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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 1966. 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

*The spelling of both names of Andrey Bely (pronounced B-yéa-lee) differs widely in various references and translations. More than one variety appears in this *Journal* issue alone, in accordance with the choices made by the compilers and reviewers of Bely's works featured here.

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For many years the nature of Bely's relationship by friends and critics alike. Marina Tsvetayeva, two Russian poets close to Bely in 1922 in Berlin the impression that Bely harbored toward the Doctor. This mistaken impression its way into much of the critical and biographical been countered by Assja herself and in more of Bely's own *Reminiscences of Steiner* and Klavdia Nikolaevna Vasilieva's own appearance of two original documents concerning last encounter with Doctor Steiner can shed of our ignorance.²

Hotel St. Paul—
across from the Cathedral

Esteemed Maria Yakolevna,⁴

Don't be surprised by my letter

I have known you for a long acquaintances (A.P. Mintslova, Khristoforova); and I know of my friend, Ellis.⁵ Therefore I am to you with the surprising request Doctor our (mine and my wife) I have needed to see and speak a year; today that need has been While in Brussels, my wife and I for information on the whereabouts the third I received news from A that the Doctor would be in C the eighth. And so we have come

We have to depart on the morning I am anxious not to disturb the through you that the Doctor saw wife and me today, and if that tomorrow. At the same time with the Doctor's lectures today and

at and Last Encounters dolf Steiner:

o 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.

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Andrey Bely (pronounced B-yéa-lee) differs in translations. More than one variety appears in the text with the choices made by the compilers noted here.

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 Klavdia Nikolaevna Vasilieva's own recollections of the period.¹ 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.²

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

Cologne, _____ 191____³

Esteemed Maria Yakolevna,⁴

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.⁵ 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. Petrovsky⁶ 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.

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)

P.S. Our address. Hotel St. Paul, across from the Cathedral. Room #28.

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;⁷ 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:⁸ 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;⁹ 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



Andrey Bely

been beyond the threshold of... but they "*left*" me). You must have had the impression was created—if you had a "*personal*" that compels me to... but something *objective* (my work will certainly soon end up).

K.N. Vasilieva will be kind enough to tell you tomorrow, Monday, for a return of my assurances of complete re-

Boris Bugaev

—Translator

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Andrey Bely (Boris Bugaev)

St. Paul, across from the Catho-

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Andrey Bely, portrait by Assya Turgenev

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 March¹⁰

—Translated by Thomas R. Beyer, Jr.

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NOTES

- 1 For a more complete discussion of the controversy see Thomas R. Beyer, Jr., "Andrey Belyj's *Reminiscences of Rudolf Steiner*: A Review Article," *Slavic and East European Journal*, XXV, 4(1981), 76-86.
- 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 *Beitraege 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 Kobylinsky. 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.
- 8 See Klavdia Vasilieva/Bugaeva, "Erinnerungen einer Russin an Rudolf Steiner," trans. by Elisabeth Ohlmann-Pusirewsky, *Mitteilungen aus der Anthroposophischen Arbeit in Deutschland*, 134-137 (Stuttgart: 1980-1982).
- 9 Bely had published a lengthy article on "Die Anthroposophie und Russland" in *Die Drei* in 1922. An English translation by Linda Maloney, "Anthroposophy and Russia," appeared in 1983 through St. George Publications. Bely had also expressed his sorrow over the burning of the Goetheanum in the Russian language Berlin newspaper *Dni*. The article has been reprinted in *The Andrey Belyj Society Newsletter*, III (1984), 18-27.
- 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 SY
dimir E. Alexandrov. Harvard Univer

SELECTED ESSAYS OF ANDRI
Steven Cassedy. University of Califor

Andre Bely (1880-1934) was a Russian philosopher. He met Rudolf Steiner in 1914 despite personal frictions with Steiner prior to his death. These two lucid, deeply thoughtful Bely's philosophy and on Anthroposophy. Bely's response to Kant, in response to "the crisis in his own aesthetic experience and a desire for Vladimir Soloviev (and, to a lesser degree, for the created a metaphysics or spiritual world which he then found fulfilled and elaborated in anthroposophy is then a rare case of sincere invention. As Alexandrov writes in passages that anticipate to an uncanny degree in anthroposophy." Or, as Bely's fellow philosopher put it: "If one knew of Steiner only through thought that A. Bely himself invented these things and in the same way." In Bely's words: "When I became an anthroposophist, Steiner's teachings gave in 1914 seemed to him and his own essay, "The Emblematics of the

Alexandrov's book traces Bely's creative development from "Symphonies," through *Petersburg*, to *Chinaman*. Symbolism, in Bely's sense, is a way of cognition and perception, "a radical departure from coming Cartesian-Kantian dualism, rejecting the transcendent, the cosmos, and thereby revealing the cosmic reality, Symbolism is by definition a new stage and unveils a new stage in cosmic-humanity between French literary symbolism and the fundamental one of orientation: the search for a sought to overcome the duality of surface and depth. "horizontal symbolism" Bely's was "other-worldly, transcendent realm as a deed, was its ground and *raison d'être*."