

A Tale of Two Cities: A Comparison of the Role of the City in Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and Bely's *Petersburg*

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The big city has long been a preoccupation with novelists. Dickens, Balzac, Dostoevsky depicted repeatedly and in great detail man's plight in an urban environment. Writers in the twentieth century turned to the same subject, showing how these ever larger man-made surroundings put the individual under considerable stress.

Andrei Bely's novel *Petersburg* and Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* are two examples of such city novels which I shall attempt to analyze and compare in terms of their respective techniques and methods of narration as well as their different approaches to the subject of man's alienation in an inhuman environment.

A little over a decade separates the two novels. *Petersburg* was first published in 1916 while *Berlin Alexanderplatz* appeared in 1929. There can hardly be any question of direct influence since *Petersburg* was, and unfortunately still is, known very little outside Slavic circles,¹ and though Döblin has been accused of writing under the influence of James Joyce, which he denied,² no connection has ever been drawn between him and Bely.

Both novels differ widely in terms of plots, protagonists, subject matter, and style; however, they have one thing in common: the inclusion of a city not merely as a backdrop for the action (as had normally been the case in nineteenth-century novels), but as a character in its own right. Neither *Petersburg* nor the *Alexanderplatz* area in Berlin are described to provide local color or to give the characters a place to move in; instead both are spread out and developed before the reader like another hero. Herein lies the main similarity of the two novels, which will allow us to draw some parallels in spite of the fact that the methods and aims of the authors were quite dissimilar.

Berlin Alexanderplatz opens with Franz Biberkopf, its simple and bungling antihero, returning from the Tegel prison to the city to begin a new, honest life. We meet him standing quite forlorn under the prison walls, watch him on the streetcar getting into town, witness his anxiety and bewilderment when returning to society. As we follow him about in his simpleminded and ineffectual attempts at leading a respectable and independent life, the city unfolds around him. Very detailed descriptions of the area surrounding the Alexander—and Rosenthalerplatz are interspersed. The streets are carefully named, their direction is given, what

¹It is hoped that the excellent new translation by Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmsted will help disseminate the work. Andrei Bely, *Petersburg*, trans. Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmsted (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978). All quotations are from this edition and will appear in the text.

²Cf. Döblin's introductory remarks to a lecture on his novel which appear in the DTV paperback edition, Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verein, 1965), pp. 412-13.

landmarks are notable, which buildings are being destroyed: "The Invalidenstrasse trails off to the left."³ "The wide Brunnenstrasse runs north from this square, the A.E.G. runs along its left side in front of the Humboldthain" (p. 54). "At the corner of Landsberger Strasse they have sold out Friedrich Hahn, formerly a department store, they have emptied it and are gathering it to its forbears" (p. 219). The construction of a subway station at the Alexanderplatz is repeatedly mentioned, even depicted at some length. Moreover, apart from casual remarks on the weather, there are numerous weather forecasts copied verbatim from newspapers (p. 433). Elsewhere the reader might come across extracts from the telephone book (p. 54) or stock exchange bulletins (p. 253). Under the heading "Franz Biberkopf Enters Berlin" the insignia for the various departments of the city of Berlin are spread over two pages. At one point there is a lengthy discussion of the play *Coeur-Bube*, "that charming Parisian comedy, in which agreeable humor is united with a deeper meaning," which is being shown at the Renaissance Theater and how it could be advertised to better advantage (p. 255). The reader is treated to authentic speeches by Chancellor Marx (p. 74), reports on visits by foreign dignitaries or film stars (p. 418), and news of sports events. We also find statistics on the number of deceased persons for Berlin in 1927 (p. 541), as well as those concerning the numbers of slaughtered animals at the stock yards, which are very frequent throughout the novel. Streetcars figure prominently: every now and again the route of one line or another is mentioned and at one point Döblin enumerates every stop between two terminals (p. 53). All this material is factual and accurate and gives a precise picture of the city between the years 1927 and 1929.

Other methods are used to broaden the picture of Berlin. Incidents in the lives of passers-by are told in a kind of *Nebenerzählung*,⁴ such as the young girl being seduced on her way to music lessons; or the little boy on the streetcar whose whole life story up to the time and manner of his death is given, including the obituary notices in the newspaper. Characters pop up, are carefully and lovingly described for a few pages, then disappear: the prison escapee Bornemann who staged his own death by drowning so as not to be caught again, or the asthmatic "collector" of antiques who could not afford any purchases and canceled his deals by sending printed postcards, are but two examples that come to mind. There is no apparent reason to introduce these people—they do not advance the plot in any way, nor do they shed much light on a particular aspect of the protagonist. Yet they are inhabitants and part of the city, and when Franz Biberkopf happens to bump into them, their story is told.

