

# INTRODUCTION

**F**rom the balcony of his family's second-floor apartment on the Arbat in Moscow, Andrei Bely would watch the hues of the sky change at sunset. As he described it in a poem from 1902,

I looked into the distance—a spider web stretched  
into the blue  
with gold and radiant threads . . .<sup>1</sup>

These were instances of a world transformed—the everyday became magical, the ordinary became mythical. Peering out into the city, Bely saw its familiar reality altered into an aestheticized vision teeming with mystery and beauty. Decades later, in his memoirs, he would mark these moments as the beginning of his life as an artist. For Bely, the turn of the century was when his “life came into harmony with his worldview.”<sup>2</sup> This was the period when Bely was embarking on his literary career by adopting a new, Symbolist, persona and composing the first of his “Symphonies.” These significant early prose works reflected the core tenets of his literary worldview. Their centaurs and giants, princesses and knights, enchanters and beasts, philosophers and adventurers were not part of a distant realm, but could be found right there in Moscow. Bely

saw them from that balcony, bathed in gold and azure, no less present than the seemingly unremarkable passersby below. His writings from the early years of the twentieth century are glimpses into his own personal mythology and artistic maturation. Yet they are also paradigms of modernist literature. They show the idealism and exuberance that greeted this new era and the awe and wonder that came when writers embraced such transformative powers. Published in relatively quick succession, Bely's four *Symphonies* (*Dramatic Symphony* [1902], *Northern Symphony* [1904], *The Return* [1905], and *A Goblet of Blizzards* [1908]) demonstrate a reformed vision of the world that reflected the combination of optimism and fear that accompanied the new century. They fused the banality of life, the intimacy of love, and the magic of the extraordinary. Bely's vision of the world was captured by the emerging literary and artistic movement of Russian Symbolism.

## RUSSIAN SYMBOLISM

Symbolism resides at the initiating moment of literary and cultural modernism in Russia. Despite its relatively short life span of barely more than three productive decades, the modernist movement in Russian literature and culture effected a sea change in Russia's aesthetic output. Between the 1890s and the 1920s, the dominance of the realist novel subsided and Russia experienced a renewal of artistic experimentation that would come to be known as the Silver Age of literature.<sup>3</sup> While modernism had been percolating in the west since the 1850s, it arrived rather abruptly and belatedly in Russian at the very end of the century. By the late 1880s, a sense of stagnation regarding the state of Russian literature had set in and modernism appeared in part as a reaction to the aesthetic crisis of the decline of realism and the novel. The Russian modernists were aware of and in contact with their European counterparts, and Russian

Symbolism shared many of the key traits of its western manifestations: a tendency toward nonlinear or fragmented narratives; the impulse to shock the reading public through language and imagery; the prevalence of subjective perspectives intended to mirror modern psychological states. While the Russian movement's individual aesthetic components align with many of the theoretical and scholarly descriptions of European modernism, Russian modernism was marked by a pervasive preference for the ideal over the real. This often manifested itself in a *mélange* of literary, religious, philosophical, and metaphysical elements that revealed a distinctly eschatological undercurrent to nearly all aspects of modernist creation.<sup>4</sup> There is hardly a better example of these themes than Bely's *Symphonies*. Russian modernism was concerned with the transformative capacity of the word, and for a brief moment in Russia, it appeared that art's power to change and even save the world would triumph. This short-lived utopianism would leave an indelible impression on all of twentieth-century Russian literature and culture. It comes through in Bely's *Symphonies* in the tension between an imaginative restructuring of modern life and the utterly mundane people and events they describe.

