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# The "Apollonian" and the "Dionysian" in Andrei Bely's *Petersburg*

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Myth-making is as old as the human race. Nietzsche attributed this human need to the pressure upon man to create a world of illusions to block out the terrors of reality.<sup>1</sup> Andrei Bely's "Petersburg" depicts characters whose lives are determined by myth. According to Bely, Petersburg is a city where cosmic forces meet — the lives of people in this city, therefore, reveal universal features of the human race. Dostoevsky called Petersburg the "most fantastic city with the most fantastic history on the entire planet."<sup>2</sup> In Bely's view, the life of the city and that of the characters is based on the contradicting forces of the "Apollonian" and the "Dionysian". The simultaneous activity of such antipodes within the same organism, be it human or one created by humans, such as the city, leads to an explosion of Apocalyptic proportions.

The theme of portraying Petersburg as the "epicentre of shocks"<sup>3</sup> was fairly common in Russian intellectual circles at the time. Bely's novel covers approximately five days, during which the Russian Revolution of 1905 is taking place. Bely almost completely neglects historical details; the author's intention is to focus on what is behind the events in the human consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Familiarity with the nineteenth century Russian literary portrayal of Petersburg is essential for the understanding of the novel. Intertextual allusions to Pushkin's "Bronze Horseman", Gogol's short stories about Petersburg and Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment" are very frequent in Bely's novel. Similarly, Bely counts on the reader's knowledge of Nietzsche, of "The Birth of Tragedy" in particular, which had a vast impact on early twentieth century thought in Russia. Nietzsche's categories of the "Apollonian" and the "Dionysian" in "The Birth of Tragedy" seemed a valid pair of symbols to characterise the condition of Petersburg. The image of Peter I. in Pushkin's poem and the statue in the city, called the Bronze Horseman, embodies for Bely the "Apollonian". Peter I. tyrannically imposed a Western-European type of order and the "Apollonian", rational, reasoning intellect of the individual on the chaotic

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia BENNETT, Echoes of Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in A. Bely's *Petersburg*: *Germano-Slavica* 3 (1980) 4: 247.

<sup>2</sup> Л. К. Долгополов, Образ города в романе А. Белого *Петербург*: Известия Академии наук СССР, серия литературы и языка, 34 (1975) 1: 47.

<sup>3</sup> D. FANGER, *The City of Russian Modernist Fiction*, Modernism, eds. J. McFarlane and M. Bradbury, Hammondsworth 1976, 469.

<sup>4</sup> Екатерина Кулешова, Эротика и революция в *Петербурге* Белого: *Russian Language Journal* 31 (1977) 110: 78.



swamp of the Russian people, whose mass embodies the "Dionysian". The "Dionysian" spirit is one of instinctive emotion rather than rational reasoning; instead of the individual consciousness of the "Apollonian" kind, the "Dionysian" is a mass consciousness. Bely and some of his contemporaries felt that the Nietzschean image of the rising flood was directly applicable to Petersburg. As in Pushkin's poem, "The Bronze Horseman", Nietzsche's "Dionysian" image represents the forces of nature rising against St. Petersburg, which is a mask, a "myth", covering the frightening truth of reality.<sup>5</sup> The fantastic city, which Peter and his order brought about, eventually explodes due to the activity of "Dionysian" forces. Or as Nietzsche writes in "The Birth of Tragedy":

But how suddenly the desert of our exhausted culture is changed when it is touched by the Dionysian magic! A tempest seizes everything that has outlived itself, everything that decayed, broke and withered, and whirling, shrouds it in a cloud of red dust to carry it into the air like a vulture.<sup>6</sup>

The mask, which is Petersburg, is fully endowed with "Apollonian" features: its layout shows perfect neoclassical symmetry:

Nevsky Prospect is rectilinear (just between us), because it is a European prospect; and any European prospect is not merely a prospect, but (as I have already said) a prospect that is European, because . . . yes . . .<sup>7</sup>

