Andrey Bely’s First and Last Encounters with Rudolf Steiner:

Two Letters to Marie von-Sivers

THOMAS R. BEYER, JR.

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

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

A. Bely, Reminiscences of Steiner

Andrey Bely* (the pseudonym of Boris Nikolaevich Bugaev, the famous Russian symbolist poet, novelist and critic) together with his companion and first wife, Assja Turgenieff, met Rudolf Steiner for the first time in May 1912. Assja and Bely later moved to Dornach in 1914 where Assja remained until her death in 1926. Bely returned to Russia in 1916 and because of his Soviet passport was unable to re-enter Switzerland. Instead he travelled to Berlin in 1921 where he and Doctor Steiner exchanged brief greetings. It was not until March of 1923, however, that the two men had a lengthy discussion in Stuttgart. Bely soon returned to Soviet Russia (where he died in 1934); he would never again see Rudolf Steiner.

For many years the nature of Bely’s relationship to Steiner was noted by friends and critics alike. Marina Tsvetaeva’s letter to Rudolf Steiner in 1922 contained the impression that Bely harbored a vendetta toward the Doctor. This mistaken impression, she wrote, “would be countered by Assja herself and in many of Bely’s own Reminiscences of Steiner...” and support to her argument. The appearance of two original documents can serve to correct our knowledge of Bely’s last encounter with Doctor Steiner. They are extracts from one of Bely’s letters to Marie von-Sivers.

Hotel St. Paul—across from the Cathedral—

Esteemed Maria Yakolevna,

Don’t be surprised by my letters. I have known you for a long time through acquaintances (A.P. Mintslov, O. Khrisforova), and I know of your other friends, Ellis. Therefore I am writing to you with the surprising request to bring to the Doctor our (mine and my wife’s) affection. As you know, I have needed to see and speak with him a year; today that need has become ever greater. While in Brussels, my wife and I would be glad of any information on the whereabouts of the Doctor. Do you have any news from Assja? I shall be the third I received news from Assja, and I hope that the Doctor would be in Germany...at the eighth. And so we have come to a decision.

We have to depart on the morning train. I am anxious not to disturb the Doctor, and through you that the Doctor should not disturb his wife and me today, and if that is not possible, tomorrow. At the same time we would like to see the Doctor’s lectures today and...
First and Last Encounters

André Bely to Marie von-Sivers

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

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

A. Bely, Reminiscences of Steiner

in 1934); he would never again see Rudolf Steiner before his death in 1925.

For many years the nature of Bely’s relationship to Steiner was questioned by friends and critics alike. Marina Tsvetaeva and Vladislav Khodasevich, two Russian poets close to Bely in 1922, have left in their own memoirs of Berlin the impression that Bely harbored a deep bitterness, even antagonism toward the Doctor. This mistaken impression, which unfortunately has found its way into much of the critical and biographical writings about Bely, has been countered by Assja herself and in more recent years with the publication of Bely’s own Reminiscences of Steiner and Why I Became a Symbolist, and Klaudia Nikolaevna Vasilieva’s own recollections of the period. The appearance of two original documents connected with Bely’s crucial first and last encounter with Doctor Steiner can shed additional light upon the darkness of our ignorance.

Hotel St. Paul—Cologne
across from the Cathedral and Train Station

Cologne, _______ 191___

Esteemed Maria Yakolevna,

Don’t be surprised by my letter.

I have known you for a long time through our mutual acquaintances (A.P. Mintslova, M.V. Voloshina, K.P. Khristoforova); and I know of you through letters from my friend, Ellis. Therefore I am addressing myself directly to you with the surprising request that you convey to the Doctor our (mine and my wife’s) urgent desire to see him. I have needed to see and speak with the Doctor for about a year; today that need has become an absolute necessity. While in Brussels, my wife and I asked throughout Moscow for information on the whereabouts of the Doctor. On the third I received news from A.S. Petrovsky in Moscow that the Doctor would be in Cologne from the sixth to the eighth. And so we have come here from Brussels.

