

# "Silver Age" as a Sociocultural Phenomenon

Dmitry D. Romanov

Department of Social Philosophy  
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia  
Moscow, Russia  
E-mail: romanovbook@yandex.ru

**Abstract**—The article deals with "Silver Age" concept as a sociocultural phenomenon from the view of Russian philosophy, the concept of all-unity and the ideas of symbolism, reflected both by modern philosophers, culturologists, art historians, and figures of the study period under. The complexity of the "Silver Age" socio-cultural phenomenon requires a metasystem methodological approach, combining principles of historical, literary and cultural criticism in the unity of their philosophical foundations. The essential features of the "Silver Age" as a cultural matrix and ideological paradigm are identified. Particular attention is paid to the concept of all-unity and its reflection in the principles of symbolism. It is asserted that the worldview of the symbolists encompasses the main ways of the "Silver Age" philosophy developing.

**Keywords**—"Silver Age"; all-unity; symbolism; religious philosophy; catholicity; sophiology; theurgy; synthetic worldview; God-manhood

## I. INTRODUCTION

Where did the term "Silver Age" come from in relation to Russian culture? There is no consensus on this, but such thinkers as N.A. Otsup, N.A. Berdyaev, V.A. Piast, C.K. Makovsky [1] engaged in introducing it into the culture of use. They endowed it with various meanings, trying to develop a methodological framework based on historical, cultural and anthropological attitudes. A number of researchers also dealt with the removal of a term from the culture of a language, among them O. Ronen, L.G. Birch, on Dorokhina [2].

N.V. Koteneva notes that the "chronological framework of the "Silver Age" is more definite than its content: 20-25 years at the turn of the XIX-XX centuries" [3]. We can take an appearance of a first Russian Symbolists poems collection, a peak of composers (A.N. Scriabin and M.P. Mussorgsky) activities, and birth of "World of Art" artistic union as a starting point.

This art-history approach should be complemented by philosophical and sociocultural analysis, and the methodology will be based on cultural-anthropological comparativistics and axiological research. In other words, there is a problem of philosophical understanding of the totality of these approaches.

The "Silver Age" concept was successfully expressed by V.S. Tolstikov: "The term of "Silver Age" was one of the

first to be used by the writer and philosopher V. V. Rozanov to characterize the post-Pushkin period in the history of Russian literature" [4]. Such a differentiation of Russian culture epochs through the philosophical analysis of artistic literature seems quite fair. The outstanding Russian philosopher A.F. Losev wrote: "Russian literature is the true Russian philosophy, original, brilliant philosophy in the colors of the word, shining with a rainbow of thoughts, clothed in the flesh and blood of living images of artistic creativity" [5].

It is necessary to proceed from the cultural integrity, in which the originality of worldview positions, the person and the new era society spiritual warehouse, reflected in Russian literature and philosophy, has been formed.

In the 70s and 80s of the 20th century, the "Silver Age" was interpreted in the context of both the historical and artistic understanding of the poetic paradigm represented by symbolism, in particular, and modernism in general, and the emergence of new general cultural concepts. To this day, the concept of modernism in its cultural and historical understanding integrates a wide range of meanings of the "Silver Age" into a complete picture of sociocultural actuality.

However, it cannot be an exhaustive definition, since it pays insufficient attention to Russian philosophical-religious thought, which originated in the 19th century. The sociocultural environment in which this thought developed, determined the uniqueness of the spiritual world-view of Russian symbolism in many respects.

Abstract philosophical knowledge is encountered with one's determinate being, with social relations and the scientific worldview precisely in the paradigm of symbolism. Symbolism can be called the main mirror of the Silver Age era, because in its context the project of a new ontology was outlined. Symbolism sought to implant man and society in the renewed quality of being, it reflected both religious and revolutionary quest, passive eschatological expectation, and philosophy of rebellion. N.A. Berdyaev wrote: "Symbolism was an expression of isolation from social reality, a departure to another world" [6], not for the purpose of intellectual oblivion, but for the expansion of ideological perspective, view on the world and its myth from the universal dimension of symbol.

