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*Literature as Music:
Symphonic Form in Andrei Belyi's Fourth Symphony*

The link between music and literature, verse in particular, is frequently assumed by both authors and critics but is rarely established in a definite way. Members of both groups are fond of applying musical terminology to their own or other's writings without presenting convincing arguments for this practice. A term which has a reasonably precise denotation in reference to music is applied to literature on the basis of superficial and often erroneous analogies. The results are almost always unfortunate.¹

Of course, poor analogies made by critics can always simply be passed over with a frown, but when an author himself maintains he is composing a literary work according to musical principles or following musical forms, the matter takes on more seriousness. Such claims cannot be safely ignored but must be investigated and either substantiated or repudiated. Andrei Belyi's *Fourth Symphony*² is especially interesting in this respect because the author had provided us not only with a statement of intent, but also with several clues as to his methods.

In his introduction to the work, Belyi points out that while he entitled his preceding three works "symphonies,"³ he did not consciously attempt to approximate the symphonic form in any direct way. In the *Fourth Symphony*, however, he is making this conscious attempt.

I was interested in the constructional mechanism of that vaguely conceived form in which my preceding "Symphonies" had been written⁴: there the construction imposed suggested itself on its own and I did not have a distinct conception of what a "Symphony" in literature was supposed to be. In the present "Symphony" I tried most of all to be precise in the exposition of themes, in their counterpoint combination, etc.⁵

Several terminological difficulties should be dealt with immediately. The words "theme" and "counterpoint" have various definitions when applied to literature and music. The relevant dictionary definitions of "theme" are:

1. It seems to me unkind to single out specific examples of the misuse of musical terminology when such misuse is rather widespread, so I will trust the reader has come upon examples in his own studies. On the other hand, as an example of how musical terminology may be used with considerable skill and sophistication, let me recommend: Harvey Gross, "T. S. Eliot and the Music of Poetry," *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry* (Ann Arbor, 1964). pp. 169-214.

2. *Kubok metelei, chetvertaia simfoniia* (Moscow, 1908). Page references are to this edition.

3. *Severnaia simfoniia (Pervaia, geroicheskaia)* (Moscow, 1904); *Simfoniia (2-ia, dramaticheskaia)* (Moscow, 1902); *Vozvrat. III simfoniia* (Moscow, 1905).

4. Indeed the first three symphonies employ essentially the same compositional methods as we shall study here specifically in relation to the *Fourth*, although they are employed with a lesser degree of complexity and thoroughness.

5. *Kubok metelei*, pp. 1-2.

- 1c: a subject of fictional or artistic representation.
 2b: a short melody constituting the basis of variation, development, or other repetition with modification.⁶

The literary definition (1c) of course applies to the *Fourth Symphony*, but in fact the musical one (2b) more exactly describes Belyi's method of operation as we shall see. In any case, the two definitions may apply without contradiction to Belyi's *Symphony*.

This is not true of "counterpoint". The relevant dictionary definitions are:

- 1b: the combination of two or more related but independent melodies into a single harmonic texture in which each retains its linear or horizontal character.
 2b: any artistic arrangement or device using significant contrast or interplay of distinguishable elements.⁷

Note that the primary definition (1b), the musical one, requires a simultaneous realization of several thematic lines and so cannot apply directly to literature,⁸ while the secondary definition (2b) may apply. Since "counterpoint" (1b) is a technical term in music, it is not used in the broader meaning (2b) and therefore the two definitions are *de facto* mutually exclusive. Unfortunately Belyi is using the literary definition in a musical context, thus confusing the situation. I will avoid the word entirely.

From Belyi's remarks it is clear that he is not using the term "symphony" casually to describe a vague "musical" style of writing but is using it in a precise, formal sense. He intends to approximate symphonic musical structure in a verbal medium. It is therefore appropriate for us to compare what he has done in the *Fourth Symphony* both with his understanding of symphonic form and with the concept of the symphony in the field of music.