We have to depart on the morning of the eighth. Since I am anxious not to disturb the Doctor, I am requesting through you that the Doctor set an appointment for my wife and me today, and if that is impossible, then for tomorrow. At the same time we ask permission to attend the Doctor’s lectures today and tomorrow.

Andrey Bely (pronounced B-yé-a-lee) differs in transliterations. More than one variety appears in line with the choices made by the compilers cited here.
Once again forgive me for the inconvenience: but, in truth, my wife and I must learn from the Doctor something upon which our actions in the near future depends.

Only a real necessity to speak with the Doctor has compelled us to come.

Accept my assurances of highest esteem.

Andrey Bely (Boris Bugaev)


Esteemed Maria Yakolevna,

Excuse me for taking up your time with this letter. But it is very important for me to see you. I do not know how long my stay here will last; but before my departure for Russia I need your advice on the cultural work with which I will be inescapably connected in Russia. Of course, —I have some personal questions—but they are not the main thing; I have been in Germany for 15 months already and have not had an opportunity to see you and Doctor Steiner for a long time; I think the necessity to see you and speak with you has for me not only a subjective sense, but an objective one as well.

K.N. Vasilieva has conveyed to me a portion of her conversation with you, concerning your words about me, with bitterness, almost with an internal groan I said to myself: “A Misunderstanding, a Misunderstanding!” Rumors, slander, personal opinions—are one thing; the objective facts are something different. If I had been an enemy of Anthroposophy I would not have written what I am writing; judge me by the facts of my public activity, and not on the basis of “slander” about me. Yes, I am bitter and it has not been easy for me; and I have borne much bitterness these fifteen months; I had the impression that in the course of my five years of work in Russia I had been beyond the threshold of the things you said to me, but they “left” me. You made an impression that compels me to confess—perhaps a personal that compels me to confess, but something objective (my words certainly soon end up).

K.N. Vasilieva will be kind enough to let me know tomorrow, Monday, for a return visit, my assurances of complete respect.

Boris Bugaev

—Translated by Louis Meier
Andrey Bely (Boris Bugaev)

St. Paul, across from the Cathedra!

My dear friend,

I am sorry for the inconvenience; but, in any case, I will learn from the Doctor something in the near future depends.

The talk with the Doctor has compelled me to accept my assurances of highest esteem.

Andrey Bely (Boris Bugaev)

St. Paul, across from the Cathedra!

My dear friend,

I have been traveling; I did not have time to write you. I do not know what you may have received of late; but before my departure I gave you advice on the cultural work we have been connected in Russia. Of course, there were questions—but they are not the least important. I have been in Germany for 15 months already, and I hope to see you and Doctor Turgenev again; I think the necessity to see you is not only a subjective sense, but a real fact.

I wrote you a portion of her letter concerning your work in the Arts.

With an internal groan I said to myself, "Misunderstood!"

The opinions—what is the difference? If I had been an agent, I would not have written what I did. No, the facts of my public activity, "under" about me. Yes, I am bitter for me; and I have borne much prejudice; I had the impression that the years of work in Russia I had

...been beyond the threshold of the Society (I didn't leave, but they "left" me). You may ask how this subjective impression was created—if you wish. But it is not the "personal" that compels me to ask for a meeting with you, but something objective (my work in Russia, where I will certainly soon end up).

Mrs. Vasilevna will be kind enough to drop in on you tomorrow, Monday, for a reply at four o'clock. Accept my assurances of complete respect.

Boris Bugaev. Sunday, 11 March

—Translated by Thomas R. Beyer, Jr.
...for the inconvenience: but, in time, I will learn from the Doctor something of which the near future depends.

Andrey Bely (Boris Bugaev)

St. Paul, across from the Cathedral

Vienna,

...I shall spend your time with this letter. But I have no time to see you. I do not know when we will see each other again. But before my departure from Vienna, I will pay a visit to the cultural work with which I have been connected in Russia. Of course, there are many questions—but they are not the main problem. Germany for 15 months already has been my home. I think the necessity to see you and Doctor Bely is an opportunity to see you clearly. My heart is not only a subjective sense, it is also a feeling.