Symbolism arrived in Russia in a bold moment of self-designation and proclamation. Three slim volumes of poetry titled simply *Russian Symbolists* were published in 1894–1895 and caught the attention of several prominent literary critics, who very publicly panned this new movement.<sup>5</sup> This cultural development was a formidable element of Bely's early life, one that would soon prompt the student Borya Bugaev to be reborn as the Symbolist poet Andrei Bely, "Andrew the White." The force behind these first collections was the poet and editor Valery Bryusov, who would serve as an early mentor for Bely. Six years Bryusov's junior, Bely inhabited the same geographical and cultural milieu: they both attended the prestigious Polivanov Gymnasium and Moscow University. The poetry

that Bryusov wrote and published at this time resonated with the aesthetic and philosophical leanings of a growing coterie of Russian writers and established a niche that Bely could slip into several years later, with Bryusov's help and encouragement. Bryusov offered the Russian reader poems that elicited a musicality and ephemerality that marked a disjunction with the real, phenomenal world and showed modernism's fundamental differences in both form and content from the nineteenth-century Russian novel. By the end of the century, the loosely unified ranks of the Russian Symbolists had swelled to include such strong poets as Zinaida Gippius, whose powerful sense of otherworldliness would help guide the movement's epistemological considerations; Konstantin Balmont, who wrote mythically charged impressionistic verse; Fyodor Sologub, who added a sense of magic and decadence to Symbolist poetics; and Dmitri Merezhkovsky, a poet of keen theoretical and aesthetic sensibilities. All of these figures are present in Bely's *Symphonies* by name or allusion.

When the next generation of Symbolists (including Bely, Alexander Blok, and Vyacheslav Ivanov) appeared at the turn of the century, the movement had reached the apogee of its talent and would dominate the literary sphere for the rest of the decade. The essence of Symbolism can be gleaned from Ivanov's well-known formulation: moving from the real to the more real.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it should be added that the Symbolist worldview did not entail abandoning the real, but rather the simultaneous experience of the phenomenal and the noumenal. Russian Symbolism strove to access knowledge and experience beyond the confines of the perceivable world and was thus drawn to mysticism and gnosticism (the theology and poetry of Vladimir Solovyov were extremely influential).<sup>7</sup> With their neo-Romantic tendencies, the Symbolists desired to reinvigo-  
rate a Russian poetic tradition and placed such nineteenth-century figures as Fyodor Tyutchev and Afanasy Fet, paragons of a subtle

and complex Romanticism, at the center of their canon. By privileging the aesthetic, they sought to achieve a reevaluation of Russian literature and to elevate the transformative power of poetic language into art's primary function. In addition to such a dramatic shift in the purview of Russian literature, the Symbolists set a significant precedent for the publication and dissemination of their work. They bypassed the traditional journals of the nineteenth century (in which most of the century's major novels had first appeared in print) and founded their own publishing houses and venues of print.<sup>8</sup> This move would be instrumental for subsequent generations of modernists, who would embrace the capacity to employ the materiality and typography of their publications in the creation of their aesthetic. All of Bely's *Symphonies* were published by Symbolist presses, giving him direct control over crafting their formal and stylistic hybridity. Symbolism—as an art form, a worldview, and an organized literary movement—was at the heart of Bely's life and career from the very moment he was born as a writer.

### ANDREI BELY (1880–1834)

Andrei Bely, meaning “Andrew the White,” came into being at the very turn of the century. Twenty-two-year old Boris Nikolae-vich Bugaev adopted this pseudonym and alter ego in 1902 when preparing his first book, the *Dramatic Symphony*, for publication. This identity emphatically distinguished his persona as a Symbolist writer from that of the student of physics and mathematics—a middle-class Muscovite, son of a renowned mathematics professor. By choosing the path of the modernist artist, Bugaev would occupy a prime position in the creation of a new art and a new consciousness. Over the next three and a half decades, Andrei Bely proved himself a modernist to the core. He experimented with form; he experimented with sound; he experimented with genre. His 1916

novel *Petersburg* is a masterpiece of twentieth-century fiction, and his poetry and theoretical writings have earned him canonical status in Russian literature's Silver Age. Bely's complex understanding of the Symbolist project infused reality with otherworldliness and fueled his ability to merge the realistic and the fantastic. His works are immersed in the ideal while still offering stark reflections of turn-of-the-century life.

