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# Crisis and Catharsis: Altered States of Consciousness in Andrei Bely's Novels

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by

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## Introduction

In 1927, Andrei Bely completed *The Line of My Life*, an attempt at constructing a visual version of his own "spiritual history." It consists of seven-year periods, all of which contain a crisis and a resolution. In the middle of the period is the neutral number four, marking the "internal breaking point" of the cycle and forming a biographical "knot."[1] The number seven indicates the "rhythmic pulsation" that can cause "dedicatory knots" to emerge, but any of these slowdowns or disturbances can become so serious that an intense, *explosive* impulse is necessary to return to the lost rhythm.[2] In other words, *in order to move from one knot to another, a crisis must occur*. For Bely, this knot appeared at the exact point where the rhythm was broken, which meant that this impulse needed to shift to an entirely different state of consciousness.[3] An early outline of his research plan indicates as such: "the work of the next seven years in the line of consciousness: a crisis of life, a crisis of thought, a crisis of culture, a crisis of consciousness."[4]

This is an incomplete explanation of Bely's project, which is far too complex in its methodology and execution to be sketchily summarized. What is clear, however, is the author's belief that the story of a life is formulated around its moments of crisis. While calamities lead to resolution, Bely's structure is so contingent on there being recurring episodes of distress that an impression builds: a man who is uninterested, perhaps even incapable, of attaining stability, contentment, or a whole sense of self. This explosive impulse was apparent to those who knew Bely, as well as critical to the stories he produced. Altered states of consciousness appear in his prose over the course of his highly prolific career, spanning from his acclaimed, though lesser

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[1] Valery Podoroga, "Literature as Self-Consciousness: The Experience of Andrei Bely," in *Mimesis: The Analytic Anthropology of Literature*, trans. Evgeni V. Pavlov, vol. 1 (London, UK: Verso, 2022), 223–300, 293-294.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Andrej Belyj - Ivanov-Razumnik. *Perepiska*. Edited by A. V. Lavrov, J. E. Malmstad (St. Petersburg: Atheneum-Feniks, 1998): 503, quoted in Podoroga, 294.

known *Symphonies,* to his later *Moscow* novels. Bely's eccentricities reflected an identity that was constantly in flux and for often legitimate reasons, served as the source for his peers' frustrations. And yet, it was undeniable that part of his "genius" stemmed from this unshakeable, innate, and ultimately tragic instability. In the words of Fyodor Stepun, who knew him well:

> In his work, and first and foremost in his language, Bely was a kind of juggler. His thinking was an exercise on the flying trapeze, high under the dome of his lonely self. And yet these acrobatics (see his 'Emblematic of Meaning') were not an empty 'mind game.' In them, as in any acrobatics, one can sense a lot of labour and skill. They also have a lot of foreboding and suffering.[5]

Channeling his own experience of a fractured sense of self in his art, Bely managed to strike a balance. The results would go on to establish him as one of the most daring, influential, and important literary figures in twentieth century Russia.

In this project, I will be focusing on altered mental states in three of Bely's most celebrated novels: *The Silver Dove*, *Petersburg*, and *Kotik Letaev*. The effects produced by this condition are emphasized through the use of symbols, language, and rhythm, but what lies at the origin of every characters' changing consciousness is the sudden onslaught of a past crisis that until then, has been repressed, lost, or not yet known. What can further complicate this existential turmoil and intensify its disorientating effects is the attempt to overcome these moments of a split identity through a desperate search for meaning. Often guided by a false belief that this will lead to a whole sense of self, the quests of Bely's characters can be misguided and end in destruction, particularly when attempted through external or material means. However, not every crisis of consciousness carries a negative outcome and more often than not, the result lies somewhere in the middle.

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[5] Fyodor Stepun, "Pamyati Andreya Belogo [To the memory of Andrei Bely]," in *Vospominaniya ob Andree Belom* [Memories of Andrei Bely] (Moscow, 1995): 169, quoted in Podoroga, 232.

Analyzing these novels allows us to trace the evolution of Bely's attitude toward altered states of minds by engaging with the thematic and poetic qualities that bring them to life. Of the three, *The Silver Dove* and *Petersburg* bear more resemblance to one another than *Kotik Letaev*. This is in large part due to matters of context and intention. In regards to time frame, both *The Silver Dove* and *Petersburg* take place in 1905, the year of the First Russian Revolution and a time of widespread political and social unrest. This climate sets the tone for these two novels, with *The Silver Dove* being centered around the intelligentsia's growing interest in religious sectarianism and *Petersburg*'s setting pointing to the city where extreme political views are transforming into acts of terrorism. In contrast, *Kotik Letaev* is set in 1880's Moscow, where, for the most part, we are confined to the interior space of the narrator's apartment. While personal elements from Bely's life reverberate in the two earlier novels, *Kotik Letaev* is a work of autobiographical fiction, based on the author's own childhood. It is also the most experimental in regards to form and style, even more unconventional in its rhythmic prose and use of typographical devices than was already present in his prior work. Despite these differences, Bely's voice is unmistakable and rings throughout all three, a testament to his commitment to Symbolism and "the living word."

What constitutes an "altered state of consciousness" in my analysis is not defined by strict parameters or means of categorization. To operate from a mandated set of guidelines could be limiting and might lead to pathologizing, resulting in the oversimplification of Bely's complex, multifaceted, and sometimes impenetrable intentions. However, for the sake of clarity, it is worth introducing material that might help build a general framework for what constitutes altered states in *The Silver Dove*, *Petersburg*, and *Kotik Letaev*. Valery Podoroga's "Literature as Self-consciousness: The Experience of Andrei Bely," provides a useful point of departure.

Podoroga focuses on Bely's systematic use of "making-strange," which he states is present in every aspect of his writing. Breaking down what specifically is "made-strange," he comes up with the following list:

- *spatial-temporal images*: in reliefs, 'distances,' positions, horizons, heights and falls;
- '*hardened everyday life*': a protest against the deadening of living experience, as a response – an explosion;
- *general gestures of fear*: 'spies' – mania of persecution, escape;
- *corporeality*: experiments with one's own body, development of correct poses/gesticulation/movement; instant reactions: 'jerks,' 'seizures' and 'convulsions';
- *'normal' states of consciousness*, instead of them: extrasensory images of the real (hallucinations, ecstasies, visions, delusions and so on); as a result, doubling, duplicity, self-making-strange;
- *literary language*: by means of a range of rhythmic, grammatical, morphological, phonetic and gesticulatory-mimic experiments.[6]

Podoroga's list is comprehensive, detailed, and provides an assessment that is not only accurate, but compelling. However, I would argue that the "making-strange" (or altering) of "normal" states of consciousness is an umbrella of its own, one that encompasses and is built upon the other categories named. While "extrasensory images of the real" are critical to Bely's depiction of altered mental states, conveying this phenomenon of the "self-making-strange" is accomplished by engaging with every type of representation of inner strife, extending beyond the occurrence of symptoms like hallucinations or visions. For instance, I address the role that language plays in characters' delusions in *Petersburg*, such as Nikolai's "Pépp Péppovich Pépp" or Dudkin's "*enfranshish*/Shishnarfne." In *The Silver Dove*, Daryalsky's "*hardened everyday life*" is what embarks the search for his "sunset," making him susceptible to the sect, the manipulation of his thoughts by the leader Kudeyarov, and resulting in states of ecstasy, frenzy, and fear. In *Kotik Letaev*, I explore "*corporeality*" as a source of the child's disorientation and

[6] Podoroga, 230.

split identity by connecting his abnormal movements, odd physical appearance, and distorted mirror image with the psychological damage caused by his parents' turbulent relationship. Bely brings a character's underlying crisis to the surface by incorporating the altered mental states as listed by Podoroga, thus "making-strange" the characters' inner lives for his reader. This process of amalgamation is what ultimately allows for the altered state of consciousness to come to the forefront.

Bely has a notoriously long list of philosophical influences. A range of intellectual sources can be found in a single work, all of which are worthy of study. However, his ideas can often be inconsistent and at times quite difficult to identify, which he was aware of: "Don't pin me down once and for all—you pinners, explainers, and popularizers—to Solov'ev, or to Nietzsche, or to whomever [most likely a reference to Steiner]. I do not renounce them since I have learned from them, but to fuse 'my symbolism' with some other metaphysics is the height of stupidity."[7] In writing this project, I more or less heeded his warning, though I do address the crucial influence of Rudolf Steiner in Chapter 3 and incorporate the Nietzschean framework of the Apollonian/Dionysian model in Chapter 1 (the theme is also significant to *Petersburg*, but is not included in my analysis of the novel). That being said, there are several philosophers I do not touch on, but who are critical to Bely's thinking. There are two who he was especially involved with: Vladimir Solovyov (the earliest and most influential to his symbolism and friendship with Alexander Blok) and Immanuel Kant (the neo-Kantian school).

I begin each chapter by placing the novel in its historical context. In *The Silver Dove*, I look at the history of sectarianism in Russia and elucidate on what drew so many writers to this way of life in the early twentieth century. Rather than direct my focus specifically on the

[7] Andrei Bely, *Na rubezhe dvukh stoletii* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1931): 187, quoted in Lazar Fleishman, "Bely's Memoirs," in *Andrey Bely: Spirit of Symbolism*, ed. John E Malmstad (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 216–41, 227.

revolutionary backdrop in *Petersburg*, I concentrate on the history of the city itself in order to paint a picture of what led up to 1905: the tension of East and West, Peter the Great's legacy, as well as the literary tradition established by writers such as Dostoevsky, Gogol, and Pushkin (especially his poem "The Bronze Horseman"). In *Kotik Letaev*, the historical context is specific to the circumstances of Bely's life when he began working on the novel. His relocation to Switzerland and devotion to Rudolf Steiner at the time is arguably what conceived the idea for the autobiographical work. At minimum, one can definitively say that Anthroposophy was a major influence in Bely's depiction of remembering life before birth, losing contact with the universe as a child comes into consciousness, and what he calls "memories of memories."

Although the Symbolists were interested in sectarianism and were curious to experience this different, perhaps more freeing way of life, *The Silver Dove* is considered the furthest removed from Bely's biography. This is especially in relation to Daryalsky, who does not bear as obvious a resemblance to the author in the same way as Nikolai Ableukhov, for instance. However, the altered mental state experienced by the hero, characterized by feelings of paranoia and doom, is a representation of Bely's at the time: "A personal note reverberates in the novel, […] a note that had tortured me throughout this whole period: a morbid sense of 'persecution,' a feeling of nets and a sense of impending destruction; it's all in the plot of The Dove […] by externalizing my 'illness' in the plot, I freed myself from it."[8] For Bely, writing is an act of self-liberation. By channeling his crisis into his art, he is able to attain resolution. That is, until the next crisis comes to the surface.

As will be discussed in Chapter 3, Bely's childhood serves as the foundation for his split sense of self, a direct response in attempting to navigate his parent's constant opposition.

[8] Andrei Bely, *Mezhdu dvukh revolyutsii*, quoted in Maria Carlson, "The Silver Dove," in *Andrey Bely: Spirit of Symbolism*, 60–95, 64-5.

Vladislav Khodasevich, the Silver Age poet and friend of the author, explains how he eventually became used to this "torn" feeling of hiding his love for his father from his mother, and vice versa, "and taught himself to believe that there was no inherent lie in such deceit. Later on, he began to transfer this same ambivalence onto other people—which earned him a reputation for being two-faced."[9] There are many instances where his actions were in fact two-faced, especially in his friendships and relationships with women. This made him the subject of harsh criticisms, such as that he lacked "personhood" and possessed a tendency for "treachery." Bely's response to these accusations was that he was misunderstood, which in turn begs the question of whether or not he had a stable understanding of himself in the first place. Perhaps the work he produced is most emblematic of his true self, especially his depictions of altered states of consciousness as the symptom of a larger, unshakeable crisis.

Khodasevich paints a picture of a young Boris Bugaev, before he became Andrei Bely.[10] "The little boy had golden curls that reached down to his shoulders and his eyes were deep blue. He rolled a golden hoop along a golden path with a golden stick. Eternity, 'that child at play,' pushes the golden circle of the sun along in precisely the same fashion. The image of Bely as a young child is closely linked with the image of the sun."[11] Bely often evoked the sun in his writing, possibly one of the most consistent symbols over the course of his career. The image has also been said to span the course of his life. He died on January 8, 1934 from a cerebral hemorrhage. For a very long time, however, it was thought that the cause of his death was a sunstroke, a fittingly poetic ending to his life.[12] Before passing, he asked to hear a poem he had written long before:

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[9] Vladislav Khodasevich, "Andrei Bely," in *Necropolis*, trans. Sarah Vitali (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019), 49–80, 53.
[10] Andrei Bely is Boris Bugaev's pen name; Bely translates to "White."
[11] Ibid., 50.
[12] As the inventor of "cerebral play," who would often describe sensations of a skull opening up or exploding in his writing, his cause of death being a cerebral hemorrhage is apt, albeit less hopeful.

He trusted in the golden brilliance,
But perished in the sunlight's rays.
He measured eras in ideas,
But couldn't live out all his days.[13]

As many have pointed out, the essence of Bely's life seems to be contained in these four lines: an exceptional, yet tormented man; an author for whom the torment was the fertile soil of creation. Like the hero of *The Silver Dove*, Bely's attempt to reconcile the lightness and darkness within by finding meaning in art is reminiscent of the beautiful, yet fleeting sunset.

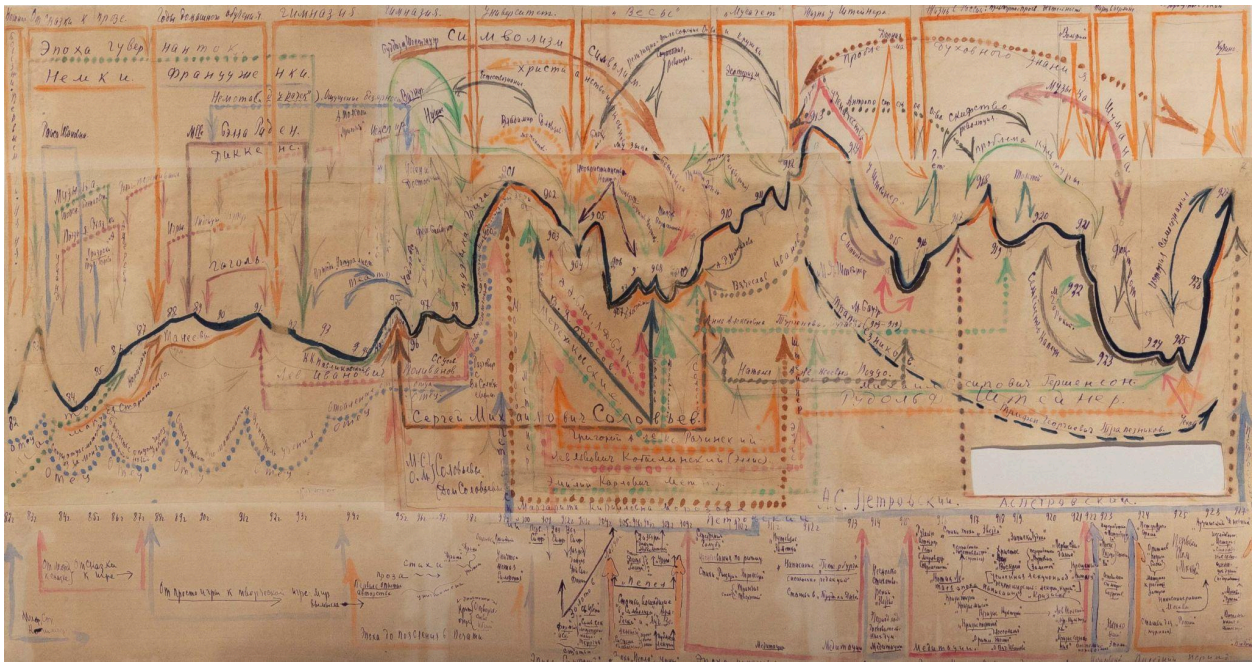

Figure 1. Bely, Andrei. *The Line of My Life*. Plan and Explanatory Notes. 1918. Handwritten document. Russian State Library. Photo by Ivan Erofeev.
https://garagemca.org/en/programs/research-laboratories/we-treasure-our-lucid-dreams

[13] Bely, excerpt from poem "To my friends [*Druz'iam*]" (1907), quoted in Khodasevich, "Andrei Bely," in *Necropolis*, trans. Sarah Vitali, 80.