The picture of Berlin that thus emerges, pieced together from this wealth of information, is disjointed and chaotic like the city itself. Berlin becomes a character in the story, one of Biberkopf's adversaries in his fight against what at the beginning of the novel is called "something resembling Fate." And just as we follow the events in Franz Biberkopf's life during the one and a half year span of the novel, so we watch the city develop quite apart from him. In fact, there are a number of scenes where neither Biberkopf nor any other character appear, but where the city figures prominently. The previously mentioned construction scene at the Alexanderplatz is a case in point and so, for that matter, is the long, detailed, and crucial slaughterhouse scene. Here, of course, the intention is to draw a parallel between Biberkopf's fate (or his perception of it) and that of the slaughtered animals. The two stories, told side by side, add breadth to the whole picture and illuminate each

³Alfred Döblin, *Alexanderplatz Berlin*, trans. Eugene Jolas (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1958), p. 54. All quotations are from this edition and will appear in the text.

⁴The term is taken from Leon L. Titcher, Jr., "Döblin and Dos Passos: Aspects of the City Novel," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 17, No. 1 (1971), 125-35; it may be roughly translated as "subplot," though its position to the main plot is parallel rather than secondary.

other. We shall see later how extensively Döblin uses this method of parallel narration to highlight aspects of his protagonist.

To draw this portrait of Biberkopf and his antagonist, the city of Berlin, Döblin uses a way of narrating which one might call epic. In fact, the novel has repeatedly been called an epic⁵ for more than one reason. First there is the subject matter: one man's fight against forces beyond his understanding or strength. Furthermore, we have the scope of the novel, encompassing as it does every aspect of the hero's life for the duration of the events, as well as giving a very wide view of the setting. Then the leisurely pace is a factor, and the frequent intrusions of the narrator himself, who never lets us forget that he is in the process of telling a story. But most of all, there is the manner of narration: the story is told in the present, giving the reader the impression that it unfolds right before his eyes.

Neither the city nor Biberkopf has a history. No allusions are made to the historical past of Berlin, to its role as the capital of the Kingdom of Prussia and of the German Empire, or even as the present capital of Germany. It is an immense entity, pieced together from innumerable streets, buildings, and lives. However, its importance is only for the year 1928 and a particular point in Franz Biberkopf's life. We get an impression of incredible breadth but not really of very much depth.

The same holds true for the life of the characters, where again the "past is prologue" and the reader is admitted only to matters pertaining to the present. The novel starts in medias res and contains very little by way of flashbacks. The comings and goings of Franz Biberkopf are described in great detail after his release from prison, yet about his former life we know only the essentials: in a fit of rage, he murdered his girl friend Ida with an egg beater, and received a four-year prison sentence. He also seems to have taken part in World War I, and became a deserter. Nor do we know more about Reinhold and other members of the underworld that provide the cast for the novel. Mieke is the only character whose previous life is mentioned in some kind of a flashback, but only for the years immediately preceding the main events—certainly not enough for a whole history. The point is we do not need to know about the past. It is the present that matters, i.e. the succession of events between the time Biberkopf is released from Tegel and returns from the asylum in Buch a changed man, and the life of the city between the fall of 1927 and spring of 1929.

This impression of a broad canvas unfurling before the reader is not really altered by frequent references to the *Oresteia*, the "Book of Job," to "Genesis," "Ecclesiastes," and to German literature. (The latter usually takes the form of a word or two, such as the passage about the girl Cilly who "carries, as Schiller might have said, a dagger in her garment," p. 297, or Lina's "offensive of her own à la Prince of Homburg. My noble uncle Friedrich von der Mark!" p. 90.) It can hardly be said that they add a temporal dimension; rather they illuminate or explain Biberkopf's plight. They do not connect the events of the novel with the past. The story of Job is told side by side with present events, and nothing permits us to fill in the intervening time gap so as to link them in a continuous manner. These references only allow us to draw parallels, helping us to understand that Franz Biberkopf's problems are not unique or unprecedented; witness, for instance, Orestes's fate: "A criminal, an erstwhile God-accursed man [where did you get that, my child?], Orestes, killed at the altar Clytemnestra, hardly pronounceable that name, eh? anyhow, she was his own mother" (p. 121). And further on: "'Up and at him, whoa,' shriek the old Furies. Horror, oh, horror, to see a God-accursed man at the

⁵For example in Theodore Ziolkowski, *Dimension of the Modern Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 99-137; and in Leon L. Titcher.

altar, his hands dripping with blood! How they snort: Dost thou sleep? Thrust slumber away. Up, up. Agamemnon, his father, had started many years ago from Troy. Troy had fallen, and thence shone the signal fires, from Ida over Athos, oil-torches constantly blazing towards the Cytherean forest" (p. 125). Döblin adds to this "How splendid, be it said in passing, this flaming message from Troy to Greece" and follows it by a dry and technical account of wireless telegraph transmission.

Thus we are told about Orestes in a manner befitting the vocabulary and comprehension of the novel's protagonists and their surroundings. In other words, Döblin does not only allude to Orestes, Agamemnon, and Clytemnestra, but retells their story in the present, using the Berlin dialect—thus placing it on the same level as Biberkopf's story. Both are equally illuminated and occupy the foreground together. With every reference to biblical or literary precedents, the reader is given a more precise image of Biberkopf, so that he can be better understood and perceived in different lights. However, no new dimension is added—the time always remains the present.