At the crux of Bely's writing is a clear expression of the modernist preference for highly subjective revaluations of the surrounding world. He coupled poetry and prose with voluminous theoretical works exploring the philosophical and epistemological roots of the new century's "new art." As a Symbolist, Bely could transform the phenomenal world through myth, magic, and language. The four *Symphonies*, along with his first book of poetry, *Gold in Azure* (1904), superimpose explorations of modern psychological, philosophical, and aesthetic states onto Bely's own intimate world and biography. For Bely, Symbolism was a way of life, a stance he maintained even as Symbolism's dominance in Russian culture waned and gave way to other expressions of the avant-garde in the 1910s. This was when he wrote two major novels—*The Silver Dove* (1909) and *Petersburg*—and consolidated his theoretical writings into three hefty (and, to some, barely readable) volumes. The combination of mysticism and realism, of a deep engagement with issues of language, epistemology, and society, that had originated in the *Symphonies* comes to a culmination in *Petersburg*, a novel first published serially in 1912–1913 but set in the chaos of the revolutionary year 1905, squarely in the middle of the period of the *Symphonies*. *Petersburg* is a strikingly modern work that interweaves elements of a family drama, a psychological thriller, a novel of detection, a political plot, and a love triangle in an unapologetically fragmented narrative.

Bely's career after the 1917 revolution reflected the peripatetic life of the Russian intellectual in the early Soviet years. He lived in Berlin

from 1921 to 1923 but subsequently returned to Russia and spent his final years in the relative isolation of the village of Kuchino, outside Moscow. During this time he produced a number of significant retrospective works, from his *Recollections About Blok* (1922–1923) and his autobiographical narrative poem *The First Encounter* (1921) to a novel drawing on his childhood, *Kotik Letaev* (1922), and culminating with his unfinished memoirs, of which three volumes were published—*On The Border of Two Centuries* (1930), *The Turn of the Century* (1933), and *Between Two Revolutions* (1934)—which present a thorough picture of Russian intellectual life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the end of his long career, Bely had produced some of Russian modernism’s most paradigmatic works as well as some of its most dense and esoteric writings (in the realm of both literature and theory). Despite the breadth and diversity of his literary output, Bely maintained a degree of coherence in his approach to literature and advocacy of a distinctly Symbolist worldview. The title of an essay from 1928 professes this lifelong aesthetic allegiance: “Why I Became a Symbolist and Why I Have Remained One Through All the Phases of My Intellectual and Artistic Development.” In the period when he wrote the *Symphonies*, Bely’s career and identity would come into focus. When he began the *Northern Symphony*, at the very end of 1899, Bely’s Symbolist tendencies were suppressed beneath the uniform of a first-year student in the department of physics and mathematics. By the time he published *A Goblet of Blizzards*, in 1908, he was brazenly at the forefront of Symbolism, one of the most active participants in its literary and theoretical activities. The group that clustered around Bely in these early years, explicitly showcasing their affiliation with myth and fantasy by calling themselves Argonauts, “embodied with great consistency the primary and most characteristic feature of the Symbolist attitude toward reality: to perceive the world as a quasi-artistic phenomenon, to attribute to reality the qualities of a literary text.”<sup>9</sup> That text was the *Symphonies*.

## THE SYMPHONIES

The *Northern Symphony* is a novella-length work of prose (albeit with a distinctly modernist structure) that partakes in the style and imagery of a fairy tale.<sup>10</sup> Yet couched in this seemingly juvenile form is a sophisticated exploration of social interactions and the psychological and emotional aspects of love and loss. The playfulness of these children's characters is often undercut by a foreboding sense of doom, a reflection of the modernists' interest in the apocalyptic. Similar in length and structure, the *Dramatic Symphony* captures the combination of banality and meaning in everyday life. It engages with philosophical and existential questions while also reflecting the nuances of family life in the late Russian imperial period. *The Return (Third Symphony)* is a more straightforward novella that presents the interplay between the transcendental and the real. It skirts the boundary between literature and philosophy and taps into the instability of forms and genres that characterizes modernism. Bely's final *Symphony, A Goblet of Blizzards*, is a mystical love story that further complicates the conventions of realism and narrative cohesion with which the other *Symphonies* had been engaged. It encompasses the wealth of aesthetic, philosophical, and theological themes and texts that contribute to Bely's own worldview and his presentation of Symbolism.

