

From Populism to Symbolism: Silver Age Discourse on the Nature of Russian Symbolism

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Abstract

The goals of the *Mir iskusstva* were to bring about a renaissance of Russian literature and art, and to initiate a dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church. Some members of *Mir iskusstva* were interested only in the artistic and literary endeavors of the Symbolist movement, while other members wanted to focus on the literary, artistic and religious aspects of the proposed renaissance. Ultimately, this paper will show that the monolithic title of *Mir iskusstva* or even the term “Silver Age” blankets significant divisions between two major threads of discourse. Sometimes these divisions intermeshed, but they are still distinctive from one another and should be defined and discussed within the larger context of Silver Age culture. *Mir iskusstva* contributed to Silver Age culture throughout Russia and Western Europe long after the journal shut down publication in 1904. This paper will seek to explain the emergence of the *Mir iskusstva* as an important forum for the Symbolist artists and writers after the 1898 closure of the journal *Severnyj vestnik* forced them to establish their own, “truly Symbolist” journal. A comparison between the two distinct lines of artistic pursuit deserves exploration and discussion. Each laid the foundation for what is currently thought of as “Silver Age Culture.” This technical term encompasses a very compelling time in Russian culture and history, and its components should be defined and examined in current scholarship.

Keywords: Dmitri Merezhkovskii, Zinaida Gippius, Russian Silver Age Culture, Russian Populism and Russian Symbolism.

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The Russian literary period from 1880-1930 was an exciting time of innovation and invention. Zinaida Gippius's verse contributions to the Symbolist movement of this time set the standard for those who followed her and contributed to the movement. Most scholars date the advent of Russian Symbolism at 1894, but I contend that the Russian Symbolist movement began in 1892, when the literary journal *Severnyi Vestnik* (*The Northern Herald*) first published poems by Gippius and Feodor Sologub under the editorship of Akim Vloynsky. Additionally in 1892, Gippius's husband, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, published his collection entitled *Simvoly. Pesni i poemy* (*Symbols. Songs and Poems*). In that same year, Merezhkovskii read in public on the seventh and fourteenth of December in St. Petersburg his famous lecture entitled *О причинах упадка и о новых течениях современной русской литературы* (*On the Causes and the Decline and on New Trends in Contemporary Literature*), which has long been accepted as the Russian Symbolist manifesto. This lecture was made up mostly of articles Merezhkovskii published in various journals from 1888-1892. It caused great controversy among Russian literary figures of the day due to its rejection of Russian Populism.

Prior to reading his lecture, Merezhkovskii had made quite a name for himself as a poet and critic among the Russian Populists, most notably the Populist critic Nikolai Mikhailovskii. Along with the publication of *Simvoly* and *О причинах упадка*, Merezhkovskii turned his back on his previous circle of literary friends and intellectual peers. Although Merezhkovskii's early Symbolist poetry was symbolist in name only, it did concern *fin-de-siècle* notions and called for solidarity between Russian and French symbolist sensibilities. Mikhailovskii, however, maintained that Europe was suffering from a reversion to "mysticism," with "magi," "neo-Buddhists," "theosophers," etc., cropping up everywhere. He considered the artistic expressions of these trends to be "symbolism" and "impressionism," and he contended that "Франция одно дело, Россия-другое," which means "France is one thing, Russia is another" (Mikhailovskii 1900).

Mikhailovskii's ideas regarding the differences between France and Russia are enlightening to scholars of Russian Symbolism due to the nature of his approach. When Merezhkovskii read his lectures, Mikhailovskii had just finished defending Lev Tolstoi against a personal attack from Max Nordau, who wrote *Degeneration*. Nordau's *Degeneration* had been published in 1895 and spoke out against the disease of degeneracy because of his philosophical bent for asking the big questions, such as "Why am I alive?" and "What is the purpose of our lives?" in his prose

(Nordau 1895). Nordau takes issue with Tolstoi's philosophical system present in most of his works, but treats *The Kreutzer Sonata* with considerable contempt largely due to the fact that the story afforded Tolstoi international fame, and Nordau considered it an inferior aesthetic effort. Mikhailovskii was an ardent Populist and deplored Symbolism; he disagreed with Nordau's assessment of Tolstoi, but he agreed with the idea that societies should be safeguarded against "the very small minority who honestly find pleasure in the new tendencies." Further, he concurred with Nordau's idea that literary critics and "all healthy and moral men" should boycott the Symbolists. Thus his approach began the debate between those who believed Symbolism to be socially and artistically detrimental and those who were ready for new ideas and new ways of representing visual and verbal art.