# CHAPTER 1

## Daryalsky's "Sunset": Altered Identity and (Self-)Sacrifice in *The Silver Dove*

Written in 1909, Andrei Bely's first novel, *The Silver Dove*, is set in 1905 and thus portrays Russian society at a critical juncture. At this time, mass political and social dissent against the Tsar, nobility, and the ruling class had spread across the Russian Empire. Exacerbated by Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, this unrest resulted in the Revolution of 1905, considered to be a predecessor to the Bolshevik revolt of 1917. *The Silver Dove* also resonates with the issues that were prevalent within Russian Symbolism in the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution: the movement's struggle to define its identity, grounded in the fact that Russia was caught between influences from both the East and the West, along with debates on the spiritual essence of art and its capacity to foster a vibrant, organic community of self-aware and spiritually "awoken" individuals. Disillusioned with the intellectual dubiety of Moscow, Bely's protagonist, the poet Pyotr Daryalsky, winds up in the Russian countryside, eventually becoming a member of the rural mystical group known as the Doves. Led by the carpenter Kudeyarov, the group manipulates Daryalsky to further the sectarians' goal of producing offspring with Matryona, a figure in the sect believed to be a "Mother of God."

Through Daryalsky, Bely grapples with the concept of the Apollonian and Dionysian, a duality which is symbolized in the novel's recurring image of a setting sun. In the novel, Bely emphasizes the connection between the untamed passion of Dionysus and the concept of self-sacrifice in the Christian faith, by portraying Daryalsky as a man on a spiritual quest who increasingly embodies the primal rebellion and fervent zeal of the Dionysian archetype. This spiritual upheaval is spurred by his lust for Matryona, which engulfs Daryalsky in a tumultuous blend of ecstasy and suffering. As Bely's hero immerses himself in the cult of the Doves, he

undergoes a profound transformation, losing his sense of self and the ability to make judgments. A painful fracture in his perception and emotions ensues—an altered state of consciousness which holds the potential to crush, or renew, both his body and soul.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the transformation of *The Silver Dove*'s protagonist from a spiritually lost poet to a confident, yet destroyed man. I begin by analyzing the way in which Bely's depiction of an altered state of mind was impacted by the social, cultural, and religious questions which prevailed at the time. Aware of the struggle that the Russian Symbolists, such as himself, Alexander Blok, Vyacheslav Ivanov, and Dmitri Merezhkovsky endured individually and collectively when reconciling the crisis of metaphysical meaning and the idea of "myth" (or, to put it differently, resolving the rift between "heaven" and "earth"), Bely created a novel in which earthly desires are featured as one of the means of reaching the heavenly heights.[14] *The Silver Dove* holds a special place in Russian Modernism and, specifically, Symbolism because it displays the author's unique ambivalence on this matter. Bely portrays the conflict between the body and the soul as irreconcilable, thus having his character's plight end in an extraordinary inner metamorphosis, sacrifice, and death. Daryalsky's crisis of identity and Bely's depiction of his altered mental state brings his Symbolist peers' deliberations of the life-on-the-brink to a new artistic height.

*The Silver Dove* is actually considered to be a parodic response to Ivanov, whose views were criticized by Bely to be "a vulgarization of the sublime," for they imposed "something like an equal sign between…Christ and Dionysus, the Mother of God and any childbearing woman, the Virgin and the Maenad, love and eroticism."[15] Ivanov's harmonious myth of Christ-Dionysus is what Daryalsky seeks when he goes on a quest for spiritual fulfillment—or, rather, what he

[14] Edith W. Clowes, *The Revolution of Moral Consciousness: Nietzsche in Russian Literature, 1890-1914* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1988), 152.
[15] Ibid.,157.

calls his "sunset." However, the expected outcome of renewal is subverted by Bely, and instead the quest ends in a total moral and spiritual destruction. This is a result of Daryalsky's increasingly deteriorating mental state, which can be attributed to having lost himself in his search for the Ivanovesque reconciliation between the heavenly and the profane. Bely does not outrightly reject the possibility of rebirth for his hero, but problematizes it so that it can only be achieved with the ultimate sacrifice. Overall, *The Silver Dove* is a reaction to the emerging ideas which the author saw not only as flawed and oversimplified, but also dangerous. The myth of earthly origins of the divine is intoxicating yet deadly, Bely suggests. Daryalsky's journey illustrates this by becoming a frenzied—and failed—pilgrimage for a wholesome sense of self. In *The Silver Dove,* Bely erases Ivanov's "equal sign" between the mundane and the sacral to show that in actuality, Dionysus differs from Christ, not every woman represents the Mother of God, and eroticism does not equate to genuine (divine) love.

### 1.1. The Abandonment of Civilization: Russian Sectarianism as a Subtext of *The Silver Dove*

In addition to the spiritual quest undertaken by Symbolist writers and thinkers, *The Silver Dove* is replete with references to sectarian ideas and rituals of the Silver Age, which went hand-in-hand with the changes in religious practices among Russian artists, writers, and musicians taking place at the time. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Orthodox Church had been perceived as an arm of the state, a culture which the Symbolists were expressly trying to transcend.[16] While still keeping in mind their predecessor's beliefs on the value of the individual and an emphasis on aesthetics, the "younger generation" of Symbolists, led by Bely, Blok, and

[16] John Elsworth, introduction to *The Silver Dove*, by Andrey Bely (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 7–25, 10.

Ivanov, gravitated towards the pressing and politically charged question on the nature of community. The Symbolists held the belief that a genuine sense of togetherness should be built upon a collective spiritual understanding, a shared intuition that sees all people as offspring of a common father, as opposed to mere residents of a shared nation.[17] The ultimate objective of the Symbolist movement of the 1900s was to attain this type of society. In order to do so, they tried to recreate this very idea in their own lives, by fusing together art and life into a single text.

Russia's religious landscape was similarly changing in the 1890-1910s. The number of Schismatics and Sectarians in Russia had steadily increased over the course of the nineteenth century, but the notable change occurred in the period between 1860-1890 due to a mass transition towards the more radical trends of Sectarianism.[18] The State, however, was hesitant to acknowledge the need for religious reforms. Instead, it enacted policies which cruelly persecuted those who lured the Orthodox away from their faith to schism, while missionaries and clergy were generously rewarded for converting Schismatics and Sectarians back to Orthodoxy.[19] The scholar and politician Paul Miliukov relays how this suppression was reflected in official figures: "in the census of 1897, the total number of Sectarians and Schismatics registered 2,135,738 persons of both sexes, when in fact by 1900 it must have reached 20,000,000 and by 1907, 25,000,000, considering the increase in population."[20]

Although the Doves were a fictional sect invented by Bely, their ideology and practices can be traced back to historical accounts of sectarianism and occultism prevalent in the Russian countryside at the turn of the twentieth century. The affiliation between religious sects and Russian populism was arguably brought to light and popularized by Professor Afanasii Shchapov

[17] Ibid., 9.
[18] Paul Miliukov, "The Development of Russian Sectarianism," in *Outlines of Russian Culture, Part 1: Religion and the Church*, ed. Eleanor Davis, Valentine Ughet, and Michael Karpovich (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1942), 77–121, 116.
[19] Ibid., 117.
[20] Ibid.

in 1861. This idea, in turn, inspired generations of Russian socialists. Shchapov closely studied sects as a "movement of religious-political protests" and "proposed that participants in Russian peasant revolts were usually non-Orthodox in religious matters, and that members of Schismatic communities usually opposed state power."[21] He proposed that a commonality among these schisms was the appearance of peasant "Christs." Shchapov paid special attention to the Khlysty sect, a group which may be seen as a prototype of the behavior and beliefs of Bely's Doves.[22] The group was first described on the occasion of a trial in 1745, when it was accused by authorities of performing a secret ritual which featured "ecstatic whirling, self-flagellation, group sex, ritual murder, and cannibalism."[23] It should be noted, however, that these were typical accusations for religious persecutions, and the majority of the evidence was collected either under coercion or provided by hostile observers, such as police officers or missionaries of the Orthodox Church.[24]

The ritual of self-flagellation is noteworthy within the context of *The Silver Dove*, as this is something Bely addresses before the novel begins. He writes in "In Place of a Preface":

> Many have taken the sect of the Doves to be flagellants; I agree, there are features in this sect that show an affinity with the flagellants: but flagellantism, as one of the agents of religious ferment, is not adequately embodied in the crystallized forms currently practiced by the flagellants; it is in a process of development; and in this sense the Doves, as I have depicted them, do not exist; but they are possible with all their insane deviations; in this sense my Doves are entirely real.[25]

What does flagellantism mean to Andrei Bely, and what makes his depiction of the Doves sect so veritable and convincing? Perhaps another example from the Khlysty can offer some insight. There is a notorious story of a bloody ritual performed by the sect, in which "singing, whirling,

[21] Alexander Etkind, "Whirling with the Other: Russian Populism and Religious Sects," *The Russian Review* 62, no. 4 (October 2003): 565–88, 566.
[22] Ibid., 568.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Andrey Bely, *The Silver Dove*, trans. John Elsworth (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 33.

and self-flagellating sectarians cut off one breast of a naked virgin. After her breast was collectively eaten, the community of sectarians engaged in group intercourse, *svalnyi grekh*. The young woman with one breast was called *bogoroditsa* (Mother of God), and she became a leader of the community."[26] While these acts, in and of themselves, are barbaric, the victimized young woman nonetheless appears to have emerged from the ritual spiritually empowered to lead her people. In *The Silver Dove*, this kind of power is what Kudeyarov promises Matryona—if, through her liaison with Daryalsky, she could bear a god-child and thus attain the status of a *bogoroditsa.*

Fascination with sectarianism reinforced Bely's own vision of the unification of aesthetic and religious forms, wherein one must give up the lower earthly self in order to liberate one's higher spiritual self, resulting in the release of an energy which, in Maria Carlson's words, "recharges the noumenal force of the sacred."[27] The story of the eaten breast demonstrates that the peasant commune was not only a collective in the economic and legal sense, with its shared land and desire to live as one family; the true essence of the colony was in the spiritual communion, as well as, perhaps, sexual commonality. Since the lower earthly self is typically thought of as the human's physical being, in performing their violent ritual, the Khlysty demonstrated that the body belonged to the collective, while its sacrifice allowed for the community's ecstatic unity with God.[28]

In *The Silver Dove*, Bely does not allow us to witness an act performed by the group which is so blatantly barbaric, but the "insane deviations" of "the Doves" certainly echo the importance of sacrifice in attaining psychic transformation and renewal that other Russian sects believed in. Moreover, in *The Silver Dove*, the sacrificed body belongs not to someone yet fully

[26] Etkind, 572.
[27] Carlson, "The Silver Dove," in *Andrey Bely: Spirit of Symbolism*, 60–95, 77.
[28] Etkind, 572.

integrated into the collective, but to a man who failed in his initial role as a begetter of the divine child. As a social and religious outsider, Daryalsky was never destined to lead the Doves. He was simply a vessel for their vision. This young city dweller could choose to join the sect, but he could just as easily get discarded by sectarians.

Matryona as an iteration of the *bogoroditsa* figure is certainly the erotic force which attaches Daryalsky to Tselebeyevo. That said, there is another component, ideological in nature, to his attraction to the village of the Doves. Daryalsky's interest in the Russian countryside and its inhabitants can be traced back to 1874, when the "Going to the People" movement began in Russia.[29] Populist intellectuals of the mid-nineteenth yearned to escape their scholarly culture and set out on a mission to integrate themselves with the *narod* (people), believing that sects were the key to the revolution because sectarians were seen as opponents of state power. As Etkind writes, political dissidents relied on the notion that "sectarians would proselytize the radicals and the radicals would propagandize the sectarians. As a result, their ideas would draw closer to each other and the number of adherents would grow."[30] While propagandizing the sectarians was mostly unsuccessful, the phenomenon of educated Russians abandoning their way of life to live among the common people persisted, and was not uncommon in the time when *The Silver Dove* was written. Moreover, a core objective of the Symbolists' was to achieve a community built upon collective spiritual understanding. Due to that mission, for Bely and his contemporaries, this cultural movement "had a particular religious and apocalyptic resonance, reflecting their conviction that the culture of the intelligentsia was doomed and that redemption could come only from reunification with the ordinary people."[31] Daryalsky's actions in *The*

[29] Ibid., 577-578.
[30] Ibid., 578.
[31] Elsworth, 16.

*Silver Dove* certainly help Bely explore the theme of the abandonment of civilization which was so prevalent in the culture of the period.

As a poet who is constantly on the lookout for spiritual enlightenment and a man who embraces the wild sides of his nature, Daryalsky finds the ways of Tselebeyevo's sectarians intriguing, if not appealing. Preoccupied with the idea of spiritual transformation, he finds their unity, mysteriousness, and inner strength strangely appealing. This is why the leaders of the Doves sect could turn the young man's sexual obsession with Matryona and temporary loss of self into a lever for manipulating him to their advantage. Daryalsky's altered mental state could therefore be seen as a response to a prevailing cultural shift towards Sectarianism in Russia, engineered by Kudeyarov, initiated by Matryona, but ultimately driven by "the undeciphered immensity of a mystery that crushes"[32] the young man.

### 1.2. A Fascinating Decline: The Downward Arc of Daryalsky's Soul-Searching

Daryalsky's character arc in *The Silver Dove* keeps the reader in a state of high suspense. The dramatic downward slope begins inconspicuously: Bely's summery and breezy early chapters, only slightly marred by the young lover's anxiety, do not forecast the tragic finale of the novel. The undoing of the thinker and lover comes from without—the Doves who want to claim him for their own—as well as from within. Bely represents Daryalsky's inner transformation through moments of incoherence, gradually revealing his altered mental state as a pathway to the final sacrifice or, possibly, surrender of self to the power beyond the character's comprehension. These frenzied, feverish moments which Daryalsky is launched into engage the reader: we are both horrified and fascinated by his decline.

[32] Bely, *The Silver Dove*, 169.

The evolution of the protagonist's self and the drama of his dissipated selfhood is what propels the plot of *The Silver Dove* forward. Although Bely does not linger on Daryalsky's early years, some aspects of the character's past help us answer the question: what was his original being like? Bely relays Daryalsky's childhood through anecdotes or memories. We learn that he was sent to an educational establishment by his father, but spent his time in libraries and museums rather than in school.[33] He even somehow convinced his mother to write a letter to the headmaster, explaining his absences as a result of an illness, unbeknownst to the other parent.[34] Daryalsky also declared early on that he did not believe in God; his parents were saddened by this, "while he, the youthful heathen, prayed to the crimson sunsets and all manner of things that descended with the sunset into his soul."[35] The motif of sun worship and of a sunset as a symbolic core of Daryalsky's rebellious nature begins here, in the hero's rejection of Russian Orthodoxy—the dominant religion of his culture and milieu.

Bely glosses over what is arguably the most crucial piece of information in Daryalsky's childhood in the briefest terms possible: "His father had died, then his mother." The tragic news is followed by even a shorter action summary, "he became a student."[36] We do not know when the elder Daryalskys died, what they died of, or how their son coped with such an immense loss. Nevertheless, by relying on the image of a mysterious sunset which the orphaned young man worships, Bely suggests that Daryalsky's subconscious combatted this tragic reality from truly

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[33] Vladimir Alexandrov notes that in his memoir, *On The Border of Two Centuries* (1930), "Bely would suggest that the 'crime' in question was his going to a library instead of to school for a period during his early adolescence—another major incident in his life, and one he had planned to depict in *The Crime of Nikolay Letaev*. *The Baptized Chinaman* offers ample evidence that Bely thought of himself (albeit ironically) as a criminal during his early childhood because no matter what he did, one parent was always displeased. Perhaps the incident with the library from a later time in his life should be understood as a further manifestation of the original childhood trauma." Vladimir E. Alexandrov, "Kotik Letaev, The Baptized Chinaman, and Notes of an Eccentric," in *Andrey Bely: Spirit of Symbolism*, ed. John E. Malmstad (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 145–82, 172.

[34] Bely, *The Silver Dove,* 60.

[35] Ibid., 61.

[36] Ibid.

sinking in and causing him irreparable damage in an abstract, repressive manner. So where did Daryalsky transfer this loss? Initially, by "seeking the secret of his sunset" in academia, which proved to be a failure and reduced him to being "a wanderer, alone amidst the fields with his strange, disordered thoughts, but always with his sunset."[37] Later, yearning for caresses and understanding, Daryalsky embraces the romantic love, finding some of the tenderness and connectedness he seeks in a charming young country squire's daughter, Katya. In fact, Bely tells us that Daryalsky was desperate to believe in Katya's love as the key to his secret and that he held onto this belief steadfastly. But what was the secret, exactly? And did the repression of pain undermine Daryalsky's stability, including his ability to remain Katya's fiancé and an intellectual?

For Bely, Daryalsky's mysticism is not only a sign of repressed mental pain (which, by the way, cannot be erased, only transferred, if not properly acknowledged and treated). The hero's search for the secrets of one's existence is an emblem of the times and of his generation, which was apparently the same as Bely's. Himself seeking keys to the enigmas of art and human existence, the divine, and the subconscious all his life, Bely wrote in "The Emblematics of Meaning" that "aesthetic and religious forms are combined in the mystery play."[38] Maria Carlson elaborates on this pronouncement, by underlining a strong connection between the spiritual search of the Russian Silver Age and the notion of an altered mental state—the existential and mystical condition Daryalsky achieves in the novel:

> The original function of the mystery was the symbolic reenactment of the passion, sacrifice, and rebirth of a divine figure for the purpose of enabling the participant in the mystery to experience spiritual identity with the deity, thereby promoting his psychic transformation and renewal. The pivotal point is the sacrifice, where in *imitatio dei*, the

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Bely, "The Emblematics of Meaning," in *Selected Essays of Andrey Bely*, ed. and trans. Steven Cassedy (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 111–97, 166.

