

Reviews

Olga Yu. Soboleva, *The Silver Mask: Harlequinade in the Symbolist Poetry of Blok and Belyi* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), 298 pp.

Russian symbolism is a topic about which a great deal has been written, yet it remains a subject which has by no means been exhausted. Since the late 1980s a great deal of new relevant information has come to light in Russia, and texts continue to be published or reissued. At the level of interpretation, scholars have begun to re-evaluate the contributions of minor or previously controversial figures, and to incorporate these re-evaluations into a revised view of the movement as a whole. Soboleva's book is a major contribution to the ongoing re-assessment. Although her principal focus is the poetry of Blok and Bely, she in fact goes beyond a concern simply with individual writers to examine 'the deeper inner changes that brought forth the radical shift in the mode of thinking' (17) which led to the symbolist revolution in the Russian arts. The particular way in which Soboleva chooses to pursue this objective is through a detailed study of the motif of the harlequinade.

The notion of theatricality, of which harlequinade was an extreme and iconic form, was central to the Russian version of symbolism because it placed the dialectical opposition of 'self' and 'other', fundamental to the symbolist project, in the most direct light. As Soboleva notes, harlequinade or *commedia dell'arte* was a very minor theme in Russian literature before the symbolist period, but was imported from the western European art nouveau tradition. With due recognition of the native Russian forms, it was quickly assimilated into the theatrical repertoire of directors like Meyerhold and Evreinov as well as into the poetic vocabulary of the 'new art', so that it became a leading metaphor for exploring the disjuncture between appearance and reality, and for questioning the inevitability of the prevailing social and political order. Soboleva's first chapter documents the extent to which harlequinade themes had come to dominate the avant-garde cultural space by the turn of the twentieth century. Soboleva situates the symbolists' understanding of harlequinade within the context of a contemporary crisis of values which led to the privileging of artificiality and the adoption of the image of the mask, with its inherent instability, as a symbol of the inability of the

modernist artist-seer ultimately to grasp the glimpsed vision of a higher cosmic reality. She then discusses at length the broader theme of self and other in Russian symbolist aesthetics, contrasting the view of an all embracing self expressed in the works of the early symbolists Dobroliubov, Konevskoi, Bal'mont and Sologub, with the motif of a dialogue between self and other as co-existing, but separate entities, which is characteristic of the younger generation of symbolists, and most particularly Blok and Bely.

The first, more general, half of the book, while of course directly relevant to Soboleva's more particular theme, at the same time provides a lucid and very valuable conspectus of the essence of the Russian symbolist endeavour. In the remaining chapters, Soboleva focuses much more specifically on Blok's and Bely's poetry. Surveying the imagery of harlequinade in terms of the opposition of self and other, Я and Он, Pierrot and Harlequin, in the two poets' verse, Soboleva draws attention to the theme of universal correspondences, and of unity within diversity which they epitomize. If for Blok 'the dialectical co-presence of *self* and *other*' is reflected in a view of the harlequin as 'the voice of the "higher reality"' (154), then for Bely the two are artificially separated so that the harlequin is above all a demonic and potentially destructive figure. Through detailed analyses of key poems – the complete texts of which are included in Russian and in English translation in an appendix – Soboleva shows that peculiarities of syntax and expression tend to reinforce the same distinctions, as do the melodic patterns caused by the alternations of stressed vowels within key poems. In both poets repetition and substitution at all levels are key strategies for the construction of meaning.

In presenting this nuanced, well-researched and elegantly written book, Soboleva has both provided a valuable and succinct overview of Russian Symbolist poetry as a whole, and provided new and original insights into its two most prominent and influential practitioners. Her close readings and analysis of Bely's work in particular, given the relatively little sustained criticism of his verse which has so far appeared, are especially important. Soboleva's book is a very welcome addition to the critical interpretation of Russian symbolism.

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