The ensuing musical discussion will, of necessity, be somewhat technical, but every attempt will be made to avoid complexities, excessive subtleties and jargon extraneous to the issue.

For clarity's sake it seems best to establish the musical concept of a symphony before proceeding to Belyi's handling of it. Succinctly put, a symphony is "a usually long and complex sonata for symphony orchestra."⁹ The essential formal term in the definition is the word "sonata" which has a "dual usage: (a) sonata form used generally for the organization of movements to comprise a classical sonata; (b) sonata form used specifically for the organization of material within the type of movement

6. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (unabridged). (Springfield, Mass., 1966), p. 2307b.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 520a.

8. Except in a bizarre situation in which two or more passages are meant to be read simultaneously. The more normal situation typified by the so-called "polyphonic" novel is covered rather by the second definition.

9. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass., 1971), p. 893a. Cf. *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Eric Blom, 5th ed., 10 vols. (London, 1954), VIII, 208-250, for a more detailed and sophisticated discourse.

most characteristic of the classical sonata."¹⁰

Both definitions apply to the symphony. The sonata (a), when in its usual four movements, corresponding apparently to the four parts of Belyi's work,

is more often than not organized as follows: (1) A long first movement of quick or moderate speed is constructed in sonata form (b) . . . (2) A long and expressive slow movement may be in aria form (ABA) or sonata form (b) or variation form. (3) A gayer and perhaps shorter movement may be a minuet or scherzo, trio, and minuet or scherzo repeated. . . . (4) A long, usually quick and brilliant finale may be in rondo form (. . . ABACABA) or in sonata form (b) or in a modified rondo form combining elements of both. The keys of each movement are commonly contrasted but related, the relationship tending to be remoter in later than earlier examples.¹¹

Furthermore,

the organization of the movements both in regard to one another and in regard to their internal structure is based primarily on key relationship; and the development of the musical material is primarily symphonic. . . . By primarily symphonic development of the musical material is meant its initial presentation in somewhat less than self-sufficient form, with a view to unfolding its potentialities stage by stage.¹²

Finally, to complete the picture, an understanding of what constitutes a movement in sonata form (b) is needed.

The recognizable features . . . are three. (1) The material tends to fall into a species of duality, which has been compared (and the comparison is often though far from always apt) with our own division into male and female. (2) This duality is, above all, expressed by a distinctive change of key, insisted on at first, though subsequently to be reconciled. (3) The material in all its inherent duality is carried through stages also three in number, with a supplementary fourth stage sometimes appended. These are commonly known as (A) the exposition; (B) the development or free fantasia; (C) the recapitulation; (D) the coda.¹³

Armed now with these concepts and definitions we can better confront Belyi's explanations and reflect on his compositional practices.

Belyi explains what he means by the precision of his symphonic structure. This is the heart of the matter:

In my "symphony" there are properly speaking two groups¹⁴ of themes:

10. *Grove's Dictionary*, VII, 887b.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 888a.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 887b.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 888b.

14. Belyi's use of the word "group" here is not objectionable. As *Grove's* indicates, "later classical sonatas often tend to a more complex structure. . . . It became unusual to present a simple pair of subjects: groups of subjects is often a more accurate description." *Ibid.*, p. 888b.

the first group is composed of themes of the first part: while distinguished from one another by the structure of the phrases, they all have, however, an internal kinship. The themes of Part II form the second group of themes which due to their construction in essence compose one theme stated in the chapter "Zatsvetaiushchii vetr." This theme is developed in three directions. One direction (theme "a", as I am accustomed to call it) is more distinctly expressed in the chapter of Part II "V monastyre"; the second (theme "b") in the chapter of Part II, 15 "Pena kolosistaia"; the third (theme "c") in the chapter "Zolotaia osen'." These three themes of Part II-a, b, c—merging in juxtaposition with the themes of Part I, form, so to speak, the fabric of the whole "Symphony."¹⁶

But this explanation is, from a musician's point of view, quite anomalous! The juxtaposition and development of the two themes is supposed to occur in the first movement as part of the development section of sonata form (b), not in the second movement (part) as Belyi indicates. In fact, the thematic material of the first movement need not and often does not recur at all in the later movements. Having carefully set up four parts, he unaccountably appears to spread his equivalent of the sonata movement over two parts thus confusing the symphonic structure completely.¹⁷ Judging from Belyi's further discussion, he intended to and, judging from the text itself, did in fact continue the process of juxtaposition and development of the two groups of themes through all four parts with the result that the *Symphony* might perhaps be interpreted as a single sonata movement with four parts.