The *Symphonies* showcase Bely's early mastery of a style of writing in Russian that is at times perplexing and evocative, yet always gripping. Bely's relationship to language, style, and form was marked by a desire to innovate and revolutionize Russian literature. The protean quality of his writing can be felt at every level—from book to chapter to paragraph to line to word. This fluidity gives Bely's works the appeal of something surprising, strange, and new. But his novelty also presents a unique set of challenges to the translator. The *Symphonies* are part of Bely's experimentation with genre

and sound. They are fragmentary and yet have a cohesion achieved through a clear narrative progression. Their style varies from prosaic to poetic to musical. Their plot oscillates between the fantastical and the trivial, with a distinct infusion of irony and satire. To sustain these many divergent forces, Bely has imbued his stories with repeated words and phrases (often nonstandard or even neologistic) that function as leitmotifs threading its fragments together. I have preserved these echoes and replicated the odd turns of phrase Bely employs in their creation as much as possible. While treating these as works of prose (which they ultimately are), I have attempted to remain faithful to the visual and aural qualities that give his writing its musicality and structure in order for the English reader to appreciate how these “symphonies” looked and sounded to the readers they first enchanted in the opening decade of the twentieth century.

Readers of the *Symphonies* cannot help but be struck by their strangeness. Vladimir Alexandrov offers a pithy catalog of the myriad ways these works were unlike anything a reader had experienced before:

Their most striking characteristic is fragmentariness: the texts consist of sequences of short paragraphs that are sometimes linked only metaphorically or by means of leitmotifs; narrative points of view change often; symbolic imagery expressing the frequently occult inner experiences of the narrator is intercalated with, and occupies nearly as much space as, the intermittent exposition of setting, plot, and character; and the organizing beliefs and hierarchies of values in the works are hidden, requiring the reader to become involved in deciphering the texts more actively than do most narratives from previous eras.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to being literary works, the *Symphonies* are musical, philosophical, autobiographical, visual, and theurgic compositions

that continuously destabilize all notion of genre and bombard the reader with vaguely familiar allusions and echoes (both internal to the work and drawing on outside elements). Roger Keys has delved deeply into the philosophical and aesthetic contexts of the *Symphonies* and has shown that, even with their seemingly undirected and amorphous forms and plots, these works contain Bely's "perennial theme [of] the whole of his creative career [. . .] the split between the world of matter and the world of spirit, and how it might be overcome."<sup>12</sup> The vision of a world transformed is always lurking at the edges of even the most realistic and biographical moments in the *Symphonies*, and as readers we cannot escape the sensation that a centaur or serpent or mystical eagle may suddenly interrupt our evening walk home. The simultaneity of both this world and the other is the most constant feature of these stories because it was how Bely had come to see reality around him, a reflection of his view from the balcony on the Arbat. Aleksandr Lavrov captures the intimacy of the form that Bely has created: "Bely's arrival at the *Symphonies* was not so much the result of a conscious, teleological search for a new genre as an unpremeditated discovery of an adequate means of self-expression."<sup>13</sup> One of the most frequent words we encounter in the *Symphonies* is "passerby." Bely fixates on the anonymous Muscovites, a city whose population had surpassed one million around the time Bely began writing the *Symphonies*, because he sees in each of these ordinary and unremarkable characters the potential to be mystical, magical, mythical. By casting his transforming gaze over them, he pulls them into his vision, into the world of the *Symphonies*.