The "numbered houses" along the straight avenues strive towards the Greek ideal of perfection. The narrator, however leaves no doubt about the incongruity of this grandeur:

Nevsky Prospect is a prospect of no small importance in this un-Russian — but nonetheless — capital city. Other Russian cities are a wooden heap of hovels.<sup>8</sup>

But Petersburg also has a "Dionysian" side. It lies off the well-lit boulevards, in the little, swamp-infested passages of Vasilyev Island where the workers, all originally country people, have their lodgings. The political assassination of Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov, which is the thematic centre of the novel, is arranged in dirty, dark chambers, in small, smelly inns, the existence of which belies the Western-European surface of the city. In these dark corners, ghost-like figures haunt the passers-by.

Nature in Petersburg is a "Dionysian" power. The sunrises and sunsets in Bely's city are blood-coloured, the contours of bridges are black. The dirty waters in the canals are green. Even the "Apollonian" statues and lampposts become green as a result of the constant rain and dampness which oxydise them. According to Bennett, in Bely's system, black and red symbolise bloodshed and general disharmony in a horrible world.<sup>9</sup>

Connected with the basic duality of the "Apollonian" and the "Dionysian" in the novels is the idea of cycles which alludes to Nietzsche's "Eternal

<sup>5</sup> BENNETT, 257.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 123.

<sup>7</sup> A. BELY, Petersburg. Trans. R. A. Maguire and J. E. Malmstad, Bloomington 1978, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> BENNETT, 263.

Recurrence".<sup>10</sup> The novel is about a city whose creation marks the desperate attempt of Peter the Great and his followers, the "Apollonians", to move Westwards. Being bound to a circular planet, they will, however, end up in the East, due to cyclic law,<sup>11</sup> whatever they try to do to avoid this. The notion of "Mongolism" expresses this fear in the novel:

As for Petersburg, it will sink. In those days all the peoples of the earth will rush forth from their dwelling places. Great will be the strife, strife the like of which has never been seen in this world. The yellow hordes of Asians will set forth from their age-old abodes and will encrinson the fields of Europe in oceans of blood. . . . Europe will sink beneath the heavy Mongol heel (p. 65).

Mongolism stands for chaotic, "Dionysian" qualities, the mass consciousness of the crowds rebelling against the realm of the individual mind. The cyclic motion from East to West and back to East again is exemplified on the personal level by the two protagonists of "Petersburg", father and son, Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov and Nikolai Apollonovich Ableukhov. The name Apollo hints at their "Apollonian", European orientation. The family name, however, is the Russian version of a "Mongol" name, that of their ancestor, Ab-Lai-Ukhov:

Here let us make a transition to ancestors not so remote. Their place of residence was the Kirgiz-Kaisak Horde, whence, in the reign of the Empress Anna Ioannovna, Mirze Ab-Lai, the great great grandfather of the senator, valiantly entered the Russian service, having received, upon Christian baptism, the name Andrei and the sobriquet Ukhov. For brevity's sake, Ab-Lai-Ukhov was later changed to Ableukhov, plain and simple (p. 3).

Father and son, like their ancestor, try to reach the West, but their actions move them closer and closer to Mongolism. Ivanov-Razumnik writes in his "Alexander Blok, Andrei Bely":

Thus the father and son carry on their destructive work, a reactionary and a revolutionary, two identical, universal nihilists. In universal nihilism is that cosmic idea which they offer the world, and which brings with it "pan-mongolism". Here is the kingdom of the Dragon . . . the kingdom of the Antichrist and the kingdom of Satan.<sup>12</sup>

This cyclic motion, on the level of the Russian state, is summarised in the narrator's exclamation: "Kulikovo Field, I await you!" (p. 65). In 1830, the battle of Kulikovo signified the first major victory of the Russian army over the Mongols: as Maguire and Malmstad write in their notes for "Petersburg": "the battle has been seen as marking the beginning of the end of the so-called Tartar yoke" (p. 325). The "new" Kulikovo will ultimately mean the return to Mongolism.