The idea of all-unity is inseparably connected with the symbolism concept as a worldview that transforms reality. This idea was developed by the greatest philosopher and symbolist poet V.S. Solovyov along with the categories of catholicity, sophiology and theurgy. As A.A. Bliskavitsky noted: "The activity of the Russian symbolists is permeated with a true desire for all-unity. It found expression in the reinterpretation of such cultural phenomena as sophiology, theurgy, and collegiality. They tried to outline concrete steps for the realization of universal harmony." [7]

The desire to transform the social and personal actuality was characteristic of the epoch, and this was expressed both in the cultural and religious renaissance and in the socialist revolution. Let us try to understand this ontological duality and see how it influenced the Silver Age project.

## II. SOCIOCULTURAL ISSUES OF THE SILVER AGE

The philosophical understanding of culture, that was characteristic of Russian religious philosophy, implied a kind of obligation, a cultural project aimed to the future. The being entirety question achieved through sociocultural transformation — the change of reality by a new worldview — was presented to the future. It is no longer confined to the sphere of idealism, but it also doesn't fall into social democratic intelligentsia nihilism (N.G. Chernyshevsky, D.I. Pisarev, N.A. Dobrolyubov). This transformation implies all-unity project realization, that is, true being implementation, which combines both the first and second, not impoverishing them, but enhancing their individual qualities in the integral development system.

The formal reflection of sociocultural being transformation through the all-unity idea in the Silver Age era is a new art. According to V.S. Solovyov: "New art returns to the earth with love and compassion, but not for the same to sink into the darkness and spite of earthly life, for this does not require any art, but in order to heal and renew this life" [8]. Transformation is a property of mystical action, divine act, therefore, the art, according to Solovyov, must be free, since freedom is an attribute of divinity.

The necessity for free actualization of a new art as a mean of sense-setting in a crisis society, as it was at the turn of the century, and the identification of spiritual landmarks, notes in his early researches N.A. Berdyaev: "The fulfillment of our hundred-year-old political dream must be connected with the great cultural and religious Russian renaissance. Only then will we know in the name of what to act and create. Our goal is not only elementary liberation, but also a cultural renaissance, a creation of culture on the basis of a renewed religious consciousness" [9]. However, the concept of the "Russian renaissance", introduced by Berdyaev into the historical and philosophical usage, cannot delineate the boundaries of the "Silver Age" definition, because, according to M.A. Voskresenskaya: "The Russian Renaissance is a complex of attitudes peculiar to the Silver Age creators. This term reflects the general orientation of their thoughts and experiences rather than marks some kind of integral socio-cultural education" [10]. The task that Berdyaev puts on is implicit in the "Silver Age" sociocultural project, endowing

it with a number of spiritual meanings, but still a person is understood exclusively personalistically, that is, as an absolute reality that society is subordinated to (and not vice versa). According to Berdyaev the project ontology as whole is reduced to a separate personality, which is the creator of his era. He theurgically fills being with a higher meaning, which can be comprehend only by chosen persons — the creators of the free spirit.

But, as Koteneva rightly notes in her study, at the end of the 19th and the beginning of 20th centuries, "real practice was far ahead of the theoretical understanding of the new political culture principles" [11]. And it was not only interclass dialogue that was difficult, but also within the classes themselves such phenomena as, for example, sectarianism, populism, decadence on the one hand, and God-seeking, Marxism, revolutionary socialism on the other, appeared. The epoch was devoid of integrity, differentiated into many projects, which the intelligentsia could not reflect on.

None of the sociocultural phenomena that are noted above can be called leading – most likely, they are different facets of a single figure, a holistic comprehension of which took place differently. For example, decadence as a socio-cultural component of the "Silver Age" phenomenon was a reaction to the social and political upheavals of the end of the XIX century. Decadence did not pretend to be a complete reflection of being, but criticized the existing order of modernity. In the first place, the ideas of nihilism. Decadence repelled philistine spiritlessness pressure, it promoted the dialogue of "Russian idea" with Western European spirit outstanding creations of the end of XIX century [12]. However, in accordance with Berdyaev, the period "of decadence and aestheticism was quickly over, and a transition to symbolism, which meant seeking in the spiritual realm, and to mysticism, took place" [13].

## III. SYMBOLISM AS A SOCIOCULTURAL PHENOMENON

Berdyaev also points to the transforming mission of symbolism, the followers of which "wanted national art, tried to overcome decadent aestheticism, and sought social order" [14].

Having passed through the nihilism and decadence stage, that criticized the moral foundations of Russian culture, society faced the need for spiritual filling. This function was assumed by symbolism. It was ontologically connected with catholicity, sophiology and theurgy.