The *Northern Symphony* takes place in an exclusively magical and mystical realm. While it is the only one of the *Symphonies* not to be at least partially set in the "real" world, it resonates strongly with a distinctly modernist mood and outlook. It's a family drama, a child's fairy tale, a contemplation of love and loss, an exploration

of faith and doubt, and a close examination of the sinister tendencies of human nature. In conjunction with the experimental structure and form Bely employs and his intentionally perplexing description of the work's genre as a "symphony," this story shows an impressive degree of complexity for its nineteen-year-old author (Bely would turn twenty two months before finishing it). It is here that the reader first encounters some of Bely's innovative literary techniques, most notably his use of line numbers throughout the work. This, along with a tendency for melodically repetitive words and phrases, signals the novelty of a *Symphony* and propels Bely's writing into a liminal space between prose and poetry. The work's simple plot about three generations of rulers—a frightful dead king, his fearful son, and his bold granddaughter—gives Bely license to depict the wild fanciful creatures (giants, centaurs, and fauns), satanic knights, and evil princes who populate the unnamed kingdom and its preternaturally gloomy woods. Its skeletal story of a king too scared to lead and his daughter who braves the unknown to return to her people and save a prince dallying with evil becomes a platform to show dark rituals and landscapes teeming with fairy-tale creatures. Bely excels at immersing the reader in this world and, as Keys puts it, his "deeper purpose was, as ever, a theurgic one. He wished to present a vision of the other world which would be as valid for the reader of this fiction as for the characters and the narrator within it."<sup>14</sup> The *Northern Symphony's* details, its use of color and musical resonance, establish its ideas, emotions, and mood, which themselves serve as a short course in the transformed perspectives emerging at the turn of the century. Alexandrov notes the accumulation of symbols—words and images that vaguely hint at otherworldliness—in the *Northern Symphony* and sees in these Bely's interest in eschatological and Gnostic themes.<sup>15</sup> In this work, Bely introduces the key terms of his Symbolist aesthetic, threads that would run throughout the

*Symphonies* and continue to appear in his prose, poetry, and theoretical writings for the rest of his career.

A year before he wrote the *Northern Symphony*, Bely finished a work that he destroyed (but of which an early draft has survived).<sup>16</sup> This “pre-Symphony” is more overtly celestial than the *Northern Symphony* but sheds light on Bely’s intentions to infuse these works with a sense of their cosmic significance. Such ephemeral notions as timelessness, Eternity, and horror find ready representation in the *Symphonies*, in part a result of young Bely’s obsession with Nietzsche. By putting these concepts at the forefront of his aesthetics and giving them a distinct place in the sphere of the literary, Bely affirms their presence in the lives of his readers. Before the age of twenty, Bely was able to tap into the prevailing currents of the day—its fascination with the Apocalyptic, its fixation on the mystical and darkly spiritual, its search for other realities, and its belief in the transformative vision of the artist. No simple fairy tale, the *Northern Symphony* is a foray into another realm that has the same emotional resonance as our own.

The *Northern Symphony*’s lack of overt verisimilitude is more than compensated for by the inescapable familiarity of the *Dramatic Symphony*. Yet its banality and simplicity belie its novelty and engagement with modernist innovation. It takes place in the streets and drawing rooms of Moscow and is comprised of the miscommunication and misunderstanding experienced by its young protagonists. Emili Metner, who would come to collaborate closely with Bely later in the decade, summarized the story for readers of the Ekaterinoslavl newspaper *The Dneiper Regional*:

A romance (at least symbolic) between the “democrat” (Pavel Yakovlevich Kryuchkov, a young man who is a liberal critic and always elegantly dressed) and “the fairy tale” (a rich and beautiful young woman); a psychological tale about the fate of a

young philosopher who went mad because he understood the infallibility of Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" and who, when he recovered, turned to mysticism; a tragicomic history of the "gold-bearded ascetic"—the mystic Sergei Musatov (the main story line), in whom "certain mystical extremes are ridiculed." The material for the *Dramatic Symphony* is quite rich. It could be called a philosophical and even mystical work; it plays out on the backdrop of an everyday reality that is close at hand, even relevant such that it has popular and polemical notes.<sup>17</sup>