Superficially, father and son in the novel represent the two different forces. Senator Ableukhov stands for order and harmony, his son for revolution. Apollon Apollonovich's office and home mirror his character. In the Ableukhov

<sup>10</sup> In her article, "A Memoir and A Comment" (see Bibliography), Nina Berberova notes that cycles, circles and fascinated Bely a great deal. Berberova lists the components of the circle of Rudolf Steiner about which Bely talked to her.

<sup>11</sup> S. CIORAN, *The Apocalyptic Symbolism of Andrei Bely*. The Hague 1973, 138.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 146.



home, small Grecian vases, soft colours and light create an effect of perfect harmony and order. Senator Ableukhov seems like the Nietzschean Apollo; he represents Schopenhauer's concept, the principium individuationis, which Nietzsche interpreted as man's reliance upon the individual's power to control his own world.<sup>13</sup> Nikolai Apollonovich's quarters are the opposite of his father's. The atmosphere here is quintessentially "Dionysian":

Nikolai Apollonovich's reception room created a sharp contrast to his study, being varicolored like . . . like his Bukhara dressing gown, which was repeated in all the appurtenances of the room: the low divan, which resembled an oriental ottoman, and the dark brown tabouret incrustated with small bands of ivory and mother-of-pearl, and the hanging African shield of thick hide, and the rusty Sudanese spears with massive hafts, and the spotted leopard skin with gaping jaws (p. 49).

Like many of Dostoevsky's characters, such as Myshkin, Raskolnikov, Ivan Karamazov, Nikolai Apollonovich's features are reflected in his doubles. Dudkin, who brings the bomb to Nikolai Apollonovich with which he is supposed to kill his father, shares Nikolai Apollonovich's aversion to shining, straight "Apollonian" forms:

The stranger cast surprised fleeting glances at the series of rooms, and Nikolai Apollonovich, gathering up the skirts of his dressing gown, preceded the stranger. Their peregrination through the glittering rooms seemed irksome to both. Nikolai Apollonovich was relieved that he could present not his face but his shimmering back (p. 49).

Dudkin's real name is Pogorelsky; the Russian verb *pogoret'* means 'to burn down'. Dudkin intends to destroy not only Apollon Apollonovich but the whole order he represents:

At that time he had had occasion to develop his highly paradoxical theory about the necessity of destroying culture. The period of humanism had outlived its time and was over. History was winderoded marl. A period of healthy barbarism was at hand, pushing up out of the lower strata . . . Oh, yes, yes: Alexander Ivanovich had preached burning the libraries, universities, museums, and summoning the Mongols (p. 203).

The hatred for the individual is a highly "Dionysian" feature which characterises both Dudkin and Nikolai Apollonovich. This attitude is the reverse of the principium individuationis:

They say that I am not I, but some kind of 'we' . . . It's that that my memory has gone to pieces. Solitude is killing me. Sometimes it's enough to make you angry! (p. 55).

The "Dionysian" consciousness, as well as revolutionary, Apocalyptic ideas come to Dudkin from the peasants of the country—Styopka, the peasant from the dreary Russian village visits Dudkin and talks to him:

"And what do you think will happen?" "First off, killings, then general discontentment and then all sorts of sicknesses, pestilence, famine. And then, as people in the know say, there'll be turmoil: the Chinamen will rise up against themselves, the Mussulmen will get all stirred up. Only they won't get away with it" (p. 68–69).

<sup>13</sup> BENNETT, 249.