Nordau defined degeneracy as a pathological condition inconsistent with talent or genius. He considered the appearance of degeneracy in art as symptomatic of a social disease that French critics called *fin-de-siècle* or *fin-de-classe*. Symptoms attributed to this disease were unhealthy nervousness, moral idiocy, states of depression, exaltation, mysticism, childishness, atavism, feeble intellect, an inability to think in terms of cause and effect, extreme subjectivity resulting in diagnosable egomania combined with a tendency to congregate in groups (Nordau 1895). All of these things, according to Nordau, were abnormalities of the criminal mind and documented by forensic psychiatrists. These perverted inclinations of the artistic degenerate (as opposed to the criminal degenerate), Nordau argued, did not express themselves in actual crimes. Rather, Nordau stated, the artist infects healthy society with his own dangerous techniques and methods created by a sick mind.

One result of creation by the sick mind in question comes in the form of synaesthesia. Synaesthesia is the association of an idea perceived, felt, or described in terms of another; it is a combination or substitution of one sense for another. For example, a voice can be described as velvety, or heavy, or sweet; a sound can be described in terms of a color. The blaring fire truck siren can be described as "red." Synaesthesia is also defined as the babbling musicality of the lunatic who strings together words for the sake of their sound without regard to meaning. Examples of synaesthesia can be found in any century, any literary medium, and in any culture. Percy Shelley was the first English poet to use it extensively in his poems "Alastor," "Epipsychidon," and "The Triumph of Life." It finally came to be defined as a technical literary term in 1891 (Greene and Cushman 2012). Jules Millet was the first to have applied it in 1892. Of course,

Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondences" and Rimbaud's sonnet "Voyelles" popularized the technique in the poetic form. Further, Joris-Karl Huysmans employed it heavily in his novel *À Rebours (Against Nature)*, hence synaesthesia came to be greatly associated with the theory and practice of the Symbolist movement.

Nordau also attacked Théophile Gautier's famous preface to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* citing that, "Poetry cannot, under pain of death or degradation, assimilate itself to the science of morals" (Nordau 1895). Nordau maintained that it was dangerous for society when respectable people, like newspaper critics, took the part of degenerate artists. He stated that the task of the "critical police" was to expose and ridicule the propagators of such pernicious opinions. The fact that Baudelaire's influence had become so great not only in French society, but also in England, Germany, Scandinavia, North America, and Russia irritated Nordau greatly. Nordau also took Nietzsche, Tolstoi, Wagner, Ibsen, the English Pre-Raphaelites, Oscar Wilde and many others to task in his book. Ivan Turgenev seems to be the only Russian writer who received a better review, and Nordau's ignorance of Dostoevskii happily spared his audience from more diatribes.

Merezhkovskii was keenly aware of the tenuous nature of the Symbolist movement, but he also understood the excitement attached to such a potentially liberating school of thought. As the title of *О причинах упадка и о новых течениях современной русской литературы* implies, Merezhkovskii offered an analysis of Russian literature and the literary climate in Russia during the 1880s and 1890s. He welcomed the ideas regarding the right of art to complete autonomy, to the freedom from other branches of artistic philosophy and embraced the possibilities of the discipline of beauty. He cites the French poets as precursors to a Russian idealist school of thought in which critics would approach such authors as Tolstoi and Dostoevskii from a mystical point of view. Merezhkovskii likened Paris in the nineteenth century to that of Florence in the fifteenth century, "были-ли в России истинно-великая литература, достойная стать на ряду с другими всемирными литературами?" (Merezhkovskii 1893). Merezhkovskii continues to describe the contributions of Pushkin, Tolstoi, Turgenev, Dostoevskii, and Gogol as worthy of world-class literary status, but begs the question of whether the time was ripe for a new, different literary style that could be perceived as Russia's new cultural force.

Merezhkovskii's definitions of the role of the poet and poetry and his definition of literature are of utmost importance in *О причинах упадка*.

He locates poetic creation within the realm of the individual, and he asserts that the poet and poetic creation do not necessarily have to exert an influence over their readership.

Поэт может быть великим в полном одиночестве.
Сила вдохновения не должна зависеть от того, -
внимает-ли миру человечество или двое, трое, или
даже никто (Merezhkovskii 1893).