Written during the course of 1901, the *Dramatic Symphony* closely mirrors significant moments in Bely's life. As he embraced his identity as a writer, Bely immersed himself in discussions of Symbolism and Decadence, mysticism and religious philosophy. He turned his gaze to the world around him, and his unvarnished depiction of it dwells on dirty streets, criminals, unpleasant characters, and the overall repetitiveness and boredom of life. But the mundane becomes lofty through the musicality of the work's leitmotifs, the glimmer of the ideal that shows itself in all things. This is his work that most subtly and intimately considers the relationship of this world to the other: Eternity prowls around the rooms and streets; symbolic meaning lurks in every chance encounter and word; hypertrophied images and colors replace their more banal counterparts. In his interrogation of otherworldliness, Bely strikes a balance between irony and earnestness. He demonstrates the absurdity of inscribing meaning onto every word and encounter while also affirming the existence of higher planes of knowledge. Bely has fashioned a semantically dense work that references many of the people, places, and ideas circulating in Moscow in 1901. But the *Dramatic Symphony* transcends such a purely representational relationship to reality by adding a layer of "conceptual meaning," as he describes it in his opening discussion of the work. Consequently, the *Dramatic*

*Symphony* abounds in tension between its various levels of meaning, creating for both readers and characters the sense of a clash between its harmonious and disharmonious elements.<sup>18</sup>

The *Dramatic Symphony's* philosophical framework is the most prominent of those points of connectivity among types of meaning. A few years after writing the *Dramatic Symphony*, Bely characterized Symbolism as a “worldview.” For him, the works of Vladimir Solovyov and Friedrich Nietzsche (both of whom died in 1900) were at the heart of that worldview, and their voices and presence resonate throughout the *Dramatic Symphony*.<sup>19</sup> Solovyov in particular haunts the text. His poetry, philosophy, and theology resonate in practically every character: he rises from the grave and walks around Moscow; the ascetic Musatov takes his writings on the Antichrist overboard (as Solovyov himself observes); he is read and debated in the literary soirees Bely describes with mockery; his poetry is on the lips of characters experiencing joy, sorrow, and ecstasy; and his concept of the Divine Feminine, one of the most powerful ideas driving Bely and his fellow Symbolists' understanding of love, is at the heart of the work's central character—the fairy tale.

Among the many autobiographical elements of the *Dramatic Symphony*, the most striking are the ways Bely incorporated his mystical love for Margarita Morozova into the story. She is his fairy tale, and the letters he wrote to her in 1901–1902, signed only “your knight,” are filled with words, images, and ideas that can be found in nearly the same form in the *Dramatic Symphony* (to the extent that she learned the identity of the letters' author only after reading the book). Morozova was a socialite and hostess, the wife of a wealthy merchant and prominent art collector, whose “decadent house” was the site of literary gatherings that Bely attended. Their friendship would last for decades, and they would partner on founding a publishing house in 1910, but these early letters are more than the vestiges of a youthful infatuation. They offer a clear look into the fluid

relationship between life and art that fueled Bely's writing and the profundity with which Solovyov's notion of the Divine Feminine affected Bely. Solovyov postulated a female counterpart to Christ—Sophia—who was both of this world and of the other, and the Symbolists were quick to adopt this idea in their writing and attempt to incarnate it in their lives. In writing the *Dramatic Symphony*, Bely made no distinction between his real-life outpourings to Morozova on Eternity and mystical love and the fictionalized ideal of the fairy tale. They were “a single text, different generic variations on the theme of ‘life creation’ that would occupy the entirety of the author’s inner life.”<sup>20</sup> As a central tenet of Symbolism, “life creation” conveys a profound belief in the power of art to shape reality and reveal its higher truths. The *Dramatic Symphony* is a paradigmatic example of how exuberantly the Symbolists could assimilate life into their art while also seeing the contours of the more real in every crevice of the world they inhabited.