> participant symbolically gives up his lower earthly self in order to liberate his higher spiritual self. The energy hereby released recharges the noumenal force of the sacred.[39]

Bely's interest in divine or mind-altering mysteries stems in part from his participation in the Symbolist movement—the Russian iteration of French Symbolist's search for the transformative power of art and its ability to amalgamate artistic and spiritual intimations of the divine with the "lower depth" of one's personality: passions, obsessions, addictions, and other irrational mental states. Like many of his fellow Symbolists, Bely was heavily influenced by Nietzsche, especially by his essays on the dualism of Apollonian and Dionysian ideals. Bely believed that the way to synthesize these was through the aestheticization of life—the process which would ultimately turn into religious creativity, or, theurgy (divine action).[40] Most of Bely's characters represent Apollonian and Dionysian virtues, some strictly fitting into one extreme (for example, Nikolai Ableukhov, Sergei Likhutin, Lippanchenko in *Petersburg*), while others, namely, Daryalsky, get caught in a struggle between the two. This internal moral battle is integral to the plot of *The Silver Dove.* In the novel, the destruction of one's Apollonian self by a Dionysian frenzy leads to the character's moral crisis, loss of identity, and then, death.

### 1.3. The Apollonian and Dionysian Duality of Daryalsky's Nature

The Apollonian figure represents rationality, logic, purity, and reason, whereas the Dionysian figure embraces passion, chaos, emotions, and instincts. When we first encounter Daryalsky, his character fits quite neatly into the Apollonian tradition; he is a poet (Apollo is the god of poetry), acts rationally, and is engaged to Katya, who, in her love for all things clear and

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[39] Carlson, "The Silver Dove," in *Andrey Bely: Spirit of Symbolism*, 60–95, 77.
[40] Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman, eds., *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 16-17.

transparent, functions as another Apollonian figure. Katya is an emblem of purity and innocence; she is a Turgenev-like heroine. Bely characterizes her as childlike, that "she seems to be just a little girl."[41] He also foreshadows the damaging effect that Daryalsky's transgressions will have on her with a warning: "Be careful with a child's heart—if a child's heart stops there is nothing that will make it beat again, nothing. And it is hardly beating as it is, Katya's childish heart."[42] By following her story, we realize that Katya nearly gets corrupted by a lover seeking to explore his sexuality with the implication that the exploration could have led to the downfall of both of them.

Daryalsky's association with Apollonianism (and Katya) ends, however, when he meets Matryona—the country woman and the carpenter's common-law wife who is strangely, but irresistibly charismatic. Matryona clearly represents the Dionysian model of sensuality, and she seems to derive from the pagan aspect of Russian culture. Her earthly beauty and sexuality are undeniably powerful, but also dark and oppressive. She is browless and pock-marked, with sagging breasts and a protruding belly. Bely expands on this image, intimating that Matryona's attractiveness partially stems from her lack of inhibition: "it was not beauty those features expressed, not the preserved chastity of a girl; in the quivering of the snub-nosed carpenter's woman's breasts, in her plump legs with white calves and filthy heels, in her large stomach, in her sloping, predatory brow—was the stamp of unconcealed shamelessness."[43] The essence of Daryalsky's altered state can be attributed to his infatuation with this dearth of reserve. Not only is he unable to resist his passion for Matryona, but his lust also has a strong spiritual component. He thinks, "she will still the longing of your soul and she cannot be betrayed; and in those moments when desire comes upon you, and you see her as she truly is, that pock-marked face

[41] Bely, *The Silver Dove*, 100.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., 169.

and those red tresses will arouse in you not tenderness, but lust."[44] After a consummation of their relationship, Daryalsky's Dionysian proclivities, neglected up to that point, come to the surface. As Bely constantly emphasizes in the novel, the duality of his character's nature demands that his mere craving of Matryona's readily available, unconventionally, but also mesmerizingly beautiful flesh, is endowed with meaning. Daryalsky rationalizes his longing and sexual explorations by directly relating the relationship with Martyona to the mystery of the "sunset," which he alludes to in his ruminations on love, identity, and nature.

Daryalsky is not interested in the morning or midday sun: he longs for the idea of the sun that is departing the sky or dying. For him, therefore, a sunset is a digression from the Apollonian ideal with its brightly lit, rational, lucid aesthetics. That said, Daryalsky's longings, both physical and psychic, or even symbolic, are not entirely representative of his crossing over to the Dionysian side. It is more likely that, in *The Silver Dove*, Bely introduces the idea of sunset as a symbol of transition, with the change from day to night signifying the temporality of the ultimate giver of life, the sun. That Daryalsky's secret is hidden within the sunset suggests that light and dark, sun and moon, Apollo and Dionysius must amalgamate in order for the mystery to ever be revealed. The merging of these opposites, however, can be achieved only through sacrifice. Camille Paglia draws a parallel between Dionysianism and sacrifice in *Sexual Personae*: "Dionysus liberates by destroying. He is not pleasure but pleasure-pain, the tormenting bondage of our life in the body. For each gift he exacts a price. Dionysian orgy ended in mutilation and dismemberment."[45] The "gift" in Daryalsky's case would be the reveal of the mystery of his sunset. In order to be liberated, he must be destroyed. Therefore, undergoing Dionysian self-sacrifice and "pleasure-pain" is necessary for his transition. Daryalsky is naive,

[44] Ibid.
[45] Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 14.

however, not realizing the heavy price which must be paid until this spiritual mutilation and dismemberment has been realized.

It must be noted that a part of Daryalsky's predicament has nothing to do with his inner struggle. When he joins Katya in the countryside—the village of Gugolevo, where her manor house is located—he does not know about a sect which has taken over the neighboring village of Tselebeyevo and is meddling in the affairs of almost all of its citizens. Matryona's common-law husband, Kudeyarov, runs "the Doves," along with a few other elders. As described by Bely, their cult is Dionysian, since the sect's rites, some of them sacrificial, are centered around Matryona, who is supposed to give birth to the new savior, the "Dove child." Kudeyarov chooses Daryalsky to be the one who creates this child with Matryona. Bely's hero is not aware of this mission; the revelation comes after he demonstrates his devotion to the sectarians' venerated female by abandoning his fiancée. This giving up of a romantic attachment, however, pales in comparison to the absolute sacrificial rite, Daryalsky's earthly death after he failed his mission to beget the divine heir. His search for the "sunset" and a possible discovery of the divine truth comes at the cost of his own life—the ultimate "setting" of his own "sun."

As Carlson suggests, "like the gods in the ancient mysteries, Daryalsky undergoes a violent death, because the violent end of the god releases vital, creative forces."[46] But although this death stems from the logic of sectarian worship and eschatological expectations, it is not finite. "An old Daryalsky has died in order that a new, transformed Daryalsky, a bearer of new spiritual and cultural values, may be reborn as the god dies and is resurrected," Carlson writes.[47] Nevertheless, Bely does depict Daryalsky's murder as pitiless, violent, and bloody. The young man gets bludgeoned by several sectarians, and he does not die immediately: "Pyotr's body

[46] Carlson, "The Silver Dove," in *Andrey Bely: Spirit of Symbolism*, 60–95, 89.
[47] Ibid., 90.

breathed in spasms; without cruelty, with faces bared they stood over the body, examining with curiosity what they had done: the deathly blueness, and the trickle of blood that oozed from his lip, which, no doubt, he had bitten through in the heat of the struggle."[48] In other words, *The Silver Dove* problematizes the idea of an individual search for a sacred meaning of life and a collective responsibility for turning that search into a means to a (ritualistic) end. Bely ascribes to the murder of his character the proportions of a cosmic event which sacralizes the gruesomeness of the physical act, while also hinting at a hopeful transformation and rebirth of Daryalsky's physical body. He explains this peculiar justification of brutality by delving into the man's inner thoughts: "By his cry and his invitation *to perform on him what they intended* he was himself, as it were, writing under his completed life: 'Death.'"[49] This passage implies that, by accepting his Dionysian side in order to find his non-earthly, divine identity (or his "sunset"), Daryalsky accepted his death as something inevitable and even desirable—a circle finally closed or a broken self, restored. Or one may say that the character imagines that his death is not in vain, for his sacrifice appears to transcend mortality, allowing Daryalsky to ascend spiritually—to be reborn as a God-like figure.

## 1.4. Daryalsky's Submission

While Daryalsky may have embarked on his own search for his sunset, the transformation he undergoes in *The Silver Dove* is not entirely of his own volition. That he winds up with Matryona and takes on the role of creating the Dove child with her is no accident, for the carpenter Kudeyarov, the leader of the cult and a man of seemingly great, yet mysterious power,

[48] Bely, *The Silver Dove*, 304.
[49] Ibid., 302.

had been watching Daryalsky for some time. Although Matryona is the one who seduces Daryalsky and is his entry point to the Doves, she is in turn under the control of Kudeyarov. It is revealed to Daryalsky over the course of the novel that there is a conspiracy at play, which involves him, yet reaches far beyond himself, Matryona, and their existence as earthly beings.

We learn about the intentions of the Doves and their leader in Chapter Two. In the town of Likhov (the name of which may be translated as "Misfortune"), Kudeyarov holds a meeting with his followers in which it is officially declared that the "Spirit of the Dove" would soon take human form, and that Daryalsky was decided upon to be its creator along with Matryona, who would birth the child. Kudeyarov even left Matryona alone in Tselebeyevo on purpose, so that she and Daryalsky would have time alone. At this point in the novel, however, Daryalsky and Matryona have yet to speak to one another, making it clear that their relationship, despite how passionate and instinctual it appears to be, is manipulated by Kudeyarov in a way which cannot be articulated. Daryalsky's selfhood ceases to be independent when he wakes up in Tselebeyevo with no memory of how he got there from Gugolevo the night before; this was surely no accident, either. It is then that he is officially introduced to Matryona and eventually, Kudeyarov, marking the point in which Daryalsky's submission to others begins to appear as acts of exploitation. He is merely a vessel for Kudeyarov and the Doves' greater ambitions, a practical step from which "the birth of the Spirit would follow, the descent of the Dove to earth and the liberation of the peasant folk."[50] The hero has also so completely surrendered to his passions that he undermines his own agency and is blind to the power dynamics he is wrapped up in. Unable to articulate what is happening in and around him, Daryalsky's mind becomes so feeble that he sinks further down than exploitation at the hands of others, succumbing to complete submission.

[50] Ibid.,173.

"And on the table in front of Pyotr Kudeyarov distinctly drew a cross three times; and everything turned upside-down in Pyotr's head; now he couldn't possibly leave the carpenter; and from his lips there almost burst the words: 'In the likeness of the Dove.'"[51] This sentence describes the moment when Daryalsky is officially cast under Kudeyarov's spell, marking a complete transformation of his mind and soul. Of course, Daryalsky's metamorphosis began earlier, when he saw and fell for Matryona, but until this point, there was still some hope for the character: we thought that, the crisis of passionate love with a common woman belonging to another man notwithstanding, his future might unfold "happily ever after." We might think in the beginning of reading *The Silver Dove* that, while still giving into the uncontrollable lust for Matryona, Daryalsky entered the relationship with the innocence of a romantic hero; he was far from his original self, but not completely possessed by the dark forces. But Bely subverts these expectations. In the chapter "Matryona," he allows us to finally understand that Daryalsky sees in his new beloved not only an object of sexual desire, but also a female version of himself: someone who gives, but also takes, creates, but also destroys.

Bely gives us an intensely forceful description of what it feels like to be in love (or lust) with the pockmarked village beauty and underlines how incomparable this passion is to Daryalsky's experiences with Katya. He and Matryona's relationship and, moreover, Daryalsky's entire trajectory from then on, is perhaps best summed up in this passage: "With the first love you are a gentle, though masterful man; but with the second? Nothing of the sort, you're not a man at all, but a child: a capricious child, all your life you will follow in the wake of this second love, and no one will ever understand you, indeed you too will never understand that what you have between you is not love, but the undeciphered immensity of a mystery that crushes you."[52]

[51] Ibid., 174.
[52] Ibid., 169.

Here, it is revealed to us that Daryalsky is undergoing not so much a transformation, but a reversion back to his childhood self, or rather, the torments and losses of his childhood he never processed as a true trauma.

For Daryalsky, succumbing to a crushing mystery would mean surrendering the part of himself which strives for reason, beauty, and purity. It would be an unraveling of the ambitions he has spent years pursuing, and it would mean destroying his imminent marriage to Katya. He is confronted with the realization that perhaps the object of his devotion, a girl who stands for the beauty and purity he admires so deeply, is too predictable. Daryalsky has been this "gentle, though masterful man" with Katya, willing with a genuine longing to fulfill his noble matrimonial and tender romantic roles. In succumbing to the mystery and eroticism that is Matryona, however, Daryalsky's desire to be gentle seems to disappear entirely. The wildness the country woman represents, replete with danger, chaos, and ugliness, is intoxicating to him and leads to his behaving wildly. In Tselebeyevo—and Matryona's embrace—Daryalsky can finally act upon his sexual and spiritual urges without restraint or reason. His will is finally free, but it also reveals the truth of his soul: in worshiping a "sunset," Daryalsky sought the possibility of his self splitting apart, rather than attaining clarity and wholesomeness.

When Daryalsky saw Matryona, Katya's love no longer mattered. Instead of a resolution of the idealistic quest for the unattainable "beyond," he discovered the here and now of great powers fighting for his body and soul in the presence of the pock-marked peasant woman. Since that fight was new to him—and incited from within as well as without—Daryalsky struggled to identify what thoughts were his own and if the visions he saw were real or not. Eventually, it became impossible for him to ground himself in reality, so that the only thing he could see, wherever he looked, were the Doves:

> "What is this I am thinking?" – Pyotr tried to make sense of his thoughts, but realized that it was not him thinking, but something thinking itself inside him: as though someone had extracted his soul – but where was it then, his soul? Where was everything that used to be? As he watched, the threads stretched, twitched, wound together in the clear air: and Pyotr thought: "Those are not threads, but souls: they stream through empty space in a mesh of gossamer – the souls of the Doves, separated by space…the souls stretch out to meet each other and wind together in the blue."[53]

We see that Daryalsky's soul-searching journey is not only incomplete, but intercepted by "*something thinking itself inside him*."[54] The threads that he sees are in fact an extension of Kudeyarov, who possesses a mysterious ability in which, "hair-thin threads of light spr[i]ng from his sickly breast and cl[i]ng to his tenacious fingers."[55] And yet, Daryalsky is unable to see the true source of these threads, as his mind and body have already been overtaken by the carpenter. The questions he poses—"where was it then, his soul? Where was everything that used to be?"—would typically be seen as frightening because they confirm that his state of mind is being altered by an outside force. However, the exchange of Daryalsky's sense of reality, which was previously stable, for a more amorphous environment and the disturbing loss of stability, could be a welcome transition for a man who had so desperately been on the lookout for community and communion.

The void which Daryalsky had been looking to fill, even before his parents' death, finally ceased to exist. It was replaced with the atmosphere densely saturated with the "souls" of his new spiritual community, the Doves, as well as with the presence of the most important Other. Solitude and uncertainty disappeared when he was gazing into Matryona's midnight blue eyes. Instead of revealing the secret of his "sunset," Matryona appeared to have helped Daryalsky to

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[53] Ibid., 242-243.
[54] Italics mine.
[55] Bely, *The Silver Dove*, 230.

take advantage of his other self, reshaping, distorting, and corrupting it to fit into Kudeyarov's and the Doves' greater mission.

Andrei Bely intended *The Silver Dove* to be the first part of a planned trilogy called "East or West." He even tells us in his preface that we will meet the majority of the novel's characters again in the second part, which is why he does not mention what became of Katya, Matryona, and Kudeyarov "after the principal character, Daryalsky, had left the sectarians."[56] The trilogy, however, never came to fruition, and *The Silver Dove* ended up being followed by the work for which Bely is best known, the novel *Petersburg*.[57] While the two novels share common themes (East and West, Apollo and Dionysus, altered mental states), *The Silver Dove* is ultimately a stand-alone work. The story is "an episode from sectarian life,"[58] told through the harrowing journey of the unsuspecting, soul-searching young man who finds himself caught up in the scheme of the sect who finally murder him.