Catholicity as a philosophical and social category was one of the key concepts of the Russian religious culture at the end of the 19th century. It proceeds from the affirmation of the church as the highest state of being, in which individuals are merged into a whole unity without absorbing of their individual qualities. The idea of catholicity was developed by the slavophiles and A.S. Homiyakov in particular.

Sophiology concept involves the perfect society project, where Sofia is the soul of God-manhood. The cosmic creative principle, which allows society to begin spiritual

transformation, consists in a mystical comprehension of absolute higher ideas. The authors exploring the idea of Sophia (V. Soloviev, S.N. Bulgakov, L. P. Karsavin) point to a nationwide cause of social and spiritual transformation.

Theurgy is the key concept of N.A. Berdyaev and symbolists, because here we are talking about free creativity, which transforms reality in order to achieve the highest form of positive all-unity – truth in beauty. V.S. Soloviev defines the theurgic project in such way: “Artists and poets must become priests and prophets again, but in a different, more important and sublime sense: not only the religious idea will own them, but they will own it themselves and consciously control its earthly incarnations” [15]. This establishment was followed by the most prominent figures of the Silver Age, and the religious consciousness renewal, the key moment of the sociocultural situation of the epoch, begins with it.

Another ontological feature of symbolism was the mythological worldview. The symbol itself is not an actual reflection of reality, but its purpose; therefore, being is understood by the symbolists in a mythological context. And the myth, according to A.F. Losev, the last thinker of the symbolism era, is a hypostasized symbol as an embodied idea [16], which expresses the fullness of being. Thus, symbolism claimed a holistic understanding of sociohistorical processes.

The main purpose of symbolism was a world value transformation by means of aesthetics. It was a message to the future, a project that required great intellectual effort of a free society to unfold.

Understanding of the determinate being and myth of the epoch through a symbol allowed the philosophers to reflect social moods.

Revolutionary coup, a change of government, a Great War and the new ideology — everything that, according to the authors of the “Vekhi” famous collection, could not be understood and accepted by Russian intelligentsia, was foreseen and realized by Symbolists.

#### IV. SUBJECTIVITY IN THE CONTEXT OF ALL-UNITY

M.M. Prokhorov identifies two major trends in the philosophy of the Silver Age:

- Rethinking of world-human relations in the categories of activism and substanceism;
- Axiological reorientation towards the culture of creative life as an absolute value [17].

The author proceeds from two types of ontological fundamentalism - ancient and modern.

Ancient worldview tends to anti-creative substantiveness of being, and Modernism philosophy — to activism. The “Silver Age” philosophers, according to Prokhorov, aspire to the second “type of fundamentality competing with substantial fundamentality — to the fundamentality of activity” [18]. The author emphasizes that they were on the verge of losing the subject, because a person leaves the ontological dimension and go to functionalism.

The Silver Age tried to unite the two fundamentals through spiritual transformation of both the human will and kind of worldview. Nihilism as a negation of existing reality order becomes the first step in the development of a new world outlook. The second step is appealing to the subject, the medium of ontological potential. The second stage involves addressing the subject, the bearer of ontological potential. Finally, the author talks about co-evolution — the joint development of man, society (becoming technogenic) and the environment.

Andrey Bely (B.N. Bugayev), a most famous person among philosophers of symbolism, tried to unite this two fundamentality into a single ontology.

According to Bely, subjectivity encompasses not only self-contained personal being, but an all-human individual endowed with consciousness as co-knowledge (joint knowledge of one subject-matter). For him, the sense of personality is, first of all, the idea of the incompleteness of subject being. One’s “I” is a part of the whole, which Bely calls the self-conscious soul. The self-consciousness of society includes the subject as its form, and culture as the meaning. Relationship between form and meaning produces metaculture or “the culture of a person in me, by which I connected with the culture of all possible consciousnesses” [19]. Bely asserts that subject conveys content to the culture through his knowledge, and the culture is something whole that unites the meta-individual subjectivity, it is the meaning of self-consciousness. Being isn’t determined by substantial closure, because subject overcomes his biological singularity in culture. It is possible to deduce the existential definition of culture: “in relation to being, culture is a reality; in relation to rational knowledge, it is organic knowledge” [20].