The theme of parricide in the novel emphasises how family and society collapse in the wake of the clash of the "Apollonian" and the "Dionysian". Petersburg was built by a Russian who imposed an alien order both upon himself and the ruling class, bringing about an unsurpassable gap between the people and their rulers:

From the fecund time when the metallic Horseman had galloped hither, when he had flung his steed upon the Finnish granite, Russia was divided into two. Divided in two were the destinies of the fatherland. Suffering and weeping, Russia was divided in two, until the final hour (p. 64).

But Peter created a gap not only between the people and the rulers but also within the rulers. The explosion in "Petersburg" is on such a vast scale because not only do "Apollonian" and "Dionysian" forces drive father and son, the people and their rulers against each other, but also both father and son experience the struggle and clash of these two antipodes inside themselves, as, in fact, did Peter the Great.

Both Apollon Apollonovich and his son possess both "Apollonian" and "Dionysian" characteristics. The family coat of arms is an image of a knight gored by a unicorn. The knight is an "Apollonian" symbol of the principium individuationis.<sup>14</sup> Bennett points out that the unicorn is the alchemical symbol of the *spiritus mercurialis*, the unconscious, which represents the "Dionysian" abhorrence of the individual.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the unicorn is also an emblem of Christ and the Holy Ghost. Thus, Cioran postulates that the *spiritus mercurialis* and the spirit of Antichrist make both Ableukhovs serve the forces of the Apocalypse in which the spirit of Christ destroys them.<sup>16</sup> Christ is the White Domino in the novel. Besides being his antipode, he is a double of Nikolai Apollonovich who wears the red domino. Nikolai Apollonovich and his son are Christ-like in so far as they are victims of the struggle between the forces of order and chaos. White in the novel stands for harmony, light and order, red for blood, chaos and revolution, as in the "Book of Revelation". In an early essay, however, Bely explains:

In physics it is a well-known fact that white light possesses the ability to become red when passed through an ashy, non-transparent substance of a particular thickness and consistency. And this impression of red is created by the relationship of white light to grey substance. The relativity or the transparency of the colour red is in its own way a theosophical discovery.<sup>17</sup>

Apollon Apollonovich's ears are green, which is definitely a "Dionysian" colour in the book. His eyes are stony; Steinberg assumes that he is Peter's double, as the Bronze Horseman, Falcone's statue, has the same colours.<sup>18</sup> Like Peter, Apollon Apollonovich has a harmonious society life by day, and a confusing, chaotic family life at home in the evening and at night. The senator is similar to the caryatid in front of his office building, which supports the governmental building, that is, the state, created in imitation of Western-European

<sup>14</sup> BENNETT, 265.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> CIORAN, 150.

<sup>17</sup> CIORAN, 156.

<sup>18</sup> Ada STEINBERG, *Colour and the Embodiment of Theme in Bely's Urbanistic Novels*: *Slavic and East European Review* 57 (1979) 2: 207.



models. Just like Apollon Apollonovich and Peter the Great's statue, the caryatid is grey and stony. Another of Apollon Apollonovich's accoutrements, the carriage, which is punningly related to the caryatid (the Russian for caryatid is *kariatida*, for carriage is *kareta*), symbolises the coexistence of "Dionysian" and "Apollonian" in the senator. Indeed, the shape of the carriage is the "Apollonian" geometric form, the regular cube, but it rests on four wheels, which are predominantly "Dionysian" symbols in Bely's terminology. The same coexistence of "Apollonian" and "Dionysian" holds true for the colour grey — Apollon Apollonovich's eyes, the colour of the caryatid, the statue of Peter I. — which, according to the above-mentioned quotation from Bely's essay, is the catalyst, turning white into red.

"Apollonian" and "Dionysian" forces cause the division of the human ego when they are present together. This tendency is symbolised in the novel by masks. These veil the horrors of reality, according to Nietzsche.<sup>19</sup> Nikolai Apollonovich hides behind a red domino. Although less explicit, the city itself is a mask, which Peter built to hide Russia behind a Western-European façade. The same motive urges the descendants of the Ab-Lai-Ukhovs to try to adopt Western-European thought. Their lack of success is apparent in the conversation of father and son:

"Cohen is a representative of serious neo-Kantianism." "You mean Comtianism?" "No, Kantianism, papa." "But didn't Comte refute Kant?" "But Comte is unscientific . . ." (p. 79).