For Merezhkovskii, the poet and poetry do not have to exert any kind of influence over the public. This idea flies in the face of Nordau's concern that those involved in the French Symbolist movement were risking certain harm to those readers interested in the new poetic trends. Further, this notion replaces the age-old position of the poet and poetry as potentially immortal entities responsible for the historic continuity of specific national literatures. Moreover, this notion implies that poetic creation does not depend any more on human dominance than on any other acts of nature, as, according to Merezhkovskii, "Поэзия - сила первобытная и вечная, стихийная, произвольный и непосредственный дар Божий" (Merezhkovskii 1893). Thus, for Merezhkovskii, poetic talent is God-given and may appear in anyone; it may appear in the seventeen-year-old Arthur Rimbaud, or in Goethe, or in Homer.

Merezhkovskii views literature as a fundamental cultural force, and he defines literature as an outgrowth of poetry, and more importantly, he considers literature to be superior to poetry:

В сущности, литература та-же поэзия, но только,
разсматриваемая не с точки зрения
индивидуального творчества отдельных
художников, а как сила движущая целые поколения,
целые народы по известному культурному пути, как
преемственность поэтических явлений,
передаваемых из века в век и объединенных великим
историческим началом (Merezhkovskii 1893).

Literature for Merezhkovskii is then a unified body of individual poetic creations, spanning centuries, and has emerged as a cultural force. He cites Homer as the biggest example of his notion. Homer's works were written in poetic form, but only centuries later during the Golden Age of Greek civilization were his works considered to be literary and poetic contributions to Greek culture. Thus Homer serves as a "historic foundation" that unifies individual literary contributions to Greek

literature, and conversely, classical Greek literature as a whole reflects Homer's influence.

Along with this "unifying foundation," literature, as with any other manifestation of culture, such as painting, sculpture, and architecture, can only develop within the right atmosphere. Merezhkovskii observes that the talents of Ghirlandaio and Verrocchio might have flourished at any time in history, but only in Florence during the fifteenth century was the atmosphere right for them to contribute the essence of the national spirit afforded to their students Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci. Once established, the Florentine Renaissance permeated Italian culture and dominated cultural expression. Merezhkovskii points out that the same thing happened during the era of Romanticism and the subsequent Naturalistic reaction against it in France. This example then implies that the atmosphere necessary to create Romanticism in France must have decayed in order for a different atmosphere to foster Naturalism. In turn, the atmosphere for Naturalism began its decay in the 1880s, thus creating a new atmosphere for the advent of Symbolism. Merezhkovskii's atmospheres appear, flourish, and decay; the atmospheric changes that occur during the decay make for a different favorable atmosphere for something new to begin. Merezhkovskii accounts for the idea of this decay with his notion of the "decline" (упадок) of Russian literature. It is important to note that Merezhkovskii's "decline" is not the same as Nordau's notion of degeneracy for *fin-de-siècle* decadence (декаденство). Rather Merezhkovskii's notion of decline resides within the artistic standards brought about by preaching the "useful prejudice" of morality as though it were sacred truth:

...только уодство. только пошлость в искусстве - безнравственны. Никакая порнография, никакие соблазнительные картины пороков не развращают так сердца человеческого, как ложь о добре, как банальные гимны добру, как эти горячие слезы наивных читателей над фальшиво гуманными чувствами и буржуазной моралью. Кто привыкъ над ложью, тот проходить с холодным сердцем мимо красоты (Merezhkovskii 1893).

For Merezhkovskii, prose is superior to poetry and it is based upon individual talent and individual genius. Prose is a cultural force, but poetry is not. Prose is the expression of national spirit, but as a part of a national culture, it can only emerge given the correct atmospheric elements. The transformation of poetry into literature has occurred in

each national culture during various historical epochs. If all of these elements of his definition of literature hold true, then Merezhkovskii's attempt to locate such a period of literary fecundity within Russia could not be completed according to his own definition of literature. And most importantly, according to Merezhkovskii, the atmosphere for world-class literary production had not yet emerged with Russian culture or history. Despite Merezhkovskii's own analysis of Russian literature from Pushkin up until 1892, he asserts that the conditions necessary for the transformation of poetry into literature had not occurred. Russian writers had traditionally flourished in isolation from one another, thus they had never united to lend a national spirit to Russian literature. Merezhkovskii cites several examples of the isolation of Russian writers, most importantly Pushkin, Lermontov, and Gogol. He also refers to the enmity between Dostoevskii and Turgenev, and between Turgenev and Tolstoi. He discusses Nekrasov's and Saltykov-Shchedrin's lack of enthusiasm for Dostoevskii, and Turgenev's aversion for the poetry of Nekrasov. Merezhkovskii shrewdly observes that, for Tolstoi, there was an obvious desire to escape from culture:

В Пушкин [sic], почерпнувшем [sic] быть может самое смелое из своих вдохновений в диком цыганском таборе, в Гогол [sic] с его мистическим бредом, в презрений Лермонтова к людям, к современно цивилизаций, в его всепоглощающей буддийской любви к природе, в болезненно-гордой мечте Достоевскаго о роли *Мессии*, назначенной Богом русскому смиренному народу, грядущему исправить все, что сделала Европа во всех этих писателях то же стихийное начало, как у Толстого: *бегство от культуры* (Merezhkovskii 1893).

Therefore, literature, which he has already defined as a cultural force, could not come into being because each major Russian writer refused the role of the writer who would unite the national spirit of Russian literature. Russia was in need of a Goethe, a representative of historic culture, and Merezhkovskii's ideal of a "man of letters." This could not be found in Tolstoi, as he withdrew into nature and away from science and culture. Despite this need, Russia could not produce such a representative of the national spirit as long as it had no literature, no cultural force, as long as it recognized that one nation alone was not enough to carry world literature. The obvious answer to this dilemma, then, was for Merezhkovskii to locate the representative of historic culture. Whether or

not he viewed himself in this role, there is no doubt that his analysis of Russian literature's contemporary situation and his view on the new idealism posits him as one of the pioneers in the creation of a great national Russian literature.

However, his condemnation of the state of contemporary Russian literature continued the prevention of the very thing he sought to find – the emergence of a national literature. He put his efforts into publishing enterprises of his time, to the journals and to the literary circles that grew up around them. Throughout this process, he observed that Russian culture was indeed in a mire of monotonous boredom, and that it pervaded Russian culture. As an advocate of culture and the arts, he could not condone the debasement of the Russian literary language, which he attributed to those who imitated the method of Dmitrii Pisarev and Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin. Concomitantly, there seemed to be a complete ignorance of the “democratic Bohemia” that was developing and was manifested in such literary contributions as Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. For Merezhkovskii, complete ignorance (or lack of education) was better than incomplete knowledge; but it greatly irritated him that the uneducated commanded a pure, beautiful language:

Но в среде полуневежественной, полуобразованной, уже оторванной от народа и ещё не достигшей культуры, именно в той среде, из которой выходят все литературные ремесленники, вся демократическая газетная богема, язык мертвеет и разлагается (Merezhkovskii 1893).

Merezhkovskii states that not only were the journals responsible for the decay of the Russian language, but they also contributed to the decline of the author. Merezhkovskii bitterly opposed the idea of honoraria, and he regretted the fact that writers should be paid for their compositions. He felt writers should give their compositions freely to the public. He himself was in the enviable financial position of a literary aristocrat. Merezhkovskii indicts the very idea of honoraria as one of the first reasons for the decline of literature. His reasoning spoke to the notion that literature had been given over to the “street crowd” and pandered to the lowest tastes of society. Moreover, he cites the “petty press” for fostering this “most degrading form of prostitution” by forcing the author to surrender his freedom and fetter his inspiration (Merezhkovskii 1893). Obviously, Merezhkovskii's own experiences with Russian literary journals and their editors are revealed with these less than charitable remarks. He encountered great difficulties getting his own work

published in the periodical press. With *О причинах упадка*, his first major critical work, Merezhkovskii presented views on literature and delineated the essential features of the Symbolist movement in Russian literature. Of utmost significance, however, was the fact that, at such an early stage in his career, Merezhkovskii explicitly outlined his trajectory as a writer and, with typical lack of humility, proclaimed the divine inspiration that was to guide his future course.

Merezhkovskii's lectures were heard by a handful of people, whereas Mikhailovskii's reverberated throughout literate Russia. Mikhailovskii's statements propagated the myth that is still prevalent in current scholarship, that Russian Symbolism was a direct transplant from France and that it was nothing more than a trendy version of decadence. Although Russian Symbolism was part of a wider European trend, it was primarily a creative, poetic movement that was not a direct transplant.