The concept of otherworldliness is on display at full force in the Third Symphony, *The Return*. Written in 1902, it was part of Bely's sustained engagement with the idea of a literary symphony as a genre-bending vehicle for expressing his aesthetic and philosophical views. *The Return* shows another plane of existence directly in its opening section and presents the reader with the undiluted language and imagery of a world beyond the border of reality. The first part is set in an overtly symbolic and allegorical space (possibly even another planet) populated by a mystical child and old man, sea creatures, the King of the Winds, a bird-man, and an evil sea serpent. It shows a cosmic battle between good and evil that takes place in the noumenal, the realm of signs. When the story switches to the realm of experiences, the phenomenal, we are returned to Bely's Moscow and follow the fairly unremarkable like of Evgeny Khandrikov. His story is tragic and psychologically realistic—he struggles in his profession, his wife dies, he suffers a mental

breakdown, and he dies by suicide. Yet his existence is accompanied by a constant awareness of the looming presence of a higher plane of being, the Symbolist more real. Through dreams, visions, hallucinations, and imagined encounters, he sees glimpses of his other life. The child and other good and evil figures, escaped from that world into his, either help him or destroy him. Living with this awareness of the ephemerality of reality and its connection to the noumenal drives Khandrikov insane.

*The Return* is clearly linked to the first two *Symphonies*. It transports us to a highly aestheticized world, as did the *Northern Symphony*, while also showing how the minutiae of daily life, the essence of the *Dramatic Symphony*, are able to reveal otherworldly secrets and mysteries. It too abounds in myth, magic, love, and sadness and utilizes Nietzsche's philosophy to demonstrate the effects of modernity on everyday people. However, *The Return* structures these encounters rather differently than the other *Symphonies*. By first immersing the reader in a fully realized depiction of the symbolic realm, this work emphasizes the ubiquity of symbols in the "real" world. As we and Khandrikov navigate Moscow, elements of the first part of the story become recognizable in the people and events around him. Reinforced through the meanings attached to names and repeated leitmotifs in descriptions, the link between these planes of reality seems undeniable. The magical and mystical is seething beneath the surface of reality and, like a palimpsest, we need only scratch off one layer to reveal that the ordinary can be extraordinary. In his programmatic 1857 poem "Correspondences," Baudelaire invokes the notion of a "forest of symbols" in describing our journey through world.<sup>21</sup> Khandrikov is the epitome of one wandering through a space oversaturated with meaning. He is the ideal Symbolist protagonist, the essential inhabitant of the *Symphonies*—one who sees a transformed reality in the humdrum activities of daily life and recognizes the symbolic potential surrounding him.

While the first three *Symphonies* are somewhat of a piece in their overall aesthetic and stylistic qualities, *A Goblet of Blizzards* is either a monstrous aberration that runs amok with the themes and images of the previous works or the densely fruitful culmination of a decade in which Bely sought to integrate literature, philosophy, metaphysics, and aesthetic theory. This final *Symphony* is undeniably the most experimental and least accessible of the four (a point Bely conceded in his opening comments) and is often characterized as an artistic failure. While its intentional incomprehensibility and relative plotlessness alienate the reader, *A Goblet of Blizzards* does still reflect the autobiographical, philosophical, and aesthetic motivations that informed Bely's previous three *Symphonies*. Additionally, it anticipates the more radical structural and linguistic innovations of Futurism and high modernism and lays the foundation for Bely's most celebrated achievement—his novel *Petersburg*. It continues the pattern of the *Symphonies* functioning both as a record of Bely's own emotional and intellectual states and a more general commentary on Russia's literary and philosophical culture at the moment. In his attempt to balance theory and practice, Bely created a difficult and opaque text that mirrors the milieu of Russian Symbolism in the first decade of the twentieth century.

As is common in the *Symphonies*, the essence of *A Goblet of Blizzards* is a sad love story. The mystic Adam Petrovich falls erotically and spiritually in love with a beautiful woman, Svetlova (who is linked to the woman clothed in the sun from the Book of Revelation and Solovyov's Divine Feminine). Svetlova is unhappily married to a wealthy engineer on the brink of ruin and is pursued by the vile Colonel Svetozarov, who has the power to save or destroy them. Loosely based on Bely's attempt to run off with Lyubov Blok, the wife of his close friend Alexander Blok, the emotional turmoil of the story gives it a sense of grounding in real life and genuine psychology, complete with an allusion to the challenge to a duel