I have been conveyed to me a portion of her correspondence concerning your words about me. With an internal groan I said to myself, "Oh, misunderstanding, a Misunderstanding!"

Personal opinions—those are one thing; the facts are another. If I had been an actual resident of Vienna, I would not have written what I did. The facts of my public activity, my "Journey" about me. Yes, I am bitter about you, but I have borne much. In those years of work in Russia I had

been beyond the threshold of the Society (I didn’t leave, but they “left” me). You may ask how this subjective impression was created—if you wish. But it is not the “personal” that compels me to ask for a meeting with you, but something objective (my work in Russia, where I will certainly soon end up).

K.N. Vasilieva will be kind enough to drop in on you tomorrow, Monday, for a reply at four o’clock. Accept my assurances of complete respect.

Boris Bugaev, Sunday, 11 March

—Translated by Thomas R. Beyer, Jr.
NOTES


2 I wish to express my gratitude to Herr Walter Kugler of the Rudolf Steiner Nachlassverwaltung in Dornach for making these letters available to me. German translations appeared in Beiträge zur Rudolf Steiner Gesamtausgabe: Andrey Belyj und Rudolf Steiner Briefe und Dokumente, 89/90 (Dornach: Michaeli 1985). They appear here in English for the first time.

3 The letter can be dated May 6, 1912.

4 Bely uses the formal Russian first name and patronymic to refer to Marie von-Sivers, secretary and later wife of Rudolf Steiner. She had spent her youth in St. Petersburg and served as the interpreter for Bely’s first meeting with the Doctor.

5 Anna Rudolfovna Mintslova, Margarita Vasilievna Voloshina, Kleopatra P. Khristoforova. Ellis was the pseudonym of Lev Kobylynsky. For a detailed description see the fine notes to the German translations.

6 Aleksey Sergeevich Petrovsky.

7 Bely arrived in Berlin on Saturday November 19 and went immediately to hear Steiner lecture. Steiner was unaware of Bely’s arrival and greeted him with the polite German, “Wie geht es Ihnen?” Bely obviously expected the more friendly Russian embrace and was evidently upset by the apparent coldness.


10 The result of this second letter was the famous reconciliation of Steiner and Bely which took place on Uhlandshoehe, March 30, 1923.

BOOK REVIEWS & NEWS

ANDRE BELY, THE MAJOR SYMBOLIST

SELECTED ESSAYS OF ANDREI BELY

Andrey Bely (1880-1934) was a Russian writer and philosopher. He met Rudolf Steiner in 1912, despite personal frictions with Steiner before his death. These two lucid, deeply thought-out minds, Bely’s philosophy and on Anthroposophy, and to Kant, in response to “the crisis in his own aesthetic experience and a desire to create a metaphysics or spiritual world view which he then found fulfilled and elevated in anthroposophy is then a rare case of simultaneous invention. As Alexandrov writes, “The passages that anticipate an uncanny world view in anthroposophy.” Or, as Bely’s fellow students put it: “If one knew of Steiner only in Germany, one would think that A. Bely himself invented the things and in the same way.” In Bely’s time when I became an anthroposophist, the Steiner gave in 1914 seemed to him an inspiration for his own essay, “The Emblems of Sympathies,” through Petersburg, than Chinaman. Symbolism, in Bely’s sense of cognition and perception, “a radical overcoming Cartesian-Kantian dualism, transcendent, the cosmos, and thereby to the cosmic reality, Symbolism is by definition, and unveils a new stage in cosmic-humans between French literary symbolism and Bely’s the fundamental one of orientation: he sought to overcome the duality of subject and object, “horizontal symbolism” Bely’s was “cosmic-symbolism” other-worldly, transcendent realm as a result, was its ground and raison d’etre...