Belyi further specifies his method of composition:

To aid calculation I could present here the structural schema of all the chapters, but who would be interested in it? For one example I will say only that the chapter of Part III "Slezy rosnye" is composed according to the following schema. If we call the fragments of the chapter in Part II "Zolotaia osen'," excluding the first α , β , γ , δ , ϵ etc. and we remember that: 1) the basic themes of Part II are a, b, c, 2) one of the themes of Part I is ρ , then the general construction of the chapter has the appearance: α , ρ , β , γ , ϵ , etc. The reader will understand how the matter goes. All the rest is written in this way.¹⁸

At first glance the explanation in the abstract seems simple enough. But when you look at it closely and then try to find the indicated pattern in the relevant chapters, obstacles appear. Belyi has omitted necessary information in his description. What do the Latin letters have to do with the Greek? And nowhere before has ρ as a theme of Part I even been mentioned, much less identified. It would have helped a great deal in fact if Belyi had identified each of his Greek and Latin letters as given

15. The omission of "II" is evidently a typographical error.

16. *Kubok metelei*, p. 2.

17. D. Chizhevskii takes this among other things to indicate that Belyi knew little about music theory. Cf. "Andrei Belyi's 'Symphonien,'" Introduction to A. Belyi, *Chetyre simfonii*, photo-reprint, (München, 1971), pp. XI-XII.

18. *Kubok metelei*, pp. 2-3.

messages.

With such a vague set of clues it is necessary to go to the places indicated and attempt to see how the schema fits what we find. But even then one cannot but be dismayed. Certain parts of Belyi's description seem to apply easily enough, but others seem to apply not at all. If we understand by "fragments" groups of sentences between double spaces, then the first fragment of "Zolotaia osen'" (pp. 111-113) is indeed omitted in the scheme of "Slezy rosnye" (pp. 123-127) and the second fragment of "Zolotaia osen'" (Belyi's *a*) has fairly obvious points of contact with the first fragment of "Slezy rosnye" in terms of the opening line, visual appearance, syntactic content and general subject matter, but directly shares only a few words and images. The reader's impression would be that somehow the new material was vaguely familiar but not a specific repetition of the preceding material. It is only by careful comparison that certain points of contact become evident. The other major agreement between the explanation and the evident situation consists in the presence of sizable reiteration of thematic material from Part I. This is fragment 7 of "Slezy rosnye", which is taken nearly *in toto* from page 21. The trouble is that if I read Belyi's explanation correctly the fragment is *p* and should come after *a* in "Slezy rosnye," i.e., it should be the third and not the seventh fragment. Beyond this there are other points of contact between the two chapters, some of which agree in general with the pattern Belyi indicates but most of which do not. Furthermore there is additional material from Parts I and II in various places. Parallels between the two chapters, in short, are far from being as close and obvious as Belyi suggests. Neither do the Latin letters have any apparent relationship to the Greek ones other than that "Zolotaia osen'," development "c", is related to "Slezy rosnye" in the way I have described. A comparison of the text of the chapter represented by "a" and "b," "V monastyre" (pp. 114-119) and "Pena kolosistaia" (pp. 104-107) respectively, with that of "Slezy rosnye" failed to reveal more than incidental similarities. Really, the precise pattern outlined by Belyi does not in essence apply to the situation other than in these broad terms: "Slezy rosnye" is a development specifically of "Zolotaia osen'" and generally of much of the previous material.¹⁹