Viacheslav Ivanov, in retrospective articles published in 1910-12, emphasizes the importance of its roots in *Russian* culture. Ivanov contended that "symbolism does not cut itself off from the soil; its desire is to combine roots with stars and to grow up as a starry flower from familiar, native roots" (Ivanov 1971). Ivanov identified Feodor Tiutchev (1803-1873) as the first poet to apply the ideas of Symbolist poetry. Tiutchev developed the method of poetry that is based upon suggestion rather than on communication, and he began publishing his work in Pushkin's *Sovremennik*, which was in publication from 1836-1866, and then made a comeback from 1911-1915. Tiutchev's poetry laid the groundwork for the Russian Symbolists by his ability to express the inexpressible and to show how "понятным сердцем языком, твердят о перонепонятной муке" (pain beyond understanding is told in a language that speaks to the heart). Tiutchev was also responsible for supplying the Symbolist movement with its first slogan, "мысли, когда-то говорили, является ложью." ("The thought, once spoken, is a lie.") The slogan was taken from a line of Tiutchev's poem entitled *Silentium!*

Another precursor to the Symbolist movement was Afanasii Fet, who was an army officer and landowner. Fet had a natural gift for verse, which Valery Briusov considered to be "a call to the great intoxication of the moment, which suddenly, beyond the colors and the sounds, opens into a transparency through which we can glimpse the 'sun of the world' – out of time into eternity" (Briusov 1913). Konstantin Bal'mont was also extremely impressed by Fet's gift for verbal art. Fet became, for the younger Symbolists, something of a cult figure. Andrei Bely, between the ages of seventeen and nineteen, admired Fet more than any other poet.

Bely found Fet's verse to correspond with Schopenhauer's (whose work, incidentally, Fet translated into Russian) concept of music and found his poetry to be the epitome of "harmonious meeting of thought and feeling: their transformation into something else again. Of course, for me, he is a 'SYMBOLIST' (Bely 1969). Aleksander Blok identified strongly with Fet's idea of the function of the poet. Blok thought Fet set the precedent for the concept of self-immolation so central to the poet, and even took the title from his last collection of verse from a poem written by Fet, "За гранью прошлых дней" (Blok 1977). Fet's career, however, suffered during the utilitarian age of Populism. Fet consciously kept his poetry within the realm of the beautiful and consequently critics of the 1860s dismissed his work as empty-headed and superficial. He continued to publish poetry in *Russkii Vestnik* between 1863-1883 and he enjoyed limited attention as, during this period, no collections of his verse had been published.

The freshness of Symbolist poetics came on the heels of Semën Nadson. Nadson was a friend of Merezhkovskii, and he was popular during the 1880s only to be rejected by his former admirers as the epitome of civic sentimentality and flaccid prosody. However, Nikolai Nekrasov gave him a forum in which to publish in his journal *Otechestvennye Zapiski*. Nekrasov exerted influence over the early Symbolists, but Viacheslav Ivanov did his best to protect Blok and Bely from his reach. Merezhkovskii, however, considered Nekrasov to be among the ranks of poets such as Tiutchev and stated "[...]in Russian squiredom, in Russian serfdom – Tiutchev, as if on a bed of roses, was lulled by mortal indolence, whereas Nekrasov was tormented by mortal anguish, wounded to death by the thorns of those same roses" (Merezhkovskii 1915). Nevertheless, Nekrasov endured harsh criticism by the likes of Turgenev and Tolstoi, even though he had been, in his heyday, considered a great poet. The popularity of his poetry faded with the entrance of the Symbolists as they began to change the face of Russian poetry. The Symbolists struggled against, and banned outright, superficial civic commitment and sentiment from their poetry. As they identified their poetic goals, they realized the need for a strong forum in which they could produce their art, share ideas, and expand their exploration of suggesting, rather than communicating. In order for this to occur, they had to find a journal willing to back them and their cause and to provide an outlet for their creative work.

Although *Severnyi Vestnik* began publication in 1885 and was a well-established Populist journal, it was also responsible for publishing the

earliest Symbolist writers, such as Nikolai Minsky, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, Zinaida Gippius, Feodor Sologub, and Konstantin Bal'mont, not to mention translations from Maurice Maeterlinck, Paul Verlaine, and Gabriele D'Annunzio. All of this occurred under the editorship of Akim Volynsky (Akim L'vovich Flekser), who took the job as editor in 1891. *Severnyi Vestnik* was losing popularity at the time Volynsky took it over (Vengerov 1914). Volynsky was an old-fashioned Kantian who, in fact, strongly opposed what these new poets were trying to do in their verse. Volynsky would often subject their contributions to extremely harsh criticism in his commentary section of the journal. Interestingly enough, he bitterly opposed utilitarianism, materialism, and the cultural complacency of the cultural establishment – all things the Symbolists were opposed to as well. Although *Severnyi Vestnik* can hardly be considered an exclusive forum for the Symbolists, it did provide an introduction to the Russian literary scene as early as 1892.