*The Silver Dove* is Bely's portrayal of an altered state of mind not as Daryalsky's response to the input of tangible means like psychoactive substances, but as his engagement with the widespread political, religious, and cultural shifts which were taking place in Russia. What makes Daryalsky susceptible to being put under the Doves' influence is his spiritual longing for a harmonizing unity of many influences he feels and often confronts. It is precisely because of his lack of spiritual fulfillment and yearning for a wholesome sense of self that Daryalsky gets drawn into sectarianism. Bely depicts Daryalsky's transformation from an Apollonian poet to a self-sacrificing Dionysian character by revealing his moments of incoherence and thus giving the

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[56] Ibid., 33.
[57] Bely does, however, make subtle references to *The Silver Dove* in *Petersburg*. Listing newspaper cuttings, the narrator mentions, "the disappearance from a small provincial town of some literary man or other (Daryalsky, I believe)." Styopka, who in *The Silver Dove* leaves Tselebeyevo and disappears into the unknown, is also a character in *Petersburg*. The narrator says he talks about "how strange people [the Doves] had turned up in their village, [...] had proclaimed that a child would be born [...]; and he also talked about a visiting *barin* [Daryalsky]." Andrei Bely, *Petersburg: A Novel in Eight Chapters*, trans. David McDuff (London, United Kingdom: Penguin, 2011), 69, 132.
[58] Bely, *The Silver Dove*, 33.

reader an intimate exposure to the character's deteriorating mental state. He addresses the Symbolist question of the rift between heaven and earth by portraying someone whose mystical pursuit and soul-searching results in total destruction, thus turning *The Silver Dove* into a representation of artistic and intellectual turmoil in Russia on the brink of revolutionary transformation.

# CHAPTER 2

## City of "Phantoms": Delusions of Grandeur and Prophetic Patricide in *Petersburg*

Esteemed by Valdimir Nabokov to be the third of the four "greatest masterpieces of twentieth century prose,"[59] Andrei Bely's second and most well-known novel, *Petersburg*, explores similar existential and political conundrums as *The Silver Dove*, except with Russia's most mysterious locus as its setting. While *Petersburg* originated as a continuation of Bely's novel about sectarianism (even referred to as "The Dove" in letters to Blok)[60], it is a significant deviation from the earlier creation and without question, an entirely singular work. *Petersburg* encompasses an intricate web of compelling characters and a thrilling, suspenseful plot, but its principal figure is titular: the city of St. Petersburg itself. Bely is far from the first Russian author to focus on Petersburg in his writing. The impact of his predecessors—Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky—is visible throughout the text. That said, never do these influences overshadow or distract from what *Petersburg* ultimately is: a novel so completely original in its telling of a defining time and place in Russian history that J.D. Elsworth calls it one of the few works "increasingly seen, as their historic moment recedes, to embody the quintessence of their time."[61]

In *The Silver Dove*, Bely grappled with the current issue of religious sectarianism in the Russian countryside by placing it at the center of the protagonist's inner conflict. Daryalsky's altered state of mind derived from the interaction with the group of religious dissenters who manipulated him into becoming their "savior" and, ultimately, sacrificial victim. In *Petersburg*, it is the political sectarianism concentrated in the titular city that orchestrates the deterioration of its characters' consciences. The young radical Nikolai Apollonovich Ableukhov is supplied with

[59] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1990), 57.
[60] Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Andrei Bely: The Major Symbolist Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 102.
[61] J. D. Elsworth, *Andrey Bely: A Critical Study of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 222.

a bomb by Alexander Ivanovich Dudkin (who, in his turn, is operating under the authority of the group's leader, Lippachenko), to execute an act of political terror: killing his own father, the revered Senator Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov. Despite Nikolai's disdain for his father and the fact that he is the one who initiated the plan months earlier, the former university student is plagued with an increasingly deteriorating state of mind as a result of this life-or-death burden, a mental state Bely often refers to as his "self-thinking thoughts." Although different, Nikolai, Dudkin, and even Apollon are subjected by their author to the same psychic torment: their perception of reality is skewed, their desires are both violent and self-destructive. The protagonists' shared distorted mental space illustrates that their distinct psychologies and positions in society do not exempt anyone in Bely's artistic universe from the dizzying effects of the illusory space of St. Petersburg. Those effects, however, eventually prove to be directed inwards. While the bomb does explode, no one is harmed; the only real act of violence turns out to be the preceding murder of Lippachenko at the hands of Dudkin. *Petersburg* then concludes with a brief recounting of the Ableukhovs' momentous inner transformations, leading to remarkably neutral futures. When the characters' psyches change, Bely's otherwise explosive novel abruptly comes to a mild (or at least not as violent as we anticipated) end.

Literary portrayals of Russian revolutionaries and their ideas as the inciting force for violence and terrorism did not originate with Bely. Set in 1905 in the wake of the First Russian Revolution, the urgency of events laid out in Petersburg and the raw, life-and-death obsessions of its protagonists are based on the very real history of the social unrest of the time. Just as the revolutionary sentiments had been brewing before, Russian literature had been addressing their onset and the danger they carried. In fact, Dostoevsky's 1873 novel *Demons* served as a prototype for *Petersburg*'s plot, especially the storyline associated with political assassinations.

This is most evident in the scenes depicting the murder of Shatov in *Demons* and an attempt on Apollon Ableukhov's life in *Petersburg*. A key distinction needs to be made, however: Dostoevsky's characters follow through, just as their prototypes, the Sergei Nechaev group did when killing one of their comrades for an attempt to abandon their cause, whereas Bely's protagonist retreats at the eleventh hour.[62]

While electrifying, tense, and dramatic, *Petersburg* is remarkably anti-climactic. The symbolic object of the ticking bomb is what propels the narrative and is always present, creating a constant sense of worry over what the likely, doomed, outcome will be. And yet, the highly anticipated explosion and its catastrophic impact turns out to be insignificant, while the "eternal" themes of one's psychic and intellectual integrity, familial and romantic love, and loyalty to friends come to the fore with a special gripping force. It is perhaps the least expected conclusion to what had been such an intensely harrowing journey, for readers and the characters alike. Bely's subversion of the plot thereby dismantles our previously held understanding of the narrative by stripping its characters' violent actions and thoughts of any real consequence or magnitude. The realization that their centrality in the world they inhabited was skewed all along allows for a new perspective to emerge: political upheavals are paramount to one's nervous breakdown; a son rebels because of the Oedipal desires that he aims to transform into political agency; and the sense of harmony and self-worth can be derived only from within one's soul, rather than from the borrowed—and abstract—concepts. Eventually, Nikolai Apollonovich's, Apollon Apollonovich's, and Dudkin's profound delusions of grandeur get dismantled, providing the novel's cast with the clarity that everyone in *Petersburg* has been lacking all along. Initially, however, the infectious nature of "revolutionaries'" illusions of self-worth contributes to

[62] Lynn E. Patyk, "Revolutionary Terrorism and Provocation in *Petersburg*," in *A Reader's Guide to Andrei Bely's Petersburg*, ed. Leonid Livak (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018), 39–53, 44.

everyone's altered self-perception, the origin of which is intertwined with the history, design, and mythology of the city in which it has spread.

## 2.1. An Urban Phantasmagoria: Bely's Continuation of St. Petersburg's Unreality

As then the northernmost major city in the world, St. Petersburg's geographical location is striking and integral for our understanding of its historical, cultural, and literary significance. Founded in 1703 by Peter the Great, the meticulously planned city reflected the Tsar's goal to westernize Russia by serving as its "window to the West." Bordering Finland and built on a trackless bog, St. Petersburg is located in the delta of the Neva River, which empties into the Baltic Sea via the Gulf of Finland. These environmental factors result in a damp, extreme climate which James Cracraft describes as "both meteorologically and psychologically unsettling: the sun never fully rises in the depths of winter, never fully sets in high summer, when its citizens enjoy the 'white nights' of June and July."[63] The Neva is prone to regular overflowing (averaging nearly one serious flood per year since the city's founding), the soil in the surrounding area is poor, and the vegetation is sparse. Cracraft argues that precisely these elements of climate and location, "with their recurrent mists and looming clouds, impart to St. Petersburg that eerie or magical atmosphere hauntingly evoked by generations of local writers, poets, and painters."[64]

Bely commences *Petersburg* with a prologue on the titular city, conveying from the outset that his vision of Russia's metropolis is critical to the novel's setting, plot, and character arcs. Rather than a straightforward description of the city's layout or a linear overview of its history, the section is more akin to a meditation on Petersburg's significance within Russia and

[63] James Cracraft, "St Petersburg: The Russian Cosmopolis," in *Russia Engages the World, 1453-1825* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 25–48, 27.
[64] Ibid.

ultimately, a questioning of its identity and existence. Following a paragraph which muses on the population and centrality of Moscow—the city with a larger number of inhabitants and the old capital of Russia—Bely writes: "But if Petersburg is not the capital, then there is no Petersburg. It only seems to exist."[65] This statement sets the tone for his many other depictions of Petersburg as an unreal city. Its illusory, metaphysical nature is a prominent theme within the novel. It is also pointedly derivative. Bely follows a tradition established by Nikolai Gogol and continued by Fyodor Dostoevsky in portraying St. Petersburg as a city of "phantoms." Due to this pointed choice of predecessors, *Petersburg* is not an original text in its depiction of a mystical, illusory space. Nevertheless, it is a groundbreaking work because of Bely's symbolic and stylistic choices in crafting and conveying such an atmosphere.

One of the most pronounced symbols in Bely's novel is his use of geometric concepts and terminology. This undermines every aspect of *Petersburg*, but initially the device is most obvious in the author's constructing a diagram of the city. Following the statement that Petersburg "only seems to exist," the prologue concludes with the sentence about its centrality:

> Whatever the truth of the matter, Petersburg not only seems to us, but also does exist – on maps: as two little circles that sit one inside the other with a black point in the centre; and from this mathematical point, which has no dimension, it energetically declares that it exists: from there, from this point, there rushes in a torrent a swarm of the freshly printed book; impetuously from this visible point rushes the government circular.[66]

The statement is composed of detailed and precise references to easily visualizable details, yet its meaning is abstract; some might even call it incomprehensible. Bely engages with and repeats words which are geometrically specific, straightforward, and universally known (circles, points), connecting these figures to documents which usually exist for the purpose of accuracy (maps). And yet, he renders it virtually impossible for readers to conjure a cohesive

[65] Bely, *Petersburg*, 4.
[66] Ibid.

image of the actual city. Our accustomed view of a mathematical point as inherently quantifiable is disrupted, then shattered by Bely's assigning it "no dimension" and thereby rendering Petersburg an immeasurable space. That does not mean, however, that Bely's shapes are meaningless. For the author, and especially for his protagonists, the father and son Ableukhov, geometric abstractions actually signify the exact opposite.

Circular patterns reveal themselves throughout the novel in numerous forms which may seem unrelated at first glance, but in the words of Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad, actually "belong to the same symbol system."[67] Examples of Bely's symbolism include the repeated use of the word "sphere," the number "zero," or the planet Saturn (pronounced in French as *ça tourne*, "it turns").[68] Even the behavior of the characters follow a circular pattern, returning to the same places repeatedly at the pull of a force which they often do not have control over. It eventually becomes clear that the structure of the novel is circular, with the return of characters either back where they started, or to an entirely fresh start. Maguire and Malmstad summarize the readers' spherical experience in the "Translators' Introduction" to the 1978 edition of *Petersburg*: "In short, we find ourselves moving further and further back in time and space, only to experience other beginnings and other returns."[69]

Bely places strong emphasis on identifying specific buildings, monuments, and locations in St. Petersburg. He is telling his reader exactly where his characters are headed, and what they pass along the way, almost as though he wants us to trace their movements as he relays them on a map of the city. By stressing the specificity of the setting, landmark places such as the Winter Canal, Nevsky Prospect, the monument to the city's founder Peter I (the "Bronze Horseman"),

[67] Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad, "Translators' Introduction," in Bely, *Petersburg* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978), viii–xxii, xxii.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.

and Vasilyevsky Island (to name just a few) give the impression that the novel is still grounded in reality. What happens, however, when we attempt to place Bely's narrative on a map? Milica Banjanin is one of the scholars who conducted this experiment:

> If we try to follow the movement of any character in the novel along the streets or bridges or sections of the city that are named, we suddenly realize that the characters are either moving in circles, or that they cannot possibly reach their proposed destination following the route that Bely suggests. [...] Outside of the novel, Bely's city does not exist.[70]

To Banjanin, the circular pattern that Maguire and Malmstad spoke about appears to be deceptive. The Ableukhovs in particular live as if the urban confusion were the essence of their existence: the father loves straight lines, but the son always crosses and entangles them in the form of "zig-zags," metaphorically speaking. In other words, it appears that the paramount question of St. Petersburg's illusory nature, for Bely, is the question of his characters' dealing with their problems and relationships in the city that constantly undermines their sense of the real.

Banjanin is correct in pointing out that the city does not exist outside of the novel, but her statement does not explain its existence within. If this fictional Petersburg "is an artificial topography that exists only in the author's consciousness,"[71] then we must dig deeper into Bely's representation of it through the plot and narrative structure. What was he intending to convey by placing his characters in a familiar city which he as the author deconstructed? Obviously, Bely rebuilds St. Petersburg as a fictional realm that assumes a new reality—one both determined by his characters' perceptions and actions, and affecting their thinking and behavior.

Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov, introduced in *Petersburg* as a statesman fully in control of Russia's politics and governance (a "man of state with the immeasurable vastness of

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[70] Milica Banjanin, "Of Dreams, Phantoms, and Places: Andrey Bely's *Petersburg*," *The International Fiction Review* 10, no. 2 (1983): 98–103, 98-99.
[71] Ibid., 98.

the mechanisms he controlled"[72]), is established from the outset to be a man who embraces order and harmony. The section, "Squares, Parallelepipeds, Cubes" brings these characteristics to the forefront and as indicated by the title, elaborates on the Senator's fixation with geometry. His nerves are calmed by "planned regularity and symmetry," but Bely emphasizes that "it was the figure of the square that brought him the most calm. He was in the habit of giving himself up for long periods of time to the insouciant contemplation of: pyramids, triangles, parallelepipeds, cubes, trapezoids. He was seized by anxiety only when he contemplated the truncated cone."[73] The geometric configurations that Apollon is so fond of not only reflect his inward desire for symmetry, but also mirror the planned areas of St. Petersburg which he enjoys most, such as the rectilinear Nevsky Prospect. His carriage, an object which becomes synonymous with Apollon's identity, is even referred to as a "lacquered cube," which cuts across the prospect "like an arrow."[74] The rigid confines of his cubic carriage and the pointed, intentional path it forges bring him solace from the vast notion of "space," something he not only loathes but is petrified by, conceptualizing such a lack of containment and direction to be a terrifying "abyss."

That said, Ableukhov Sr. is not spared the anxiety of the rest of the people dwelling in Russia's most phantasmagorical city. The abstraction of a void which is all-encompassing and frightening threatens Apollon's consciousness, pushing it from its usual state of active cognition, towards what Bely pointedly calls "idle cerebral play." It is not always possible to stay within the confines of geometric clarity, especially to a mind overtaken by the chaos of immeasurability on the brink of bursting. An early example of this altered state is shown in a nightmare: threatened by a Mongol who is, in fact, meant to be Nikolai, the Senator's mind and body are overcome by the sensation of a "gaping breach," and "something began to suck Apollon Apollonovich's

[72] Bely, *Petersburg*, 8.
[73] Ibid., 16.
[74] Ibid., 17.

consciousness from beneath the vortex of flashing lights (through the dark blue breach in the crown of his head) out into infinity."[75] What is also revealing about Apollon is his relation to the circle, the shape that is most prominent in the novel and which represents the antithesis of the angularity he seeks out. Frequently, when the senator thinks of the circle, or the "truncated cone," he is "seized by anxiety." This indicates a subconscious awareness within Ableukhov of the threats he might soon face. As the novel unfolds, he even becomes semi-aware of the bomb's existence, which ties into the fact that the very object intended to kill him appears to be round. That *Petersburg*—in plot, symbols, time, and space—operates as a spherical structure takes on an even greater significance due to this knowledge. In short, Apollon's altered state of mind in the novel is uniquely and directly intertwined with Bely's use of circularity.

When one looks closely at Apollon, Nikolai, and Dudkin's unique relationships with St. Petersburg, the intentions behind the city's topography begin to make slightly more sense, on a "cerebral" level, as Bely prefers to call it. Each character is designated a location in St. Petersburg; Bely recurrently places them at the center of those "signature" places, mirroring or representing some aspect of their personality. For instance, Vasilyevsky Island—the location inhabited by Dudkin—is suggested to draw in evil because of its residents, the menacing creatures who have moved there from different parts of the empire and possibly abroad. Dudkin himself is no exception to this phenomenon: the infiltration of Russia's capital with strangeness. As Bely writes, "he considers himself a citizen of Petersburg, but he, a denizen of chaos, threatens the capital of the Empire in a gathering cloud…"[76] But this goes further due to Dudkin's status among the citizens of St. Petersburg, who was relocated there from his political exile in Finland. His functioning as a nucleus within the narrative is thereby compromised both

[75] Ibid, 184.
[76] Ibid., 18.

by the "foreignness" of his background and his looking just as other "transplants" from unknown and dangerous places to Vasilyevsky Island.