Oddly enough in view of Belyi's rather confused description of his symphonic method, the general outlines of genuine sonata form can be perceived in the first part, which must be in sonata form (b). If the verbiage connected with snow is taken as the "key" of the movement, then the first chapter, "Metel'" is the key-establishing introduction. Within the framework of this key, there are two thematic ramifications: the first (principal theme) relates to Adam Petrovich and is stated as the contents of the second chapter, "Gorod" (pp. 8-10); the second (subordinate theme) relates to Svetlona and is stated as the contents of the third chapter "Zhemchug v alom" (pp. 10-12). These taken together are the exposition section. In the course of the succeeding chapters, both themes alternate, are juxtaposed, combined and varied in a way equivalent to what occurs in the development section of a symphony. Then, in agreement with

19. I do not rule out the possibility that Belyi's precise pattern is really there to be found and that perhaps a more clever reader than I can find it. But if the considerable effort and experience with Belyi's methods that went into my attempt to uncover the pattern failed, I doubt that many other readers will fare much better.

sonata form (b), the principal and subordinate themes are recapitulated toward the end in a chapter also titled, significantly, "Gorod" (pp. 54-55). The recapitulation consists of a block of eighteen lines (principal theme) reproduced from page 9 with only slight modifications, and of several extensive passages taken nearly verbatim from the chapter "V pene beloï" (pp. 29-31) in which the subordinate theme related to Svetlona emerges very strongly for the first time. This latter situation is, however, somewhat irregular from a musical standpoint because the recapitulation should normally be of the exposition section, not of a development section. Either the chapter "Zhemchug v alom" is the official exposition of the subordinate theme, in which case the recapitulation is of a development of the subordinate theme and not of the theme itself, or the chapter "V pene beloï" is the official exposition, in which case the statements of the subordinate theme in various places on pages 8-28 are premature, or could perhaps be looked on as foreshadowings of the subordinate theme. Of course, this irregularity is only an irregularity in the context of absolute formal rigor; without stretching a point it could be seen as a perfectly acceptable innovation in sonata form, an innovation which symphonists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would have found quite congenial. The remainder of the first part would be classified as a coda section. In chart form, the structure of Part I relates to sonata form (b) in the following way:

Introduction:	"Metel' " (pp. 7-8)
A. Exposition	
Principal theme:	"Gorod" (pp. 8-10)
Secondary theme:	"Zhemchug v alom" (pp. 10-12) or "V pene beloï" (pp. 29-31)
B. Development:	Pages 12-54, or pages 31-54.
C. Recapitulation:	"Gorod" (pp. 54-55) reiterates "Gorod" (p. 9) and "V pene beloï" (pp. 29-31)
D. Coda:	Pages 55-60.

If the question arises as to whether Belyi, in spite of his misleading introductory remarks, intended to have the first part be in sonata form (b), the fact that the title "Gorod" was used for both the exposition (pp. 8-10) and the recapitulation (pp. 54-55) would strongly indicate that the answer is yes. This is the only chapter title in the entire work to be repeated.

Belyi's use of duality is quite appropriate to both the musical form and narrative situation. The problem is that a vital aspect of a movement in sonata form, the resolution of keys in the recapitulation, is missing, and as *Grove's* puts it, "Sonata form is essentially dramatic. . . Its mainspring is key relationship."²⁰

20. *Grove's Dictionary*, VII, 887b. Specifically, "a normal recapitulation . . . opens with the reappearance of the tonic key. First and second subject-groups ordinarily reappear in the order of their first appearance, but commonly with slight changes of detail. . . . One change, however, is of fundamental importance: The contrast of key which in the exposition set the conflict between the dual elements is replaced by identity of key in the recapitulation thus reconciling them in the most dramatic fashion." *Ibid.*, p. 889b.