Volynsky became encouraged by the journal's publisher Liubov' Gurevich to use his position to further the cause of "idealism in art." As a literary editor, Volynsky gained an acceptance of the new art by challenging the established tradition of radical literary theory. He argued against the most important literary theory. He argued against the most important literary critics of the day, such as Vissarion Belinsky, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Nikolai Dobroliubov, Dmitrii Pisarev, and the successors in the 1880s and 1890s (Volynsky 1898). Volynsky undertook this challenge in defense of the values of Russian literature. He contended that Russian literature was "austere, simple and serious" against the radical critics' views that Russian literature "lacked civic merit" (Volynsky 1895).

Volynsky's criticism against the radical critics took the form of logical questions aimed at the core of their theories of literature. Belinsky, for example, believed that literature should convey a civic moral. Volynsky questioned Belinsky's ability to know where such a "civic moral" could lead. In the case of Chernyshevsky, whose utilitarian demands were clearly and concisely presented and whose definition of "content worthy of the attention of a thinking man" was taken very seriously, Volynsky asked, "Tell me *in the name of what* you wish people well and I will tell you whether I can be your comrade" (Volynsky 1893). Volynsky asserted that there is nothing higher than the notion of abstract truth, and he considered political questions regarding literature as superficial. Dobroliubov and Pisarev, who relied heavily upon Realism and usefulness in their literary theories were, in Volynsky's eyes, "a

generation of worthy militants” who were “heading in the wrong direction” (Dobroliubov 1900). Volynsky contended that their ideas, which were strongly held and advocated under great external pressure, had been “handed in for small change” by their successors, “losing all their vital freshness” in the process (Volynsky 1895). In summary, Volynsky recognized the need for changes in the Russian literary climate and in the periodical press; however, he was not certain that the Symbolists were the solution to the problem.

The difficulties that new poets and artists had in placing their works in the Russian periodical press had become untenable. Zinaida Gippius, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, and several others were forced to offer their works to such journals as *Mir Bozhii*, which was a monthly illustrated publication with photographs of famous paintings and shiny pen-and-ink drawings depicting melodramatic, sentimental scenes in the style of the new age; *Trud*, which was as uninspiring as the name of the journal itself; and *Niva*, which was barely distinguishable from *Zhurnal dlia Vsekh* (Martinsen 1997). For both the Merezhkovskii’s and Volynsky, *Severnyi Vestnik* became a publication haven. Volynsky was not afraid of Gippius’s new poetry, even though his decision to publish her work brought him serious troubles with his other editorial colleagues. He also began serializing Merezhkovskii’s first novel *Otverzhenyi* in January 1895, but demanded that the work be radically edited. This did not help the relationship between Volynsky and Merezhkovskii, nor did the fact that both authors chose to write about subjects such as Dostoevskii, Tolstoi, and Leonardo Da Vinci. Volynsky published Gippius’s poems “Pesnia” and “Posviashchenie” and Feodor Sologub’s first novel *Tiazhelye sny* in the journal. However, Volynsky published these works with reservations. He considered the works to be evidence of decadence and moral degeneracy. He refused to publish other “decadent” works, such as Valery Briusov’s *Moskovskie simvolisty* and Aleksandr Dobroliubov’s *Natura naturans*. He allowed publication of Konstantin Bal’mont’s poetry, even though he greatly criticized Bal’mont’s first two books for lack of depth and simplicity. At the same time, he repeatedly pointed out Bal’mont’s superior poetic talent to Nikolai Minsky and Dmitrii Merezhkovskii. He charged Sologub with moral turpitude and disparaged the Nietzschean element in Merezhkovskii’s novels and in his 1896 collection *Novye stikhotvoreniia* (Gippius 1951). Gippius and Merezhkovskii left *Severnyi Vestnik* on bad terms in 1897, when Volynsky refused to serialize Merezhkovskii’s sequel to his first book on

Da Vinci, *Voskresshie bogi. Leonardo Da Vinci*. In 1898, *Severnyi Vestnik* closed down.