Dudkin first appears in *Petersburg* as a shadowy figure who we only know as a "stranger," identified solely through minute physical features. However, the portrait of "the inhabitants of the islands," informed by Apollon's own perception of them as invaders and dangerous infiltrators, immediately precedes this obscure introduction. Moreover, Bely inconspicuously points to Dudkin's distinguishing characteristic, a small black mustache, to show that this character is not to be trusted. Being a general description for the population of the Islands as a whole, the mustache makes Dudkin stand apart from the rest of St. Petersburg—and especially from the Ableukhovs who represent its imperial center: "The inhabitants of the islands strike you with the vaguely thievish ways they have; [...] he will have a small moustache, perhaps; [...] he, the inhabitant of the island, will be a stranger with a small black moustache, elusive, invisible, there will be no trace of him [...]."[77]

By bringing in Dudkin as the only major character who resides in the Islands and by fusing his introduction into the narrative with the estrangement of his location, Bely lets us see the man and his place as synonymous with St. Petersburg's shadowy outskirts. Therefore, the danger that emanates from Dudkin and the Islands makes it effectively impossible to separate the character's identity from the space he is designated. In a similar fashion, Apollon and his carriage are inseparable—they are both the controlling center of the empire and the epicenter of an imminent explosion. This also pertains to Nikolai's various rooms in the house, which represent how he interprets the duality of East and West inherent to St. Petersburg and, more broadly, the Russian psyche: his minimally decorated study features a bust of Immanuel Kant, while his bedroom is decorated with Oriental tapestries and clothing. Therefore, what might

[77] Ibid., 19.

resemble an attempt at order only proves to reinforce the chaotic nature of the urban structure, as the centrality of one individual is shown to change, or render immeasurable, the entire city. For instance, Dudkin tells Nikolai that his soul is "like outer space," and that it is from this outer space that "desperately plagues" him that he "look[s] at everything."[78] However, he proceeds to call this space his "abode on Vasily Island." As a result, the vastness implied by his terminology is juxtaposed with the suffocating image of Aleksandr Ivanovich within the confines of his "four perpendicular walls covered with wallpaper of a darkish yellow hue."[79] And yet, no one seems to question the notion that it is from the "outer space" of these four walls that Dudkin manages to "cast [his] shadow on Russian life from."[80] The glaring contradiction in this statement does not faze Nikolai or the narrator because within *Petersburg*, space is malleable, unpredictable, and contains multitudes which often cannot be foreseen.

In *Petersburg*, Bely stays true to the 19th century literary tradition of the city as an illusory space in which "phantoms" are always present, lurking in the shadows of its streets.[81] The novel conveys the essence of the haunting atmosphere and the hold it has on its various inhabitants by merging the location with the characters' personalities, ultimately affecting the structure of St. Petersburg itself. Bely presents a challenge to his reader with the narrative's sustained questioning of the city's existence and the uncertainty of the "abyss" which manifests in its characters and setting, within and without. Despite the distinct spaces assigned to

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[78] Ibid., 115.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Gogol's short story, "Nevsky Prospekt" (1835), is of special significance. Taking place on the most famous street in St. Petersburg, the narrator concludes with a series of warnings similar to those in *Petersburg*. "It deceives at all hours, the Nevksy Prospekt does, but most of all when night falls in masses of shadow on it, throwing into relief the white and duncolored walls of the houses, when all the town is transformed into noise and brilliance, when myriads of carriages roll off bridges, postilions shout and jump on their horses, and when the devil himself lights the street lamps to show everything in false colors." Nikolai Gogol, "Nevsky Prospekt," in *The Complete Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, ed. Leonard J. Kent, trans. Constance Garnett, vol. 1 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 207–38, 238.

individuals, everyone's path is interwoven, often inexplicably. This is shown through the frequent occurrence of not-so-accidental run-ins between characters who, when placed on a "real" map according to their named locations, are at a great distance from one another. In spite of, or perhaps because of this geographical impossibility, they meet nevertheless, reaffirming the symbol of a circle. Although the characters' altered states of minds become increasingly frenzied as the plot's tension thickens, *Petersburg* ultimately shows that the phantasmagoric nature of the city they inhabit had seeped into the populace's collective consciousness long before the novel's action came to be.

## 2.2. "Pépp Péppovich Pépp": The Phonetics of Delirium and Deterioration

An illusory city needs proof of its existence. The latter can be found in Bely's assertion that Petersburg "energetically declares that it exists." This statement on the vocal, declarative nature of Petersburg not only personifies the urban space—it also gives the city an audible voice, a marker of its agency. Sound is stressed in *Petersburg* to an extreme degree, reflecting Bely's own preoccupation with speech and sonic meaning (continually evolving with his waxing interest in anthroposophy at the time). Vocalizations permeate nearly every aspect of the novel, emitting from objects, dialogue, the narrator's pronouncements, and naturally, St. Petersburg itself. Language, like a city, is planned and structured. Bely plays with this correlation by breaking the rules of convention in one and thus distorting the other. In other words, in *Petersburg*, the author deconstructs the notion that a city is formal by breaking the language of its inhabitants apart and then re-assembling it. It is through this broken language that the broken

mental states emerge, within the minds of individual characters whose existences are inseparable from and interwoven with the "othered" state of St. Petersburg.

*Petersburg*'s prose is saturated with repeated sounds, and Bely is not subtle in how he executes the stylistic and phonetic recapitulation. Any reader who has not studied Bely's writing on sound, particularly works like *Glossolalia* (1922) and *The Magic of Words* (1909), is likely to get confused after encountering such fragments of text as, "*Byby…byby*…" or "*Vy-by*…(You should…)"—those mumbling pronouncements that seem to pop up in the most unexpected places.[82] Initially, one might try to chalk-up these sections as purely stylistic choices on behalf of an eccentric author. Bely, however, makes it impossible for his readers to ignore the sonic moments as purely decorative by infusing sound into his plot. The meaning attached to the strings of letters printed on the page (which may, initially, be seen as "gibberish") are actually well conceived and elaborate: their decoding adds another layer to the mystery of the novel. For example, the phonetically bizarre phrase, "Pépp Péppovich Pépp," is one of the most consequential and revealing in regards to the plot of *Petersburg*, but it also serves as a clue to the functioning of the consciousness of one of the novel's main characters, Nikolai Ableukhov.

*Petersburg* is rich with symbolism, but it is the bomb which emerges as the most significant symbol—the catalyst of its narrative action—even though it does not fully accomplish the task set up by the narrative. Bely takes advantage of the simplicity of the object and utilizes its most innate and identifiable qualities to the point of extremity; basic properties of the bomb, such as the round shape of the sardine can it is contained in or the ticking sound it makes, become so imbued with anxiety, violence, and tragedy of broken familial ties that the explosion itself manages to be mild in comparison. And yet, Bely maintains an integrity towards the object which is not lost on the reader, offering us simple reminders about its presence: "[a] bomb was

[82] Bely, *Petersburg*, 29.

something round that must not be touched."[83] The ticking sound that emanates from the bomb is the key indicator of its constancy and looming destructiveness. Through mimetic phonetic sequences reiterating the bomb's inner mechanical sounds and carried through from chapter to chapter, Bely keeps the readers on their tiptoes: the moment of explosion is near.

In one of the rare authorial reflections on the process of writing *Petersburg*, Bely connected the sound of the bomb to the sense of captivity and suffocation his characters experienced:

> 'I, for one,' says Bely, 'know that *Petersburg* stems from l-k-l-pp-pp-ll, where *k* embodies the sense of stuffiness and suffocation emanating from the *pp-pp* sounds – the oppressiveness of the walls of Ableukhov's "yellow house" – and *ll* reflects the "lacquers", "lustre" and "brilliance" contained within the *pp-pp* – the walls or the casing of the "bomb" (Pépp Péppovich Pépp). *Pl* is the embodiment of this shining prison – Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov; and *k* in the glitter of *p* with *l* is Nikolai Apollonovich, the Senator's son, who is suffocating in it.[84]

This 1923 quote comes from Bely's friend Ivanov-Razumnik who recalled a conversation with the author. It reveals how deeply embedded phonemes are in *Petersburg*. The highly specific sounds are so integral to its plot and characterization that Bely himself considered the novel as stemming from them. As is shown in the statement, the meanings of "l-k-l-pp-pp-ll" beget a multitude of stylistic choices, such as the deliberate naming of the Ableukhovs. Far less subtle within the prose and arguably one of the most impactful phonetic sequences in the narrative, however, is the repetition of the sound "p" in "Pépp Péppovich Pépp." This string of sounds forms the essential link between the symbolic function of the ticking bomb and the origin of Nikolai Ableukhov's patricidal desire.

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[83] Ibid., 226.
[84] Ivanov-Razumnik, *Vershini* [Summits] (Petrograd: Kolos, 1923): 110, quoted in Adam Thirlwell, "Introduction," in *Petersburg: A Novel in Eight Chapters* (London, UK: Penguin, 2011), vii–xxiv, xv.

Although the majority of characters handle or are involved with the volatile object in some form or another, it is Nikolai who has the strongest and most debilitating connection to the bomb. It is revealed to date back long before the plot begins, when he conceived of the idea for his father's assassination and was sought out by revolutionaries to carry out a terrorist act against the senator. Brought to his house by Dudkin, but also buried in Nikolai's subconscious, the bomb continued to tick, marking the approaching time of the major act of violence and evoking one "Pépp Péppovich Pépp"—an ancient and yet very urgent phantom of Nikolai's feverish imagination. A turning point marking a more active awareness of the bomb in Nikolai's conscious mind is triggered by the return of his mother Anna Petrovna, who had left the family a few years prior, traveling to Spain with her lover, an opera singer. The mother's comeback signifies to him that "the old days had returned," ones which "looked at him – horribly!"[85] It is here that "a certain absurdity he had forgotten," evoked by the bomb's "swift expansion of gases," is brought to the surface: the recollection of a nightmare: "In his childhood Kolenka had suffered from delirium."[86]

The "delirium" was a vision Nikolai would have at night, in which a small elastic ball, "made perhaps of rubber, perhaps of the matter of very strange worlds," would bounce in front of him. The ball would make a quiet sound as it hit the floor, "pépp-peppép; and again: pépp-peppép."[87] However, the object would suddenly swell and "assume the perfect semblance of a sphere-shaped fat gentleman; and the fat gentleman, having become an agonizing sphere, kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger and threatened to fall on top of him and burst."[88] Nikolai would then imagine how the ball then moved closer, and before bursting into pieces,

[85] Bely, *Petersburg*, 308.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.

emitted the quiet sound, "'Pépp…'/ 'Péppovich…' / 'Péppp…'." In other words, the child's fear of an exploding toy marks the moment where one of the paramount phonetic patterns in *Petersburg* is brought into the narrative, making itself known not only to the reader, but also to the conscious mind of Nikolai. The ball is a clear representation of the bomb, whereas the figure of the "fat gentleman" gradually assumes the shape of Lippachenko—the man who orders Dudkin to deliver the bomb and whose physique is described as rotund, hollow, rubbery, and glossy.[89]

The meaning behind the sound "p" itself, however, is not so easily identifiable, and clues within the novel are sparse at best. Chloë Kitzinger offers a structural framework that is useful in beginning to decode the significance of the bomb's phonetics:

> As the "crimson ball" that stands for the bomb gets more fully embodied, it receives its own name and patronymic; it is notable that the structure of this name (Pepp Peppovich Pepp) echoes that of Nikolai's governess, Karolina Karlovna, and his father, Apollon Apollonovich. The delirious Kolenka is surrounded by figures whose very names (Pepp son of Pepp, Karolina daughter of Karl, Apollon son of Apollon) suggest a kind of self-reproducing monstrosity, highlighting the problem of unbroken linear succession. In subsequent fantasies, Nikolai assimilates Pepp Peppovich Pepp by actually swallowing the bomb, and the explosion he imagines appropriates his own body [...].[90]

Kitzinger's analysis aligns with what Bely expressed to Ivanov-Razumnik—namely, the interconnection between the naming of characters, the familial ties between them, the novel's symbols, and the sensory phenomena. This web of semblances reinforces the idea that all language in *Petersburg*, down to the letter, is deliberate. While the function of "Pépp Péppovich Pépp" is symbolic in its relation to the bomb, the phrase's many meanings are specifically rooted in its phonetic qualities. Bely's statement that the "pp-pp" sounds represent "the oppressiveness of the walls of Ableukhov's 'yellow house'" and "the walls or the casing of the 'bomb"'

[89] The bomb is located inside a sardine can, so his "glossiness" evokes the oily insides of the container.
[90] Chloë Kitzinger, "'This Ancient, Fragile Vessel': Degeneration in Bely's *Petersburg*," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 57, no. 3 (2013): 403–23, 409.

highlights the consonance as a signifier of containment and claustrophobia (Kitzinger similarly draws a connection between its structural properties and "the problem of unbroken linear succession"). At the center of this commotion is Nikolai Ableukhov in a role more akin to that of an unwitting victim than a voluntary perpetrator of murder.

"Pépp Péppovich Pépp" is not the only phonetic phrase which bears significant weight in *Petersburg*. In fact, the characters themselves often deliberate on the meaning of letters and sonic qualities—dialogue which is so reminiscent of Bely's own writings on sound that one might think they were spoken by the author himself. For instance, a conversation between Aleksandr Ivanovich and Lippachenko takes place in a tavern, where Dudkin speaks of the difference between the sounds "*i*" and "*y*." He insists, "in the sound *y* one hears something stupid and slimy…," "something with cold blood," and "something formless."[91] What is most striking in this scene is what Dudkin thinks to himself right after, "before him sat quite simply a kind of Y," underscoring Lippachenko as a shadowy figure in whom something dark resides because of the sound's meaning, as well as being suggestive of some greater evil due to the letter's capitalization. Lippachenko's association with the letter is repeatedly mentioned throughout the novel and directly extends to Aleksandr Ivanovich's extreme repulsion for "Mongolianism" and the East, whose language he insists contains this very "*y.*"

Dudkin's deterioration is similarly interwoven with the deconstruction or, in his case, reversal, of language. We learn early in the novel that he is plagued with recurring nightmares where he is always surrounded by "ugly faces" (specifically, "Orientals"). There is "a most senseless word" that always emerges from these dreams: "*enfranshish*."[92] Dudkin is eventually visited by a Persian with the name Shishnarfne ("*enfranshish*" reversed). Their meeting forms

[91] Bely, *Petersburg*, 48.
[92] Ibid., 112.

one of the most significant instances within *Petersburg*, in which clarity and feverish thoughts take on the semblance of being one and the same.

In other words, delirium being brought on or intensified by phonemes is critical to Bely's portrayal of altered mental states in *Petersburg*. However, it is crucial that when identifying the relationship between language and consciousness, one must not be confined to a cause-and-effect mode of thinking. It is perhaps Dudkin's journey which best exemplifies the multidimensional, specifically historical, nature of what it means to be caught in the whirlwind of Bely's "cerebral play." The final undoing of Aleksandr Ivanovich is tied into the novel's focus on lineage and the Oedipus complex, which is of course most apparent in the Ableukhovs. Dudkin, however, encounters many of the same conflicts as Nikolai through the symbolic fathers he adopts, then seeks to destroy. The magnitude and outcome of this destruction is wider, as it pertains to the history of Russia as a whole (in Dudkin's mind), but the illusion is broken once Bely brings such heightened states, including those of the readers, back to "reality."

### 3.3. On Fathers and Sons: the Oedipal Destructiveness of Bely's Symbols

Both Nikolai Apollonovich and Aleksandr Ivanovich subscribe to the belief that one act of terror will be powerful enough to change all of Russia. Both are also fueled by delusions of grandeur, but their motivations, actions, and final outcomes are eventually shown to be entirely different. Ableukhov Jr.'s perception of his own worth is disrupted on the level of self-identity, causing an inner torment, a constant war with himself: "he performed acts of terrorism on himself – number one on number two: the socialist on the nobleman; and the corpse on the man in love [...]."[93] This conflict is ultimately rooted in Nikolai's irreconcilable Oedipal struggle with

[93] Ibid.,140.

Apollon Apollonovich: "he cursed his mortal self and, to the degree that he was the image and likeness of his father, he cursed his father. It was clear that his likeness to a god was bound to hate his father; but perhaps his mortal self loved his father all the same?"[94] The source of these ruminations pertains to the very question of Nikolai's identity, which does not come to light until later in the novel when it is revealed that the son was conceived out of marital rape.

Nikolai involves himself in revolutionary politics not because he is a radical at heart, but because, as a child of a powerful parent whose domestic persona and inability to keep the mother at home renders him weak and unappealing, he lets the inner struggle ultimately give birth to the idea of a terrorist attack against his father. This split perception of himself is shown through Nikolai's adoption of Eastern and Western philosophies and aesthetics, as well as through his scandalous actions in society, when, dressed up as the red domino, the young Ableukhov visits friends in high places and stalks his former beloved.[95] As various recollections of his childhood along with interactions between he and his father are revealed, the reader develops a fairly well-rounded understanding of Nikolai's skewed identity: he is feeling scared, confused, spurned, abandoned, and jealous.

Like Ableukhov, Jr., Dudkin transforms his inner turmoil into acts of violence directed at others. The political exile and a man from the "lower depths" of the Russian society, however, is not afforded the luxury of a familial closeness and familial strife. Nor is he granted the neutral, closed-circle ending given to the members of the Ableukhov family. Rather, Aleksandr Ivanovich's final moment in *Petersburg* shows him over the dead body of Lippachenko—the

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[94] Ibid., 140.