It is probably an oversight by Belyi that he does not attempt to create a resolution, even one based on some analogy to key such as I have suggested (key = weather, season). The two themes remain quite apart and unreconciled in the recapitulation, and the resolution of the dual elements (male and female) occurs only at the end of Part IV, thus supporting a possible view of the *Fourth Symphony* as one sonata movement in four parts, but correspondingly weakening the view of it as a typical symphony.

Of course, this distortion of symphonic form has its narrative purpose. Belyi wants to reconcile the themes in a particular way which could only be accomplished at the end. Following the normal symphonic structure would have spoiled his plot structure.

The second part, which would ordinarily be the slow movement of a symphony, should contrast in mood with the first part while being related in key. It does both in a way. The season has changed to summer; and though the vocabulary and images are much the same as in the first part, they apply not to a raging snowstorm but to the relatively calm atmosphere of gardens and fountains. Motions, instead of occurring in a whirlwind of snow, occur at a more stately pace with the rustle of leaves in the background. This would perhaps correspond to a change in tempo which is not literally practicable in a verbal medium meant to be read to oneself and not recited. On the other hand, stylistically there is no perceptible contrast between the first and second parts. The contrast is in the semantics of the situation, in what is being described and not in how it is being described.

The third and fourth parts exhibit none of the formal patterns characteristic of equivalent movements in a symphony in spite of the fact that it would have been easy enough to incorporate them into a verbal medium. For instance, the A-B-A form of a third movement would present no problems, nor would a fourth movement in rondo form with a periodically recurring section or passage be difficult to arrange. Rather, Parts III and IV are further stages in the ongoing development of the materials of Parts I and II. Sizable recapitulations do occur, but these are related to the overall structure of the work rather than to the internal structure of the given movements and thus fall outside the requirements of symphonic form.

But there are aspects of these latter parts that are somewhat analogous to the key and tempo structure of third and fourth movements of symphonies. If key is analogous to weather and season, then both parts are similarly intermediate between Parts I and II. They occur in late winter-early spring (i.e., between the full winter of Part I and the late summer of Part II). This situation corresponds to symphonic form where the third and fourth movements are often in the same key and often intermediate in mood between the dramatic energy of the first movement and the serenity of the second. Belyi's third part with its vigorous love intrigue (the seduction[s], quarrel of husband and lover, duel and wounding of the lover) is more demonic and scherzo-like than graceful and minuet-like; but the fourth part, while it begins on a dark note, ends with a rousing, triumphant finale.

The apparent anomaly of having the normally rather undramatic third movement contain more active plot interest than the usually more dramatic first movement of a symphony disappears when you take into account that the drama of the plot is systematically reduced in favor of thematic or musical development. In this context

part of its value as a structure.

On the other hand, while Belyi's stylistic practices admittedly have their quasi-musical properties, it must also be admitted that taken as purely literary devices, they lose none of their artistic effectiveness. Moreover, interpreting them musically adds little or nothing to their impact. Such a musical interpretation is little more than a confusing accretion to a basically literary text.

Belyi himself realized the fallacy of his thinking in this area and eventually abandoned attempts to approximate musical forms: "The *Fourth Symphony* revealed once and for all the impossibility of a 'symphony' in words."²⁵ As late as 1918, however, he still had thoughts of sub-titling *Kotik Letaev* a "symphonic tale,"²⁶ but this designation did not appear in the published edition (1922). The second edition (also 1922) of the *Third Symphony* was retitled simply *Vozvrat: Povest'*.

Belyi, in abandoning his preoccupation with musical form, did not, however, lose interest in precisely those techniques he had considered musical. His exploration of all aspects of the literary medium (visual and semantic as well as aural) was exhaustive, unique and ongoing, and led to the greater accomplishments of *The Silver Dove*, *Petersburg* and *Kotik Letaev*, the last perhaps his highest achievement in the realm of verbal "music."

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25. Andrei Belyi, *Mezhdru dvukh revoliutsii* (Moscow, 1930), p. 138.

26. K. Bugaeva and A. Petrovskii "Literaturnoe nasledstvo Andrcia Belogo," *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, Vol. 27-28 (1937), p. 604.