abandoned his symphonic experiments. The verbal orchestration of *Petersburg* is, for example, marked by assonance: the sound "u" becomes the thematic center of the novel. From this thematic vowel Bely moves to an ever-expanding world of word associations pre-determined by the starting point. The novel also abounds in alliterative elements of n, l, p, r, s which occur in names and link characters to one another, or characters to objects and states of mind. This generation of associations is based more on sound than sense. As Steinberg notes: "Only by destroying commonly accepted norms of the organization of sound in speech could Bely reproduce the incredible experiments carried out by Wagner in his orchestration." Indeed, Bely wrote in his critical study of Nikolai Gogol about an inverse relationship between form and content which could be applied to his own work. As the attention to form, specifically sound, increased content

receded such that in the later novels the form overwhelmed the content and the message became almost indecipherable.

Steinberg examines two other aspects of Bely's own devotion to the word. The first is dissonance and consonance, the clash or mixture of voices, specifically the ability to capture voices simultaneously and on several planes of meaning. The final section examines Bely's concepts of synaesthesia. Bely was, like his admirer Vladimir Nabokov, an acutely conscious writer. In his work *Glossalolia* Bely created a "poetic" correlation of sounds to colors, emotions and other associations. While the relationships between sounds and colors or sounds and associations varied over the course of his career, there was an ever present reaffirmation of some specific ties between sound and sense.

Bely is one of the most original and important Russian thinkers and writers of the twentieth century and his artistic practice and theory need be made accessible to a broader audience. Steinberg's book explores in detail the music and the word in Bely's prose and is a valuable contribution for Slavic specialists. At the same time, the work can serve as one more puzzle piece in an attempt to explain Bely's significance in Russian for the non-specialist audience. Readers unfamiliar with Russian, however, may find difficulty in following the text where Russian is transliterated but not always translated. They should also note carefully two important points covered briefly, but of general knowledge among Bely scholars. Bely's prose is extraordinarily (some would say excessively) rhythmical and other studies have been devoted to special aspect of his prose. He also relied heavily on Rudolf Steiner's studies in Eurythmy, especially for his *Glossalolia*. One searching for a key to Bely's later novels should begin by examining the writings of Anthroposophy.

Steinberg concludes that "despite his failings, Bely has to be considered a major innovator in the history of the twentieth-century novel." Among those who come to Bely through Steinberg's study, there may be some who find secret successes in the failures.

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