The confusion of the Ableukhovs by the similarity of the two names seems to suggest that these philosophies are merely used as masks to cover the internal nature, to hide their Eastern origins.<sup>20</sup>

Nikolai Apollonovich's Kantianism pushes him towards chaos. Kant's notion of the categorical imperative implies that the "content of an action should be such as that one would agree to its becoming universal law applicable to all people at all times."<sup>21</sup> If, however, Nikolai Apollonovich accepts parricide as a universal law, all norms fail and complete chaos follows. Parricide in the novel is attempted on the real and on the abstract level. Dudkin's rebellion against the state is parricide on the mythic level, directed against Peter the Great. Dudkin's name, *dudka*, means "shepard pipe". In Nietzschean terms, this is associated with the "Dionysian": "the orgiastic flute tone of Olympus must have been sounded, which . . . transported people to drunken ecstasy."<sup>22</sup> Dudkin's rebellion against the "Apollonian" order is one against Peter who calls him "my son": "The Bronze Horseman said to him: 'Greetings, my son'" (p. 214).

The theme of parricide alludes to the Oedipal myth in "Petersburg". Oedipal rivalry is a Nietzschean theme, representing the "Dionysian" element. Nikolai Apollonovich longs after his mother who fled from her domineering husband, leaving the family home. The theme of Oedipal feelings is made explicit in the novel through the medium of dreams. Nikolai Apollonovich dreams of an explosion of cosmic proportions:

<sup>19</sup> BENNETT, 257.

<sup>20</sup> CIORAN, 140.

<sup>21</sup> CIORAN, 142.

<sup>22</sup> BENNETT, 254.



There was no Earth, no Venus, no Mars, merely three revolving rings. A fourth one had just blown up, and an enormous Sun was still preparing to become a world . . . Now he wanted to throw a bomb at his father. But his father was Saturn. The circle of time had come full turn. The kingdom of Saturn returned (p. 167).

Apollon Apollonovich is identified in the dream with Cronus (Saturn) who swallowed his own children lest they might overthrow him in accordance with a prophecy, but his wife, Rhea, aided one of their sons, Zeus, to survive and end the power of Cronus by destroying him. Cronus had himself mercilessly destroyed his father, Uranos, for casting his sons down to Tartarus. The allusion to the Cronus myth, like Bely's explanation of the colour white which can turn into red, demonstrates the reversible roles of antagonistic forces.

But revolt against the order of the universe and the circle of time leads into nothingness. The atmosphere of the city in Petersburg is similar to a dream; the citizens have no faces, they walk about like shades. In the novel we do not know what exactly are "reality", hallucinations and dreams. Bely himself wrote: "The streets of Petersburg possess one indubitable quality: they transform the figures of passers-by into shades."<sup>23</sup> Not only the shade-like figures, but also the main characters, move about in such a way that it is not possible to account for how they get from one place to another, or precisely where places are. We cannot say for certain where Senator Ableukhov's office and home are. Moreover, there is no definite indication as to how much time is covered by the plot of the novel. It is unclear when a scene starts and when it ends, and whether a discussion is completed or not.<sup>24</sup>

The name of Saturn is connected with the notion of the time-bomb in the puns, "Cela tourne" and "sa tourne" (p. 177). Two features of the bomb are of particular interest: the time-bomb is a device which disrupts space by its explosive force, and, secondly, its timing can be set. As a symbol of the hopeless of rational, "Apollonian" forces to control the boiling, powerful "Dionysian" element behind the surface, the bomb gets completely out of control and its explosion cannot be stopped.<sup>25</sup>