[95] Khodasevich remembers Bely owning the same costume as Nikolai, before writing *Petersburg*. "I dropped in on Bely (he was living on Vasilievsky Island, practically on top of Nikolaevsky Bridge) and spotted a round bandbox. Inside it were a red satin domino and a black mask. I realized that Bely must have appeared in that 'completely Petersburg-ian place' in this getup." Khodasevich, 61.

man who had earlier manipulated him as a political operative and terrorist. Dudkin's story concludes with the blunt diagnostic statement, "He had evidently gone mad."[96]

Bely does not introduce Dudkin in the conventional mode of *Petersburg*'s other characters, such as the Ableukhovs. Although he joins the narrative immediately after Apollon Apollonovich, the narrator refers to him only as "the stranger." Beyond the narrator, Dudkin initially appears to exist only in the mind of Apollon. Therefore, Dudkin's existence cannot firmly be confirmed or denied—like that of the illusory city of St. Petersburg (he is even known within the revolutionary group by the nickname "The Elusive One"). And yet, should not his being present on the page suffice as evidence of his being tangible and "real" in his own mind, in the imaginations of other characters, and, most importantly, in the collective consciousness of the reader? The narrator thinks so: "Once [Apollon's] brain has come into play with the mysterious stranger, that stranger exists, really does exist: he will not disappear from the Petersburg prospects while a senator with such thoughts exists, because thought, too, exists. And so let our stranger be a real live stranger! And let my stranger's two shadows be real live shadows!"[97] Moreover, the narrator's belief in Dudkin's reality becomes the foundation of his forcing the reader to think so. Rather than assert that "our stranger" *is* "a real live stranger," he tells us to *let* Dudkin exist as one. The narrator, then, is suggesting that imagination goes further than sheer existence within the pages of *Petersburg*, but actually functions as the source of its conceived reality. As Kitzinger eloquently explains it, "the repeated, reified description in which Dudkin originates emerges as a method of generation, such that Dudkin turns out to be (in a sense) the offspring of the text itself."[98]

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[96] Bely, *Petersburg*, 533.
[97] Ibid., 67.
[98] Kitzinger, 414.

Lippachenko makes a reference to Dudkin's relationship with his father at a point ("it would appear that the noble son hates his father"[99]), but otherwise very little is known about his family history, further reinforcing the argument that he is "the offspring of the text." This is in stark contrast to the Ableukhovs, whose identities are inseparable from their lineage as is made evident in the opening paragraphs of Chapter One, which begins, "Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov came of the most respected stock: he had Adam as his ancestor."[100] There is nonetheless a prominent identification that Dudkin exhibits with patriarchal figures: men in power, great leaders. Eventually, this yearning for a father leads to him adopting two of his own: Peter the Great through the statue of the Bronze Horseman, and Lippachenko. While not related to Lippachenko by blood, Dudkin harbors a desire to murder him, which, similar to Nikolai's, appears to be patricidal.

*Petersburg*'s Oedipal theme is notably a reference to Peter the Great, who accused his son Alexei Petrovich of plotting to overthrow him and sentenced him to execution (Alexei died in prison likely due to his injuries from the torture he received, as Peter hesitated before signing the authorization for his sentence). However, the novel reverses the narrative of Peter killing Alexei by grounding its plot in the portrayals of sons trying to kill their father. But why is Dudkin, and not Nikolai, the one to complete the patricide? The answer can be traced back to the father of St. Petersburg himself: Peter the Great, symbolized in the statue of the Bronze Horseman erected in the city. The statue, in its turn, is brought to life by the poem of the same name.

"No major city of the modern world is more closely connected with its founder than St. Petersburg is with Peter the Great."[101] The founder appears all throughout *Petersburg*, a figure whose presence seems to lurk everywhere, including the consciences of Bely's characters and

[99] Bely, *Petersburg*, 387.
[100] Ibid., 5.
[101] Cracraft, 25.

above all, within Dudkin. More specifically, it is the bronze statue of Peter the Great whose essence permeates the novel, taking on a life of its own and establishing itself as one of the most critical symbols in the work. One cannot write about *Petersburg* without mentioning Pushkin's narrative poem, *The Bronze Horseman: A Petersburg Tale.* Written in 1833, though only published in its entirety posthumously, it tells the story of the great flood of 1824 and the bronze Peter the Great pursuing the figure of a "poor hero" named Yevgeny, who dared to threaten the statue of the tsar for the choice of the city's location (due to that choice, the flood had killed Yevgeny's fiance, Parasha). When the statue comes to life, it chases Yevgeny, now a "piteous madman," through the streets "all through that long night."[102]

The poem was extremely successful and is now considered one of Pushkin's greatest works. It was also so impactful that the statue became known after its title, *The Bronze Horseman*. Bely pays homage to Pushkin by replicating, then altering events from the poem, and, finally, entering them into the novel (for instance, the statue coming to life is shown in Dudkin mounting the body of slain Lippanchenko as if he were the tsar and his foe, a horse; in confronting authority, Dudkin simultaneously plays the role of Yevgeny). However, *The Bronze Horseman*'s portrayal of St. Petersburg and its founder in Bely's novel is also noteworthy. Thus, in the first part of the poem, Pushkin honors the prevailing point of view among the citizens of Petersburg and others who contemplate its power: the city serves as an embodiment of one man's glorious ability to execute will and reason.[103] The second part, however, penetrates the mythic aspect of the city by creating a more unsettling, if not derogatory, vision of St. Petersburg and its founder. Maguire and Malmstad encapsulate this new point of view: "beneath the 'western'

[102] Alexander Pushkin, "The Bronze Horseman," in *Alexander Pushkin: Collected Narrative and Lyrical Poetry*, trans. Walter Arndt (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers, 1984), 423–38, 437-8.
[103] Maguire and Malmstad, xv.

facade lay a shadowy world of intangibilities and unrealities, alien to man's reason and apprehensible only to his unconscious being—an 'eastern' world, in the Russian terminology."[104]

The Bronze Horseman cannot be categorized as a symbol in the same way as the bomb, for instance, because it dominates the symbolic and historical landscape of Petersburg the city, rather than of *Petersburg* the novel. Nor does the statue of Peter take on the role of a character in the novel, as the city of St. Petersburg does. It is rather that Bely's major male protagonists all embody some aspect of Peter's personality, suggesting that, in this storied capital, the founder survives as an immortal figure whose acts are bound to be repeated through others "irrevocably"; once again, tying in the idea of circularity and violence, mental illness and fatidic occurrences, family and politics. For instance, Apollon Apollonovich embraces the bureaucracy built by Peter and shares his love of symmetry, for only in lines "has the memory of Petrine Petersburg remained."[105] In regards to the younger Ableukhov, whose father would give the "Petrusha" horseback rides, Anne Hedin makes a connection between Nikolai and "the tsar's famous clowning and buffoonery"[106]: "The Petrushka is not only a Punch-like puppet in Russian folk theater, but a diminutive for Peter, thus the welding of the grimacing buffoon and the galloping Petrushka links Nikolai Apollonovich to the Bronze Horseman."[107] The tsar's ruthlessness and vulgarity is made especially apparent in Lippachenko (when the double agent meets Dudkin in a tavern, the ghost of Peter I hovers nearby). Not accidentally, Lippanchenko is also the man who dies at the hands of Dudkin—the character whose ties to Peter as a madman with a revolutionary vision are most pronounced as well as most consequential in *Petersburg*.

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[104] Ibid.
[105] Bely, *Petersburg*, 21.
[106] Anne Hedin, "The Syntax of Slaughter in Bely's *Petersburg*," *Ulbandus Review* 2, no. 2 (1982): 149–65, 157.
[107] Ibid., 158.

Bely crafts Dudkin's meeting with Shishnarfne as a series of momentous awakenings in which Aleksandr Ivanovich is confronted with his repressed past, the expansion of space and time through the "fourth dimension," and his delusions of grandeur which are exactly that, pure delusions. The only way to transcend this crippling state of mind and destroy the force behind it is by performing one sweeping action. According to Dudkin, it should be grounded in morality and no longer motivated by a thirst for domination. When Bely is tracing the origin of Dudkin's "idle cerebral play," "that seemed as if inspired by someone else"[108] back to Helsingfors, Peter the Great's spirit emerges. We learn that Dudkin mirrors the tsar's drive for power, since in Finland, he developed "a paradoxical theory about the necessity of destroying culture [...]; at this time Aleksandr Ivanovich was preaching the burning of libraries, universities, and museums; he also preached summoning the Mongols (later on he took fright at the Mongols)."[109] Dudkin's desire to destroy the integrity of Western culture while located on the opposite side of the border between Europe and Russia is effectively the exact inverse of what Peter sought to do in founding St. Petersburg. A popular historical narrative of St. Petersburg's founder at the time held that in creating an anti-Orthodox, foreign city, Peter the Great was the Antichrist.[110] Bely echoes this sentiment in Dudkin's conversation with Shishnarfne, when he is reminded that in Helsingfors he would espouse theories on Satanism ("Christianity is obsolete: in Satanism there is a crude fetish worship, that is, a healthy barbarism…").[111] From Bely's masterful amalgamation of history and myth it emerges that Peter's spirit is cyclical. Rearing his head when the Bronze Horseman crashes into Aleksandr Ivanovich's home, the hero of Pushkin's poem reenters the fold.

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[108] Bely, *Petersburg,* 401.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Anna Lisa Crone and Jennifer Jean Day, *My Petersburg/Myself: Mental Architecture and Imaginative Space in Modern Russian Letters* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2004), 7.
[111] Bely, *Petersburg*, 401.

Dudkin's delusions of grandeur come from his identification with the figure who wields the power to destroy and conquer. However, this self-perception is shattered when Aleksandr Ivanovich is told by Shishnarfne that he can only transcend to the "fourth dimension" by killing Lippachenko. When the Bronze Horseman crashes in, Dudkin suddenly realizes that over the course of multiple lifetimes, he has always been the wretched Yevgeny.

> Once again now Yevgeny's fate was being repeated; [...] in precisely similar fashion was Aleksandr Ivanovich's past dismantled; he exclaimed:
>
> 'I remembered…I've been waiting for you…'
>
> The bronze-headed giant had been racing through periods of time right up to this moment, completing an iron-forged circle; quarter-centuries had flowed by; and Nicholas had ascended the throne; and the Alexanders had ascended the throne; while Aleksandr Ivanych, a shadow, had tirelessly been traversing that same circle, all the periods of time, fleeting through the days, the years, the minutes, through the damp Petersburg prospects, fleeting – in his dreams, awake, fleeting…tormentingly; and in pursuit of him, and in pursuit of everyone – the blows of metal had crashed, shattering lives [...].[112]

In *Petersburg*, the Bronze Horseman greets Dudkin affectionately as "dear offspring,"[113] signaling that his shared attributes with Peter run deep, and their ties cannot be severed. Whereas Yevgeny being chased endlessly and ultimately dying in Pushkin's poem because he threatened the Bronze Horseman is reminiscent of Peter's murder of his own son (who resisted and rebelled against his father), the greeting shows a reconciliation between the two, allowing the dual identities of Peter and Yevgeny to merge within Dudkin. It is only when the Bronze Horseman melts and "flow[s] with metals into his veins" that Aleksandr Ivanovich joins forces with Peter and gathers the courage to kill Lippachenko, committing his very own patricide.

In describing the positioning of Dudkin's body over his tormentor-turned-victim, Bely evokes the image of the Bronze Horseman: "the man was sitting astride the corpse."[114] It is an obvious and provocative parody that is highly effective in capturing the horrifying absurdity of

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[112] Ibid., 420.
[113] Ibid., 421.
[114] Ibid., 533.

the circumstances at play. Bely places us at the center of Dudkin's consciousness for so long that his delirium has become the reality we are accustomed to. By suddenly withdrawing from this position and relocating us to the perspective of an unknown and likely unassuming third-party ("*they* entered in the morning"[115]), the much-anticipated culmination of Aleksandr Ivanovich's harrowing journey is made especially jarring. That "he had evidently gone mad"[116] seems like a gross oversimplification and does not appear to take into account other forces at play, especially those with as much enormity and magnitude as the "fourth dimension" or the astral plane, for instance. However, the unsatisfactory feeling Bely leaves us with is quite similar to the hollow aftermath of the explosion in the Ableukhov house. We come to realize that Lippachenko is Dudkin's very own bomb: he bears physical resemblance to the object, he exacts the same threat of complete annihilation to those who are unlucky enough to become involved with him, and his long-awaited finale—while shocking—does not amount to a monumental outcome.

The dissonance between the narrative treatment of Dudkin's and Nikolai's outcomes is not necessarily related to whether or not the real and metaphorical patricides came to fruition. *Petersburg* ends with a prevailing sense of emptiness—characters who saw themselves as wielders of power changing the fate of Russia are met with the rude awakening: they realize that their pursuits were products of their own delusions. After the explosion, the Ableukhovs are the only ones to survive within the actual text because of their lineage. The narrator even makes an association between Apollon Apollonovich and "the ephemerality of existence" before the first chapter begins. Nikolai Ableukhov, as the son of the man who claims Adam and "the very progenitor of the Semitic, Hessitic and red-skinned peoples"[117] as his ancestors, is therefore the one on whom Bely concentrates his authorial gaze in the novel's epilogue. It appears that

[115] Ibid. Italics mine.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid., 5.

perpetuating the cycle of regeneration is in Nikolai's blood, and is also the source for his patricidal desire. For Bely, however, Ableukhov Jr. represents a hopeful beginning: he is the new type of consciousness, modified, but also crystalized by the violent experiences of the book.

Like Nikolai, Dudkin is beholden to the spherical structure that is at the core of *Petersburg* and dominates the novel's movement towards its final resolutions. As is often the case in this work, the mechanics behind character development, dialogue, and destructive tendencies are by-in-large the same, only reversed. Dudkin enters the narrative as a stranger we are told to *let* exist, but, without even realizing it, we forget that we had to do so in the first place. It is then only natural that he exits the text in an uncertain fashion—as a shadowy iteration of a literary trope, a footnote to the Bronze Horseman discourse of St. Petersburg literature. At the scene of the murder, the narrator reverts back to the language he had used to characterize Aleksei Ivanovich when he was still just the stranger ("the figure had a small moustache"[118]) and he is not made mention of again. Whereas Nikolai Ableukhov is given prominence in the Epilogue as a new kind of thinker living in Egypt as a morally chastened man, we are left to assume that Dudkin dissolves into the literary, mythological, and strangely dehumanizing realm of the city. It seems it is only once we have witnessed these "phantoms" for ourselves that the clarity emerges that, as forewarned by the narrator, Dudkin's fate was bound from the beginning. "Petersburg streets possess an indubitable quality: they turn passerby into shadows; while Petersburg streets turn shadows into people. We have seen this in the example of the mysterious stranger."[119]

[118] Ibid., 533.
[119] Ibid., 39.

# CHAPTER 3

## The Crisis of Cognition: Childhood Consciousness and Disrupted Development in *Kotik Letaev*

Shortly after completing *Petersburg*, Bely abandoned his "East or West" trilogy and began crafting *Kotik Letaev*. Written from 1915 to 1916, this third novel was intended as the first installment of a large autobiographical piece called "My Life."[120] It would be followed by *The Christened Chinaman* (1927),[121] but the collection was not completed and he instead turned to writing memoirs. *Kotik Letaev* is thus a literary work which exists in the liminal space between Bely's fictional and autobiographical writing. It addresses the development of self-consciousness within a child from the ages of three-to-five, though the endeavor is embarked on by the author's thirty-five-year old self. How he and the reader experience time, however, is neither determined nor restrained by the parameters of age. Rather, we are thrust into Kotik's "memories of memories," some of which recall a life before birth, while others are grounded in what we can confidently assume are "real" events that occurred in his childhood. In other words, in *Kotik Letaev*, Bely raises the possibility that remembering life extends past the stage of childhood or even the womb, to a prenatal existence often associated with depictions of the spiritual cosmos. In the novel, he endows his protagonist with the multifaceted and fluid ability to perceive himself as a consciousness emanating both from the past and from the sublime reality beyond earthly existence. The concept of altered mental states is connected, in *Kotik Letaev*, to the harrowing experience of a child as he is thrown into consciousness. Faced with the incomprehensibilities of his surroundings, Kotik's perspectives facilitate the reader to reconsider what it means to develop memory, identity, and familial bonds.

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[120] Alexandrov, "*Kotik Letaev*, *The Baptized Chinaman*, and *Notes of an Eccentric*," in *Andrey Bely: Spirit of Symbolism*, 145.
[121] An older translation for the title is *The Baptized Chinaman*.