Bely's principle of ontology is as follows: objectively, only the transpersonal “I” of all mankind is verily. It defines individual personal and cultural entities. These entities themselves are deprived of the forces of self-determination and interaction, and, in fact, are monads harmonized by the Absolute. The monads co-evolution with environment is established by divine principle. The God-manhood philosophy of Solovyov is built on similar principles, which states that “true humanity, as a universal form of uniting material nature with a deity, or a form of perception of a deity by nature, is of necessity God-manhood” [21].

God-manhood is the main category of all-unity ontology, the top of “Silver Age” philosophical thought. Berdyaev, summing up the reflections on “Silver Age”, emphasizes that realization of God-manhood as a social standard was possible only with active position of man in relation to the social being chaos. Berdyaev notes that subjectivity always balances on the verge of dissolution and mixing in supra-individual being. Thus, religious intelligentsia experienced a transcendental temptation of the loss of subject. This led to a passive expectation of social being reorganization by external forces, and obedience of personal will subordination to chaotic world substance. And therefore, according to Berdyaev, the project of God-manhood was not implemented, which led to the subordination of man by society in accordance with the standard of Marxism. He emphasizes

that “that a person retains his highest value, his freedom and independence from the power of nature and society, if there is God and God-manhood” [22]. Berdyaev associates the collapse of “Silver Age” sociocultural project precisely with the loss of subject, devaluation of man and deprivation of his status as a divine reality. This is due to division of intelligentsia into two camps, which Berdyaev defined as anthropological duality. Berdyaev writes: “Russian is an apocalyptic or nihilist; the apocalyptic at the positive pole and the nihilist at the negative pole” [23]. Explicating personal being through the public being, Berdyaev believed that the person is not just society reflection, but contains its essential basis in itself, as well as society, it does not consist of individuals, but it is a supra-individual entity itself.

At the end of the 19th century, the process of sociocultural differentiation begins, and the monistic approach to society gives way to pluralism with a democratic tendency, which is reflected in all social life spheres, including political transformations. It became necessary to give a philosophical reflection on the sociocultural paradigm changes. Exactly then V.S. Solovyov develops the concept of all-unity, in which the monistic and pluralistic are not in contradiction, but in complementarity. A substantive and activist approach to human relations is also reconciled. It should be noted that the social concepts of A. Belyi, S.L. Frank, S.N. Bulgakov, L.P. Karsavin is rooted precisely in the Solovyov’s all-unity metaphysics.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Modern researchers have no single approach to the philosophical understanding of the “Silver Age” sociocultural problems. This is caused by

First, the lack of strict differentiation of methodological principles in an interdisciplinary study;

Secondly, the vagueness of subject definition and, as a result, terminological inconsistency;

Thirdly, the understanding difference of the "Silver Age" phenomenon genesis;

However, these discrepancies enrich the methodological arsenal, without obscuring the area of research interests. So M.A. Voskresenskaya, following a systematic approach, believes that "the sociocultural foundations and contours of the Silver Age as a systemic integrity are revealed through the description and analysis of its system-forming elements, which are cultural nature, social base, language of culture, chronotope" [24].

When studying the “Silver Age” socio-cultural phenomenon, one should pay attention to identifying the structural dimensions of various cultural dominions as elements of a single system operating with various contexts of meanings. These contexts are as follows:

- the spiritual reality of the individual subjective world (religious philosophy, personalism);
- a life-meaning filling of human proportionate reality (Rozanov, Frank, Bulgakov, Russian Marxists);

- religious and cultural symbolism (symbolists, anthroposophists);
- intense search for synthetic worldviews (“late” Tolstoy, Solovyov, Belyi, D.S. Merezhkovsky);
- the existential experience of world description (Vyach. Ivanov, Rozanov, Belyi, decadents).

In contrast to the system approach, we can put personalism and the idea of spiritual renaissance as the defining discourses of "Silver Age". Symbolists' worldview takes on the mission of spirituality reviving. It implies a change in spiritual reality through aesthetic transformation.