that Bely had issued to Blok in August 1906 (unlike in the story, Bely's and Blok's duel did not take place). Bely finished writing and editing *A Goblet of Blizzards* in Europe, where he fled after the disastrous denouement of this courtship. Lyubov Blok occupied a significant place in Symbolist mythology as the perceived embodiment of Solovyov's Divine Feminine and the inspiration for Blok's famous first book of poetry, *Verses to the Beautiful Lady*. Bely would revisit this moment in his life in a major subplot of *Petersburg* in the form of Nikolai's infatuation with Sofia. Yet the cathartic retelling of this episode in *A Goblet of Blizzards* was accompanied by mundane and ironic depictions of the debates and polemics raging within Russian Symbolism as well as extended forays into mystical and religious spheres (in both the physical form of a monastic life and the symbolic form of the blizzard motif). The exemplar of a *Symphony* that Bely has developed here—a mixture of the intimate emotional states, realistic details, and lofty contemplation—links this genre to his developing theories of Symbolism.

*A Goblet of Blizzards* does not clearly distinguish between ideas and physical form (in this way it anticipates the reification of thoughts that Bely calls “cerebral play” in *Petersburg*). Metaphoric language takes on a life of its own by fluidly moving between the abstract and the concrete. Snowflakes become diamonds and white bees, and as readers we must accept those as both artistic comparisons and real transformations. In *A Goblet of Blizzards*, language vacillates between the literal and the figurative, between meaning and nonsense, often partaking of both modes at once. This fourth *Symphony* continues Bely's quest to bridge the phenomenal and noumenal and reveal the presence of the other world in the reality surrounding him. It particularly resonates with the onslaught of essays Bely wrote between 1902 and 1910 articulating his views on art, culture, and philosophy. Two articles from that period are especially relevant to *A Goblet of Blizzards*. Bely's “Symbolism as

a World View,” which was written in 1903, focuses on Nietzsche’s role in the development of modern life. The article’s discussions of Eternity and the contemplation of cosmic forces complements the imagery used in *A Goblet of Blizzards* and transports them to a theoretical essay. Bely’s assertion that humans come “into the world and immediately begin knocking at the door of the nonworldly”<sup>22</sup> is an equally fitting description of a Symbolist writer and a character in a Symbolist work like *A Goblet of Blizzards*. In the aftermath of writing the *Symphonies*, Bely began writing about language from a linguistic and philosophical context, a critical approach he would maintain for the rest of his career.<sup>23</sup> His 1909 “The Magic of Words” delves into the notion of metaphoric language in ways that help us unravel his previous works. Bely addresses a tension that proliferates in *A Goblet of Blizzards*, the question of literal and figurative images, by acknowledging the impossibility of the reification of metaphors and then going on to admit his desire to believe in their reality: “in the deepest essence of my creative self-assertion, I cannot help believing in the existence of some reality whose symbol, or representation, is the metaphorical image I created.”<sup>24</sup> For all of its complexity and abstruseness, *A Goblet of Blizzards* quite masterfully suspends readers in such a liminal state, strands them between the real and the more real. The ensuing blend of confusion, frustration, insight, and enchantment are fundamental to Symbolism’s use of art to propel us into a higher plane of knowledge, a consistent goal of all four *Symphonies*.

Early in its appearance in Russia, Symbolism was called a poetry of hints.<sup>25</sup> It is an aesthetic that relies on implicit understandings, nuanced readings, and barely perceptible allusions and echoes. Bely’s *Symphonies* embody the changes that literature was experiencing in the early twentieth century and are quintessential works of modernist experimentation and innovation. They fundamentally alter the relationship between reader and text and make the familiar

strange and the strange familiar. They transport us to worlds that resemble our own but reveal the elements of artifice and magic that allow us to see the truth of our place in the universe. For the Symbolist, art is no less than the complete transfiguration of life, and the *Symphonies* are representations of the “new art” par excellence. In this first decade of his momentous career, Bely understood that the function of modern artists was to endow the seemingly small details of their lives with cosmic significance. That level of meaning allows the *Symphonies* to soar and pull us out of turn-of-the-century Moscow, out of our unremarkable lives and into the realm of the Infinite and Eternal.