## 3.1. The Poetics of Imprecise Memory

The artistic universe of *Kotik Letaev* is hermetically sealed within domestic space and the hero's age. As a result, there are relatively few external events which take place in *Kotik Letaev*, nor is there a traditional plot, if at all. In *The Silver Dove* and *Petersburg*, the characters' altered states of mind are intertwined with the eschatological landscapes and political upheavals they are surrounded by, whereas Kotik's changing consciousness is a reflection of the author's personal experience as a man whose destiny is to live through several crises: first, the personal, and later, the intellectual, the artistic, and the spiritual. Reading *Kotik Letaev*, we can see that the series of apocalypses that permeate Bely's previous works is still present, but the writer's eyes are turned towards the internal stages of his personal growth: birth, individuation, and cognition. For Bely, the era of formation and development of the child's personality tells a story of withdrawal, or of coming to terms with the loss of contact with the spiritual realm he descended from at birth. As Kotik grows into consciousness, we are shown that acquiring knowledge and becoming aware of the individual ego is accommodated by grief. Ultimately, Bely's evolved, self-conscious narrator looks to the future by mourning the betrayal of childhood: no longer being the unconscious, unborn being who had been in unity with the universe.

In other works by Bely, this profound loss is the source of the debilitating incompleteness that plagues so many of the characters, such as Daryalsky, Nikolai Ableukhov, and Dudkin. They attempt to recover from it by making themselves the center of the universe, rather than find harmony with the world. In *The Silver Dove*, the soul-searching orphaned poet's belief that his life contains some "strange truth" and nearly divine mission—to form a union between the Russian intelligentsia and the *narod* by proving himself to be "the future of the people"—is dismantled and taken advantage of by the Dove sect. In *Petersburg*, Nikolai Ableukhov seeks to

sever himself from his father by killing him in the name of political revolution. This desire originates in Nikolai's profound guilt over the nature of his entire existence: that his conception was the result of marital rape. These two characters channel feelings of emptiness, which they desperately yearn to fill with meaning, into grand acts of despair. They are convinced that they can change the fate of Russia and at last feel fulfilled, but instead their illusions are revealed to be nothing more than futile and misdirected attempts to connect to a higher force. Their deteriorating consciousnesses, however, do not necessarily indicate a failure in their quest. Rather, Bely asserts that "cerebral" anguish and instability are necessary steps in unlocking the unified, elevated self they seek.

While trials and tribulations of this nature occur in all of Bely's first three novels and begin to take on specifically anthroposophical qualities in *Petersburg*, the psychological discomfiture in *Kotik Letaev* adheres to Rudolf Steiner's philosophy—Anthroposophy—most closely. Bely wrote the novel in Dornach, Switzerland, where he was helping to build the Goetheanum: a combined theater and temple designed by Steiner.[122] The writer's extended proximity to Steiner and his fascination with the founder of Anthroposophy's ideas is why Vladimir Alexandrov highlights the "occult science" as a point of origin for the novel's autobiographical motifs. Specifically, Alexandrov points to the "Akashic record," "a cosmic transcript of all human experience that can be read with great accuracy by the initiate who has undergone the requisite training."[123] A notion of central importance in Steiner's interpretation of both onto- and phylogenesis, it is directly related to Bely's representation of the inner turmoil of his character. Steiner believed that the path to reunification with the universe was possible so long as the student dedicated himself to the necessary practice of recalling the past frequently

[122] Alexandrov, "*Kotik Letaev*, *The Baptized Chinaman*, and *Notes of an Eccentric*," in *Andrey Bely: Spirit of Symbolism*, 148.
[123] Ibid.

and in great detail. The outcome of this training is the ability to revive in one's imagination not only their life before birth, but the multitudes of previous lives. "As a result, he can become a self-conscious part of the teleologically evolving cosmos, in which Christ is the central regenerative force."[124] For Bely, this idea of Steiner translates into the poetics of imprecise memory that characters constantly aim to verify and turn into the truth of one's existence.

Steiner envisioned the journey through the spiritual world as one of great difficulty. Embarked on by those who are actively seeking enlightenment, it proceeds as an exploration of one's self-consciousness that both *upholds* and is *guided* by the principle of free will.[125] Bely's characters, however, are thrown into the metaphysical realm unwittingly. Rather than embody the anthroposophical role of explorer, they are victimized and blindsided by a force which cannot be named. *Petersburg* portrays this on a grand scale: imprisoned yet unaware of their exact crime, the novel's characters are dealt the sentence of a self-consciousness which alters, then engulfs their minds by the torrential onslaught of what Bely calls "cerebral play" or "self-thinking thoughts." In *Kotik Letaev*, Bely does not abandon this phenomenon, but he does introduce the authorial self who explores Kotik's reality from the anthroposophical vantage point as a prominent, if not the dominant, omnipotent figure in the narrative.

From the moment of his birth, Kotik's symptoms are presented similarly to characters like Daryalsky or Nikolai Ableukhov: the first glimpse of consciousness as "imageless deliria," "the mathematically precise sensation that you are both you and not you, but…a kind of swelling into nowhere and nothing [...]."[126] However, what differentiates *Kotik Letaev* is that these are written recreations of preconscious memories, which are actively being sought out by the narrator. The recollection of thoughts and events within the narrative are often centered around

[124] Alexandrov, *Andrei Bely: The Major Symbolist Fiction*, 106.
[125] Ibid., 108.
[126] Bely, *Kotik Letaev*, trans. Gerald Janecek (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 9.

Kotik's inability to communicate with others since he is so easily overwhelmed by the intensity of newfound "sensations" interfering with cosmic forces that he cannot identify. Bringing these memories into the present demonstrates that the author is now exercising immense free will through the writing of the character who was supposedly himself—or, rather, an earlier version of the thinking and remembering future creator. The revelation that the "torments" of infancy were in fact "the sparkle of childhood" is what then allows for the author's anticipated "crucifixion," something he claims to have awaited since the age of five.[127] Kotik's torments, in other words, are presented as the preconditions for the final destruction of authorial consciousness: a unique event that is voluntary and willed into action. This climax is captured most precisely in the novel's final sentiment: "In Christ we die in order to rise in the spirit."[128]

Bely's portrayal of Kotik is thus an exploration of his own evolution as a metaphysical being—the one who strives to attain great spiritual enlightenment—and as an artistic being who aspires for an act of self-sacrifice for the sake of a continued life in art. In the Foreword to the novel, the thirty-five year-old narrator identifies himself and his position as an initiate launched on a quest for clairvoyance: "self-consciousness has exploded my brain and hurtled into childhood."[129] This elevated state is what makes it possible for him and his three-year-old self to "converse" and "understand each other."[130] Although the narrator is embarking on this journey willingly, Bely ensures that the reader comprehends the magnitude of such a feat as one replete with danger, destruction, and uncertainty. He infuses the text with images from nature that bestow the elements with cosmic powers, placing himself at the top of a mountain from which he prepares to descend. Bely aggravates the stakes through the repeated use of statements detailing

[127] Ibid., 217.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid., 5.
[130] Ibid.

how "the path of descent is frightening" and that when the time comes, he will "feel sick above the precipice." However, returning to the ground is the only way to reunite with his infant self and achieve transformative self-consciousness, as "the future runs downward."[131]

This striking terrain is notably located in the Swiss ranges, where Steiner's Goetheanum was being built. Bely's metaphor of ascending and coming down is indicative of the novel's self-referential nature, which is made even more pronounced with the narrator's description of how he arrived to such a heightened state. In striking alignment with Bely's own path to writing *Kotik Letaev*, the narrator reflects, "I stand here in the mountains: it is thus that I stood, amid the mountains, having fled from people; from those who are distant, from those who are near; and in the valley I left—myself, with arms extended…"[132]

Because the material in *Kotik Letaev* is taken from Bely's own childhood, the act of writing the novel—and thus, of going back into the depths of the authorial memory of the earliest kind of self-perception—takes on the effect of an anthroposophical exercise. The novel's chronological framework, specifically the early age of Bely's character is also aligned with Steiner, who felt that "in the life of an individual there is a period of earliest childhood from birth until the age of seven, when quite different spiritual forces are at work from those later in life."[133] Bely responds to this idea by giving Kotik access to the special forces which he felt, embraced, or struggled with as a child. The textual interpretations given below demonstrate to what extent the narrator's grown-up self shares this means of entry with his earlier incarnation, the child called Kotik.

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[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid., 6.
[133] Rudolf Steiner, *The Fifth Gospel: Seven Lectures Given in Oslo, 1st-5th October, 1913, and Cologne, 17th and 18th December, 1913*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1968), 130.

## 3.2. Altered Perception and the Childlike Soul

Young children remember differently than adults, but this idiosyncrasy is often overlooked and misconstrued to mean that a child's representation of experiences from the past is simply false. Kotik's frequent feeling that he is being misunderstood is arguably the central conflict of the novel. It is also the determining influence in how his consciousness and sense of identity develop. The wounds which result from the lack of understanding are primarily centered around his parents' turbulent relationship, communicated in the novel through memories recollecting his difficulty with speech, engagement with symbolic objects, and interpretation of witnessed events. Kotik's thinking embodies the amorphous and imaginative thought process that children uniquely possess. However, one can ascertain from Bely's proclivities as a writer that as a child, he likely interacted with language more than others and is thus represented by Kotik's unique experience.

As Bely wrote in a 1928 Foreword to the novel, "the theme of *Kotik* is to underline: *children perceive facts differently*; they perceive them as an antediluvian adult would. Once we have grown up, we forget this. The problem of knowing, so to speak, how to delve into the childlike soul is connected with knowing how to blow the hint of an extinguished memory up—into a full picture."[134] This is the crux of the composition of *Kotik Letaev*: a series of large pictures from the fragmented memory of a small child are illuminated with the help of his adult self who has the ability to put into words what the young boy could not. The narrator makes no attempt to mimic Kotik's speech (or lack thereof) in his writing. Instead, he employs the creative act of poetic language to bring meaning to otherwise unutterable memories under the rubric of

[134] Bely and Gerald Janecek, trans., "Appendix II: Foreword to Kotik Letaev," in *Kotik Letaev* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 219–22, 219.

"that's what the little child would have said if he could have spoken, if he could have understood."[135] Bely's complex and fully adult language is not meant as a clarification of the child's incoherent thoughts. Rather, it creates a rich and evocative lens through which the author convincingly recreates Kotik's sensations, experience, and viewpoint.

In *Kotik Letaev*, a child's developing consciousness is the accumulation of language and cognition, ushering him into "actuality" by recognizing his 'I' as both distinct from yet belonging to the external world. However, is it even possible for a writer to portray the origin of this process from an autobiographical standpoint with the limitations of an adult's conscious memory? While he does not rule it out completely, Paul John Eakin, a scholar of the "art of self-invention" in and through literature, poses this as highly unlikely. "The life history of the individual in his or her earliest phase of development, pre-language, pre-'self,' presents the autobiographer with problems analogous to the challenge of human pre-history," Eakin suggests.[136] But Bely not only takes on this exact challenge in *Kotik Letaev*, he does so quite literally. The earliest moments of Kotik's consciousness form a gateway that extends through and beyond the history of the world, allowing the child to occupy a state of being that retains contact with the universe through "memories of memories" that are not constrained by nor reliant upon the rules of language. Kotik recalls these moments of enhanced access to human prehistory in the novel, one instance being when he saw the cover of a "*Extinct Monsters,*" a booklet his father owned: "it is called a '*dinosaur*'; they say—they have died out; I still encountered them: in the first moments of consciousness."[137]

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[135] Bely, *Kotik Letaev*, 10.
[136] Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 215.
[137] Bely, *Kotik Letaev*, 18.

In vein with the difficulties pointed out by Eakin in writers' attempts to document life in the earliest phase of development, Bely's portrayal of Kotik as a three-year-old who possesses memories spanning the entire history of the universe can neither be firmly confirmed or denied to be accurate. The altered mental state that is presented here is not necessarily an affliction, as is often the case in Bely's works. Rather, Kotik's ability to recall past existences is a virtue that belongs only to the mind of a child in the early stages of consciousness. In *Kotik Letaev*, the type of dissociation and debilitating effects that characterize the altered states of Daryalsky or Nikolai Ableukhov, for instance, emerges and begins to take hold as the child develops further, becoming increasingly aware of his body and image in relation to others.

### 3.3. Distorted Reflections and Identifying "I"

The first section of Chapter III, titled "*Kotik Letaev*," begins with the statement, "I am four years old."[138] Name and age are two of the most common and easy markers of identification. They are concrete evidence of a person's existence and, because everyone is endowed with one, they are universal. However, while it is not unique to have a distinct name and be of a specific age, these labels permit for just enough variance and fluidity that one can comfortably adopt them into one's identity without losing a sense of individuality. Because a name is assigned at birth, a child does not have any choice in the matter. Furthermore, an infant does not possess the consciousness to be cognizant of what this label means. The beginning of Chapter III, then, from these two initial circumstances alone, indicates that Kotik is not only experiencing his world through sensations, but is also starting to understand that he plays some part in it.

[138] Ibid., 66.

The opening of the previous chapter is worthy of noting here, too. When Kotik is still three-years-old, and no longer ill from the scarlet fever, he begins to experience a heightened self-awareness: "I began to live in being, in *the having-become* (as I had earlier lived in *the becoming*); I grasp the thread of events in it; not everything had *become* for me yet; many a thing would *become set* for a second; and then—would flow away."[139] Having occurred in the second chapter, this "having-become" takes on the function of a mental state that is altered by awakening of Kotik's mental and spiritual selves. Through it, Bely places emphasis on the link between names and identities—hinted at, for example, by the titles "Nanny Alexandra," "Brabago," and "Auntie Dotty," given to chapters—and the symbolic function of the mirror in defining and distorting the self.

The becoming of Auntie Dotty in Chapter II, for instance, involves the mirror as an object that contributes to Kotik's development of language and sense of community. The child stands before a mirror with his aunt as she whispers to him, "strangers…,"[140] while pointing at the reflection. Suddenly, "everything becomes very strange."[141] Kotik recognizes the adult as "Egorovna," but in place of his own image, "someone else is over there: greenish, far away, and small, in pale chestnut curls."[142] Summarizing an observation made by John Kopper, Jacob Emery notes that "this is the moment at which young Kotik begins to use proper names; he henceforth refers to any relationship of repetition through his aunt's patronymic, 'Egorovna,' which signifies her relatedness to him, his father, and grandfather as well as her reproduced image in the mirror."[143] The choice of name is quite significant from an autobiographical standpoint, as Bely's aunt and prototype for the character was named Katerina Dmitrievna

[139] Ibid., 43.
[140] Ibid., 47.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Jacob Emery, "A World of Mirrors," in *Alternative Kinships: Economy and Family in Russian Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 45–72, 52.

Egorova. However, in Kotik's case, "Egorovna" is the matronymic. By splitting one name into two versions of the same person, inverting its order, and flipping the genealogical implications under the duality of mother and father, Bely slightly distorts the texture of his narrative. His syntax in writing this self-reflective novel evokes a similar effect to the mirror—an object that produces an image that is identical, yet reversed.

At this moment, we can conclude that Auntie Dotty has *become set* as Egorovna. Kotik's reflection is a foreign entity, however, which is then made more unsettling due to the image's faint traces of himself only through the distinguishing feature of his curls (these come to be established as an extension of his mother). It is not surprising, then, that this scene foreshadows a moment of significant self-estrangement for the child in the aforementioned section of Chapter III, titled "Kotik Letaev."

> I went around—a quiet boy,—draped with curls: in a vermilion dress; I was very rarely difficult; but I didn't know how to carry on a conversation; bent down over the broken elephant, I would listen to the speech of others; and responding to caresses, I would rub my head on my shoulders; chased away, I used to go off into a corner to slowly make my way from there up onto a lap: to take a nap on that lap.
>
> Or I would meekly sit down in a little armchair: so I could think awhile in the chair; with my arms resting on the arms of the chair,—I thought in the chair:
>
> —Why is it like this: here I am I; and he is Kotik Letaev…Who then am I? Kotik Letaev?.. But what about—I? How can it be? And why is it that—
>
> —I am—I?...
>
> From under the pale chestnut curls, which fell over my eyes and onto my shoulders, in the twilight I would glance: into mirrors.
>
> And it became so strange…[144]

"Kotik" is actually a term of endearment for the child, whose real name is Nikolai.[145] In Russian, the pet name is a diminutive of "*kot*," which translates to "he-cat" or "little tomcat."

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[144] Bely, *Kotik Letaev*, 67.

[145] Not once is this name used in *Kotik Letaev*, becoming known in the sequel, *The Christened Chinaman*. Nikolai is the name of Bely's father, meaning that the author's patronymic is "*Nikolae*vich." Also noteworthy is the character of *Nikolai* Apollonovich Ableukhov in *Petersburg* who bears numerous similarities to the author, especially evident in regards to his turbulent family life.

This adds a layer of meaning to the descriptions of Kotik "responding to caresses," being "chased away," and napping on a lap. His behavior, which is emphasized by Bely's diction, is literally more akin to that of a kitten than a young boy. Thus, the narrator's language in depicting the memory of "becoming" Kotik might indicate that the boy had internalized his name and begun absorbing it into his self-perception. However, the series of questions the child asks himself in front of the mirror suggests that the opposite may be true. Kotik is troubled by his reflection because he is confronted with the possibility that his interior and exterior have merged into one self, something he is not prepared to reckon with. There is a noticeable shift that occurs here from when he previously looked in the mirror with his aunt. The curls that he had previously not connected as belonging to himself are now recognized as a part of his own image, for instance.