One of the main features of the “Silver Age” is the ontological socio-personal duality, the presence of two subject fundamentalities. This duality didn’t allow to complete the project of all-unity implementation, begun by FM. Dostoevsky in the idea of the Russian all-subjectivity and developed by Solovyov in the doctrine of God-manhood. Moreover, ontological duality led to a radical changes in the socio-cultural formation, which marked the end of the “Silver Age” epoch.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] M.A. Voskresenskaya, “The Silver Age Phenomenon: a problem field of cultural-historical comprehension” in Tomsk State University Bulletin, 2017. No. 48, pp.20-28.
- [2] M.A. Voskresenskaya, “Silver Age: fiction, intent or reality (comments on the unfinished dispute about terms)” in Tomsk State University Bulletin. 2007. No. 295, pp.119-122.
- [3] N.V. Koteneva, “Characteristics of the "Silver Age" as a sociocultural era” [Electronic resource] in Analytica kulturologii: elektron. scientific journ. 2014. No. 3, URL: [http://www.tverlingua.by.ru/archive/005/5\\_3\\_1.htm](http://www.tverlingua.by.ru/archive/005/5_3_1.htm) (access date: 07.15.2018).
- [4] V.S. Tolstikov, “To the question of the Russian culture of the Silver Age” in Bulletin of Chelyabinsk State University. 2012. No. 18 (272), pp. 62-68.
- [5] A.F. Losev, Philosophy. Mythology. Culture. Moscow: Politizdat, 1991. 525 p. 212
- [6] N.A. Berdyaev, The origins and meaning of Russian communism. Moscow: Nauka, 1990. 224 p.
- [7] A.A. Bliskavitskij, “Philosophical and aesthetic foundations of Russian symbolism “in Bulletin of Slavic cultures, 2011. No. 1, pp. 31-43.
- [8] V.S. Solovyov, Collected Works in 2 vol. Vol.II. Moscow: Misl, 1998. 822 p.
- [9] N.A. Berdyaev, “Culture and politics (to the philosophy of the new Russian history)” in Berdyaev N. Sub specie aeternitatis: philosophical, social and literary experiments. Moscow: Kanon+, 2002, pp. 310–326.
- [10] M.A. Voskresenskaya, “The Silver Age Phenomenon: a problem field of cultural-historical comprehension” in Tomsk State University Bulletin, 2017. No. 48, pp.20-28.
- [11] N.V. Koteneva, “Characteristics of the "Silver Age" as a sociocultural era” [Electronic resource] in Analytica kulturologii: elektron. scientific journ. 2014. No. 3 URL: [http://www.tverlingua.by.ru/archive/005/5\\_3\\_1.htm](http://www.tverlingua.by.ru/archive/005/5_3_1.htm) (access date: 07.15.2018).
- [12] V.S. Tolstikov, “To the question of the Russian culture of the Silver Age” in Bulletin of Chelyabinsk State University. 2012. No. 18 (272), pp. 62-68.

- [13] N.A. Berdyaev, *Self-knowledge. Russian idea*. Moscow: Astrel, 2011. 604 p.
- [14] N.A. Berdyaev, *The origins and meaning of Russian communism*. Moscow: Nauka, 1990, 224 p.
- [15] V.S. Solovyov, *Collected Works in 2 vol. Vol.II*. Moscow: Misl, 1998, p. 293
- [16] Dj. Rimondji, "Symbol and myth in the philosophy of A.F. Losev: poetic images of M.Yu. Lermontov" in *Teacher XXI century*, 2015, no. 2-3. p. 421
- [17] M.M. Prokhorov, "Thinking about the final meaning of the Russian philosophy of the Silver Age" in *TSU Bulletin*. 1998. no. 3. P. 18
- [18] M.M. Prokhorov, "Thinking about the final meaning of the Russian philosophy of the Silver Age" in *TSU Bulletin*. 1998. no. 3. P. 21
- [19] A. Beliy, *Self-conscious soul*. Moscow: Kanon+, 2004, p. 33
- [20] A. Beliy, *Self-conscious soul*. Moscow: Kanon+, 2004, p. 44
- [21] V.S. Solovyov, *Collected Works in 2 vol. Vol.II*. Moscow: Misl, 1998. 822 p.
- [22] N.A. Berdyaev, *Self-knowledge. Russian idea*. Moscow: Astrel, 2011. 604 p.
- [23] N.A. Berdyaev, "Philosophical truth and intellectual verity" in *Milestones. From the depth*. Moscow: Pravda, 1991.
- [24] M.A. Voskresenskaya, "The Silver Age Phenomenon: a problem field of cultural-historical comprehension" in *Tomsk State University Bulletin*, 2017. No. 48, pp.20-28.