In the spirit of bad-mannered literary criticism, Volynsky placed himself among editors of other journals who considered the Symbolist contribution to be morally and politically objective. Volynsky struggled constantly with rejecting Populist critics and criticism, and he agreed with those critics who thought Symbolism was a deplorable example of a literary movement. One thing the early Symbolists were very serious about was the overhaul of back-biting sarcasm and personality assassinations in literary criticism. Volynsky disagreed. Instead, the Symbolists sought to replace these elements with ironic statements, focusing criticism on the merit of the argument rather than the personality of the writer. In later Symbolist journals, such as *Mir Iskusstva*, *Novi Put'*, and *Vesy*, the early Symbolists were able to put better-mannered criticism into practice and thus elevate literary criticism to a more civil exchange of aesthetic ideas.

Although Volynsky was opposed to Populism and its purported materialism, he shared the Populist's optimistic views of human nature and their belief in progress. Thus *Severnyi Vestnik*, although it had served as the early Symbolists' introduction to readership and criticism, was still too close to Populism to be able to provide a stable periodical environment for the young Symbolists.

The journal *Mir Iskusstva* began as an academic discussion at regular Friday receptions hosted by Sergei Diaghilev and Dmitrii Filosofov. From January 15 through February 8, 1898, Diaghilev and Filosofov arranged a very successful art exhibition of Finnish and Russian painters. This exhibition fostered introductions and growing friendships of key participants during the inception of *Mir iskusstva*. The group approached Princess Tenisheva, a noblewoman, and Savva Ivanovich Mamontov, a merchant patron, for funding to bring the journal into publication. On November 9, 1898, they celebrated the publication of *Mir iskusstva* No. 1-2. The journal was always published in double volumes, it was printed on fine-quality paper, and it was filled with opulent illustrations by new artists. The journal also serialized many of the great contributions to the Russian Symbolist movement. For example, Gippius's *Zerkala: Vtoraia kniga rasskazov* was published during the journal's first year of publication. *Mir iskusstva* allowed for a truly creative collection and collaboration for the Russian Symbolists. The point of this new and innovative journal was aptly determined by its publisher Sergei Diaghilev: "We must force our way through. We must amaze people and not be

afraid to do so, we must make our entrance at once, reveal our whole selves with all the good and bad qualities of our nationality” (Diagilev 1982). It was not critics or poets who began this, the first truly modernist literary journal in St. Petersburg, Russia. Rather, it was painters, musicians, and people who loved the performing arts and who finally found the confidence to break out from Populism, Naturalism, and Romanticism and launch this most successful Symbolist journal. The key participants were a cosmopolitan group of amateurs of the fine arts who were closely linked by blood or patronage to the *dvorianstvo* and the court. The *dvorianstvo* was the class of “serving nobility” originally created by Peter I. The purpose of this class was to counter the power of the old feudal nobility and to provide an educated upper class devoted to the crown. They were rewarded throughout the eighteenth century with land and serfs, and they acquired a great deal of independence. In spite of the root of the word *dvorianin*, which means courtier, this class became comparable to gentry who owned land and upper-middle-class professionals.

Thus the goals of the *Mir iskusstva* to bring about a renaissance of Russian literature and art and to initiate a dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church were outlined in the critics’ debates and lectures, which began in 1892. Some members of *Mir iskusstva* were interested only in the artistic and literary endeavors of the Symbolist movement, while other members wanted to focus on the literary, artistic and religious aspects of the proposed renaissance. The monolithic title of *Mir iskusstva* or even the term “Silver Age” blankets significant divisions between two major threads of discourse. Sometimes these divisions intermeshed, but they are still distinctive from one another and should be defined and discussed within the larger context of Silver Age culture. *Mir iskusstva* contributed to Silver Age culture throughout Russia and Western Europe long after the journal shut down publication in 1904. The *Mir iskusstva* groups members and the journal were an important forum for the Symbolist artists and writers after the 1898 closure of the journal *Severnyj vestnik* forced them to establish their own, “truly Symbolist” journal. Each of the two distinct lines of artistic pursuit deserve exploration and discussion because each laid the foundation for what is currently thought of as “Silver Age Culture.” This technical term encompasses a very compelling time in Russian culture and history, and its components should be defined and examined in current scholarship.

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