Rather than offer a sense of clarity, the association of name, physical appearance, and the "I" as belonging to a singular entity makes things "strange" in *Kotik Letaev*. It is as if Bely is proposing that the conditions of "reality" are, in fact, the true source of his disorientation. In the essay "The Magic of Words" (1909), Bely writes, "when I say 'I,' I create a sound symbol. I assert this symbol as something existing. And only at that moment do I create myself."[146] Going back to Kotik, we can see that although the child questions the meaning of his "I," he does not deny its existence. But why does his self-proclaimed statement, "here I am I," appear to be a source of anguish in Kotik Letaev? Precisely because for Bely, this "I" has yet to be actualized from the realm of thought to "living speech." Bely elucidates in the essay, "all I can do with thought is distinguish a phenomenon, whereas with the word I can subjugate, subdue a phenomenon. The creation of living speech is always a struggle between man and the hostile

[146] Bely, "The Magic of Words," in *Selected Essays of Andrey Bely*, ed. and trans. Steven Cassedy (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 93–110, 103.

elements surrounding him. The word ignites the gloom surrounding me with the light of victory."[147] The precarity of Kotik's "I" when seeing himself in the mirror suggests that his consciousness has developed the ability to "distinguish" a phenomenon, but does not yet possess the language to "subjugate" and "subdue" the "gloom" it surrounds him with. The child's recurring sensation of strangeness in these moments of both literal and figurative reflection are perhaps early signs of this struggle "between man and the hostile elements," but at its most inarticulable, impressionable, and vulnerable stages.

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's concept of the "mirror stage" posits that an infant experiences jubilance upon seeing himself in a mirror for the first time. This act "immediately gives rise in a child to a series of gestures in which he playfully experiences the relationship between the movements made in the image and the reflected environment, and between his virtual complex and the reality it duplicates—namely, the child's own body, and the persons and even things around him."[148] While Bely was not personally involved with psychoanalysis, Lacan's theory provides a useful framework in grasping the strangeness and abnormality of Kotik's experience. The infant's first identification with his reflected image and environment is said to take place from approximately the ages of six to eighteen months, but Kotik does not seem to reach this stage until the age of four. When he does recognize himself, his reaction stands in opposition to the child in Lacan's example: instead of giving rise to movement, Kotik's arms rest on the arms of the chair; instead of jubilance, Kotik sinks into introspection; and rather than playfully experiencing the duplicated reality of his own body and surroundings, he enters a dissociative, fragmented, and precarious state.

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[147] Ibid., 95.

[148] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function: As Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 93–81, 94.

Perhaps the alterity of his response is related to Kotik's advanced age, which might distort the purity integral to the infant's experience with the presence of consciousness. This interpretation, however, would indicate that Kotik's development has been stunted in some way—the supposition which goes against Bely's reliance, as an artist and thinker, on the child's precocious wisdom, gleaned from the "memories of memories" of past lives. I propose that Kotik's disorientation and turmoil lies precisely in this dichotomy, in which the core aspects of his personality, worldview, and physicality are divided into opposing, incongruous, and conflicting states. From the perspective of *Kotik Letaev* and its author, his abilities and traits as multifaceted and complex is not an inherent disadvantage, but is made into a source for the child's self-consciousness because of the scrutiny they are subjected to. Moreover, the point of origin for Kotik's turbulent self-perception is his parents' fractured marriage, the intensity of which is enhanced by the autobiographical nature of these vividly recounted memories.

### 3.4. Kotik's Sin: The Curse of "Premature Development"

The inner world of Bely's character is not only fluid and easily traversable in different directions, but also disjointed. This feature stems from the Letaev family dichotomy explicated in the novel. The attributes that make up the whole of Kotik's identity can be classified as being split into two realms. While scholars have defined these using a variety of labels, from the perspective of Bely's novel, the duality of mother and father would, perhaps, be the most tangible means of categorization. Inevitably and unintentionally on the child's behalf, the diverse elements that are unique to his personality overlap in an attempt to form a whole sense of self. The result is not harmony, however. At least, it is not harmonious in *Kotik Letaev*, where Kotik's

parents reject that their opposing qualities have amalgamated within their only son. Despite the tumultuous and bleak reality of Bely's family life, perhaps the light-hearted words of his father serve as an appropriate introduction to this dynamic and by extension, to Kotik's experience in the Letaev household. In the early days of his son's childhood, Professor Bugaev would say, "I hope that Borya will inherit his mother's face and my brain."[149] In this statement alone, a rigid line is drawn to assign distinct domains to each parent. While the sentiment does not disparage one trait and propagate the other, it is clear that these virtues are in fact what signifies the whole of their *value*.

In his memoir *Necropolis*, the Silver Age poet Vladislav Khodasevich emphasizes how the very essence of the Bugaevs' marriage lay in these binaries.

> The physical discrepancy between the two spouses was a reflection of their inner dissimilarity. They weren't suited to each other, either in terms of intelligence or interests. Their situation was an extremely typical one: an ugly, unkempt husband with his head stuck in the clouds paired with a beautiful, coquettish wife caught up in the grips of the most earthly desires. This was also the source of the discord that is equally typical of such situations. This discord manifested itself day after day in violent quarrels that took place at the slightest provocation. Borya bore witness to them.[150]

In *Kotik Letaev*, Bely revisits this discord from the perspective of an innocent, observant, and highly sensitive child. Because Kotik does not yet have the cognitive faculties to understand the exteriority of the situation unfolding before him, he picks up on, internalizes, and fixates on details that he can observe in himself, including the monumental split between father's and mother's traits. Specific images, words, and sounds take on profound meanings in the novel due to the imaginative interpretations that Bely understands children are uniquely predisposed to. The reader witnesses the extensive impact that strings of associations, originating in details that may present to some as frivolous, random, and not significant on a large scale, contribute to a

[149] Khodasevich, 50.
[150] Ibid., 51.

complex web of child's emotions and identity markers. The impact is made all the more evocative due to the poetic qualities of Bely's narrative: its syntactic jarredness, stylistic distortions, sound-play, and the constant origination of new words and visual amalgamations. In portraying Kotik as eternally torn from within, Bely demonstrates how the inner and outer dissimilarities between his parents were directed towards him and subsequently manifested in his confusion over the question of identity. In Kotik, he attaches the utmost meaning to the traits the boy inherited from his mother and father.

The picture that emerges of Kotik's relationship with his mother is predicated on his infantilization, oftentimes utilized as a weapon in counteracting the father's influence on the child. The mother's umbridge with her husband is known to Kotik, and the various ways in which this is communicated to him results in his feelings of guilt, anguish, and instability. His father, like Bely's, is a man of outstanding rational intelligence who, first and foremost, embodies the role of a renowned mathematician. It is therefore all the more fitting that the profession the father's identity revolves around is also his wife's usual target of scorn, which is transferred onto Kotik. Elizaveta's panic in anticipation of the son's future resemblance of his father and the apprehension that he might become a "*second mathematician*" overwhelm Kotik and take on the magnitude of his being "caught in a criminal act" when his mother blames the father for "raising" him rationally.[151] The need to hide his relationship with each parent from the other also becomes increasingly pervasive and difficult to maintain, fostering a constant sense of guilt. "I am a sinner: with Mama I sin against Papa; with Papa against Mama. How can I exist and: not sin?"[152] While the shame that Kotik associates with his very existence is a product of his

[151] Bely, *Kotik Letaev*, 151.
[152] Ibid., 152.

troubled state of mind, Bely accentuates the child's interior split sense of self by emphasizing his bizarre physical appearance.

It is well known that Bely's mother would dress her son in feminine dresses beyond the standard years of early infancy, the customary period of nursery-style femininity for boys at the time. This peculiarity, along with his long chestnut curls, are significant aspects of Kotik's development, or rather, his mother's attempt to prevent his growth.[153] In the novel, the narrator frequently recalls "conversations" about his large forehead, a feature inherited from his father, that his mother, and then he himself, attempts to cover with his curls. The striking feature is treated by his mother and himself with resentment, since it may serve as some verifiable proof that Kotik is "prematurely developing" into the likeness of his father. "*Premature development*" is a phrase the child overhears his mother speak of often as the fault of his father, but in actuality is likely referring to his entering the stages of cognition, or "thinking." While Kotik does not understand the meaning behind these words, he is highly attuned to the negative implications they carry regarding his relationship with his father. "I am not allowed to talk to Papa: or then Mama will say:—'Yes, he is prematurely developed'..."[154]

Kotik loves each of his parents, but spending time with one is tantamount to the betrayal of another. In the section titled, *The Quiet One*, the narrator recalls the torment his childhood self silently endured while navigating his environment of constant polarization, within which he is positioned at the center of.

> I didn't like the conversations: about raising a child; two lines were intersecting in me at this point (Mama's line and Papa's line): the intersection of lines is a dot; because of this I was becoming a *mathematical* dot: I—turned silent; everything—was compressing; and—was going off into indistinctness: I didn't know how to speak, and I thought up what I would say; and because of this I hid ideas…until a very late age; because of this, even in high school I was considered a "dunce"; for the people at home, though, I was

[153] See Figures 2 and 3.
[154] Ibid., 158.

> "Kotenok,"—a good little boy…in a little dress, who got down on *all fours*: to give them all a wag of his tail.
>
> But I felt it in my soul:
> —"You are—not Papa's, not—Mama's"...
> —"You are—mine!..."
> "He" will come for me.[155]

Kotik is positioned at the center of his parents' conflict, which Bely illustrates visually and literally with the image of a dot where two intersecting lines meet. As indicated by the placed emphasis on the word, the "*mathematical*" component to the description is significant because it represents his father's identity and is the byproduct that is his mother's antipathy. That Kotik's cognitive instinct was to produce a geometric abstraction might serve as an indication that his mind is connected to his father's. However, his developed awareness that any association with the paternal figure can only exist when kept secret from his mother has conditioned him to hide his thoughts, ideas, and speech; in other words, the tell-tale signs of "premature development."

Worthy of note in this passage is that the narrator refers to himself during high school, a time that exists somewhere in-between the narrative's "past" and "present" perspectives, yet outside of the novel's realm. This is not the only instance within *Kotik Letaev* where a memory from later years is mentioned, but they are inserted in the text sparingly and intentionally to convey that certain moments from early childhood hold the potential for longevity. By revealing that Kotik's silence persisted "until a very late age" and to such a noticeable extent that he was considered a "dunce," Bely highlights the degree to which he was impacted and hindered by his repressive environment. There is no clear transition in the text that indicates a return to Kotik's five-year-old self. The omission of such a link creates an ambiguity around time and duration in the subsequent emphasis of the child's infantilization using the novel's established motifs. Along with the "little dress," Kotik's characterization as a cat due to his pet name and the description of

[155] Ibid., 159.

his behaviors is pronounced. The boy going "down on *all fours*: to give them all a wag of his tail," is unequivocally a performance manufactured to appease his mother and female relatives. Instead of genuine and innocent playfulness, the act of playing a cat now functions as a survival mechanism to prevent further conflict from erupting.

Andrei Bely's first three novels each possess distinct qualities in their atmosphere, scope, and plot, making all of them major works in their own right. And yet, they are unmistakably the products of one extraordinary mind, whose evolution as a writer and thinker is directly reflected in his impressive oeuvre, but also observable on a much smaller scale. *The Silver Dove*, *Petersburg*, and *Kotik Letaev* all portray characters whose consciousnesses engage in a struggle that is all-consuming and often too powerful to overcome. These exaggerated and irrational thought patterns proliferate not only the minds of the characters they inhabit, but are overwhelming in their presence within the text itself. Kotik's distorted mental state, however, is an outlier in that it is far more ambiguous than the others. Daryalsky's mind was manipulated by the leader of the Dove sect to the point of madness and eventually, his brutal murder. Nearly every character in *Petersburg* is afflicted by "self-thinking thoughts," under the influence of the "phantoms" that lurk in the streets, Peter the Great's legacy, and its eerie landscape. In *Kotik Letaev*, altered states of mind do not always take on a negative meaning because it is the job of the author to raise the child to artistic and spiritual truth.

Figure 2. *Borya Bugaev*. Moscow. Around 1885. Memorial apartment of Andrei Bely on Arbat: State Museum of A.S. Pushkin. http://www.nasledie-rus.ru/podshivka/7510.php

Figure 3. *Borya Bugaev*. Moscow. 1883-1885. Memorial apartment of Andrei Bely on Arbat: State Museum of A.S. Pushkin. https://kvartira-belogo.guru.ru/museum/eksponat.php?a=eksponat_01_child

# Conclusion

One might think that Andrei Bely, the author of a masterpiece as widely acclaimed as *Petersburg* and a man given the title of "the Russian Joyce," would be more well-known outside of his home country. I cannot give one definitive answer for why this is the case, I am only sure that it is a great loss for a world full of readers. However, I suspect the very qualities that warrant the comparison to Joyce are also those that contribute to his "below-the-radar" status. After Bely's death, the writer Yevgeny Zamyatin described the author as above all, "a writer's writer, a master, an inventor whose inventions have been used by many Russian novelists of the younger generations."[156] Pondering the question of why the works of such a master did not exist in translation (at the time), he wrote: "I am not certain, however, whether one can properly say that they are written in Russian, so unusual is Bely's syntax, so full of neologisms his diction. The language of his books is Bely's language, just as the language of *Ulysses* is not English but Joyce's language."[157] Bely himself felt that his Russian could not be replicated in any other language. "As I was asked to permit the translation of my symphonic novel *Kotik Letaev* into English I answered by silence, before me even rose the picture of distorted rhythms and deformed words."[158] This statement alone sums up the most substantial difficulties I encountered while writing this project as a non-Russian speaker.

While language, particularly its idiosyncrasies, is crucial to Bely's symbolism, writing, anthroposophy, and in many ways his identity, it is tricky terrain to navigate when it is filtered through translation. Unfortunately, I am simply unable to provide a comprehensive analysis of

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[156] Yevgeny Zamyatin, *A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin*, ed. and trans. Mirra Ginsburg (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970): 242, quoted in Gleb Struve, "Andrey Bely Redivivus," in *Andrey Bely: A Critical Review,* ed. Gerald Janecek (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1978), 21–43, 40.
[157] Ibid.
[158] *Literaturnoe Nasledstvo* [Literary Heritage], (Moscow, 1937), vols. 27–28: 637, note 20, quoted in Waldemar Gurian and Andrey Bely, "The Memoirs of Bely," *The Russian Review* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1943): 95–103, 95.

the intricacies of a syntax that is foreign to me. However, instead of abolishing the subject altogether (practically impossible in any discussion of Bely, or otherwise a gross oversight), I concentrate on the aspects of language that directly pertain to depictions of altered states of consciousness. I did my best to maintain a balance, honoring Bely's devotion to the "living word" while respecting the unavoidable limitations of translation.

Nevertheless, there are certain areas that I did not delve into, but would include if I were to expand the project or focus on in future research. While I touch on sound, music and rhythm are not stressed in my work to the degree that they were important to Bely (this is also a matter of difficulty in translation, as evident in Bely's statement on *Kotik Letaev*). His "symphonic" prose is a hallmark of his writing and symbolism, which would develop into an interest in the anthroposophical idea of eurythmy. The basic principle, of a connection between movement and the sound of speech as bringing one closer to the spiritual world, is explored by Bely in his poem *Glossolalia*. I devoted lots of time to the text over the course of writing this project because despite Bely's more than sizable output, the poem stands out as one of his most original and impressive works. I tried to incorporate it in Chapters 2 and 3, but ultimately felt that as my project currently stood, it was not feasible to go as in-depth as I would have liked. The Anthroposophy-oriented viewpoint that I begin to explore in *Kotik Letaev* might be a useful jumping-off point for an analysis of altered states of consciousness in *Glossolalia*, which is completely immersed in Steiner's "occult science." That being said, practically any of Bely's works can be studied with a focus on altered mental states and produce new discoveries; namely, the author's condition at the time, and his evolution.

It is quite clear that the inner workings of Bely's own consciousness are not only present, but active throughout all three of these novels. One could argue, however, that the result is

esoteric to the degree that the sincerity of his experience is lost—too fragmented, too chaotic, too difficult to understand. In other words, perhaps too reflective of the author's mental state. While often twisted to excuse his "treacherous" behavior, Bely's assessment of being misunderstood is probably true, at least to a greater extent than his harshest critics gave him credit for. Attempting to get to the essence of who Boris Bugaev was is likely a fool's errand. Perhaps the most fruitful insights can be gleaned by looking to Andrei Bely's art—seeing clarity in the incoherence, and the language that follows. In words spoken by Nikolai Apollonovich Ableukhov, we hear the author: "But who was it standing there, experiencing – me, or someone else? It happened to me, inside me, outside me…You see what verbiage results?…"[159]

[159] Bely, *Petersburg*, 355.

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