After the explosion of the bomb, both father and son, who had been striving to reach the West in the city of Peter I., arrive in the East. Apollon Apollonovich goes to his ancestral family estate in the Russian countryside. Nikolai Apollonovich goes to Egypt to unravel the secrets of Nature, or as Nietzsche puts it in "The Birth of Tragedy",

the same man who solves the riddle of Nature — the sphinx of two species — also must break the most sacred natural orders by murdering his father and marrying his mother. Indeed, the myth seems to whisper to us that wisdom, and particularly Dionysian wisdom, is an unnatural abomination . . . wisdom is a crime against Nature.<sup>26</sup>

And similarly to Zarathustra,<sup>27</sup> by studying the culture of ancient Egypt, Nikolai Apollonovich begins to arrive at a new and original type of understanding, "Dionysian" in the sense that it is not taken over from some alien culture, or

<sup>23</sup> FANGER, 470.

<sup>24</sup> CIORAN, 154.

<sup>25</sup> CIORAN, 153.

<sup>26</sup> BENNETT, 252.

<sup>27</sup> CIORAN, 160.

for that matter, from any culture at all. Nikolai Apollonovich reaches his new credo in the Russian country-side: Kant is replaced by Grigory Skovoroda, the 18th-century Ukrainian philosopher, who opposed the rationalist philosophy, which has created chaos and renounced nature, and preached instead that the only honest way to live is to go away from society, as did the Cynics, followers of Diogenes.

Following the explosion of the time-bomb, the style of the novel changes. Up until this point, the antagonistic currents of the "Apollonian" and the "Dionysian" can be felt on the formal, as well as the thematic level. The organization of "Petersburg" follows the patterns of classical symmetry and order. The eight chapters of the book are preceded by an introduction and concluded by an epilogue. With the exception of the last one, at the head of each chapter there is a quotation from Pushkin's "The Bronze Horseman", the Russian prototype of the novel about Petersburg. The harmonious formal arrangement of Bely's novel is like that of the city: the precise order of the elegant palaces on the straight boulevards has affinities with the well-organized chain of chapters. The same "Apollonian" attitude characterises both the form of the city and that of the novel about the city.<sup>28</sup> The inner arrangement of the chapters, however, is sharply different from the well-organized surface. The prose is rhythmic — sometimes the pace reaches exceptional heights — the punctuation is very unusual, demonstrating lack of order:

"Dust, dust . . ." "My . . . my ! . . ." Let me have a go at it . . . with a dustrag . . . like this . . . "Good !" The telephone gave an alarmed ring. The Institution was calling. From the yellow house came the answer: "Yes . . . He is partaking of his coffee . . . We will inform him . . . Yes . . . The carriage is here" (p. 237).

The narrative voice capriciously leaps from one character to another, from real to metaphorical, from the waking to the dreaming consciousness. The narrative voice is endowed with so much flexibility and freedom that the epic or tragic distance between narrator and narrated disappears; the tone is carnevalesque. On the last page of the eighth chapter and in the Epilogue, the symbolistic imagery and the non-conventional narrative devices yield their place to conventional narration. But, as Fanger suggests, "this movement away from Symbolism, however, is itself symbolic: the passing of the world of "Petersburg" is the passing of the politico-cultural St. Petersburg which had existed for two centuries and sustained the myth since Pushkin's time."<sup>29</sup>

The ticking of Bely's time-bomb is a very powerful symbol. Apart from the significance of its explosion in the Russian context, it also has a fully universal meaning, bridging the gap between East and West, past and present. It is Bely's answer to the views which grew out of nineteenth century evolutionism concerning the progress and development of the human race. Bely's statement in his art is that man does not proceed but moves in circles — the man of today is no different from the man of the times of ancient, "primitive" rituals. Myths are more than matter of logos; they are reenacted in and determine human life.

<sup>28</sup> BENNETT, 245.

<sup>29</sup> FANGER, 475.



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