We had already pointed out this method of parallel narration in connection with the slaughterhouse scene which is a retelling of "Ecclesiastes" in a different context and which, among other things, brings the city to life independent of the main protagonist. We also made the point that in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* the city does not merely serve as a backdrop, but is an adversary in its own right in the life of Franz Biberkopf, a presence described and told for its own sake. And yet we found that the city does not add depth so much to the characters as it adds breadth. And even when in the end the city is personified as the whore of Babylon, no dimension is added to the novel, but a new parallel is drawn, a new angle of illumination for Biberkopf's struggle with death and the misconceptions that kept him from leading a responsible, meaningful life.

How different in Andrei Bely's *Petersburg*! Here also we have a city that is alive, rivaling the protagonists for the spotlight. But the city is not used to parallel the struggle of an individual; here its function is to deepen the meaning by adding a further symbolical dimension.

First of all in Bely's novel the city is deeply anchored in the past. On the one hand, we have the "historical" past of the capital built by Peter the Great on the Finnish swamps to provide "a window to the West." On the other hand, there is the "fictional" but nonetheless vivid past of Petersburg from the writings of Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, to name but the most prominent. Right at the very beginning, in the Prologue, the historical importance of the city is alluded to, and ridiculed in the parody of official proclamations. Allusions to Nevsky Prospect further evoke the city of Gogol's fiction. While the events concerning Senator Ableukhov and his son's involvement with a group of revolutionaries take their increasingly hectic course on the surface of the novel, the murky, misty, mysterious picture of the city emerges beneath.

Again, as in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, we are confronted with a wealth of detail: newspaper clippings and tourist guidebook descriptions of landmarks in St. Petersburg. However, here they are often purely fictional, as the little notices from the *Daily Chronicle* of October 1 to 4 (p. 37). Also they seldom relate to the present but more often to historical events. Thus the Summer Garden is described at the beginning of Chapter Four in connection with the murder of Emperor Paul by a group of conspirators (pp. 97-98), or the Winter Palace as seen through the eyes of Empress Catherine the Great; the dome of St. Isaacs Cathedral, which marks the spot where Tsar Alexander II was assassinated, and the spire of the Admiralty

building are constant landmarks seen in the background by the characters in the novel as they move about the city. These buildings play a role as much by their physical presence as by the ideas, mentality, and world view that they represent. We might add that the action is set in 1905, the year of the first Russian revolution, i.e. a time filled with momentous historical happenings.

Before we look at the extensive presence in *Petersburg* of literary allusions, there is another rather interesting point about the novel that is worth mentioning. In a careful study of the geography in the novel, L.K. Dolgoplov shows that Bely has deliberately distorted the picture of the city.⁶ For instance, the house of Senator Ableukhov, where much of the action takes place, has two very distinct locations—one to the West of the Winter Palace, facing Vasilievsky Island; the other to the East of the Palace almost across from the Peter-and-Paul Fortress. This is not due to an oversight on the part of Bely, but is a deliberate attempt to disorient the reader. Real events and places are used by Bely as a backdrop, however they are never allowed to supplant the reality created within the novel.

There are other places in *Petersburg* which are minutely and carefully described and give the aura of a very precise location. On close analysis it turns out there are no five-columned three-story buildings on the Moika embankment where Bely puts one (Lieutenant Likhutin's house); that the "institution" where Senator Ableukhov repairs for work could be either the Senate building or the Synod, according to the different itineraries which are described; that the often mentioned "bearded caryatid" which had been "freed from scaffolding in the year 1812" and "saw the crowds rage beneath him in 1825" (p. 32) simply does not exist anywhere in the vicinity of the square where the events of 1825 took place; that details of the kind given when Sophia Petrovna (Angel Peri) and Varvara Efggravovna go to a meeting (p. 76) are impossible to locate.

Where Döblin was impeccably accurate in his evocation of the streets and buildings around the Alexanderplatz, Bely creates a Petersburg of his own, only slightly distorted, leading the reader astray by a wealth of wrong details.

Russian writers had long been fascinated with Petersburg, "the most theoretical and intentional town on the whole terrestrial globe."⁷ Pushkin, in his poem "The Bronze Horseman," shows its inhumanity in the plight of a petty clerk who imagines himself pursued by the statue of Peter the Great during a flood. We find the Bronze Horseman again in Bely's novel, and once more he appears in the delirium of one of the characters. Not only the statue is here resurrected, as it were, but all it stands for: the tyranny of the emperor who built the city in disregard for the individual and only with an eye to the advantage of the empire, an advantage which was offset by the split that Westernization created among the Russian people. There are endless ramifications to the meaning of the statue, and all of them lurk in the background in the scene where "someone made of metal was moving up towards the landing" of Dudkin's room (p. 213). In *Petersburg* the Bronze Horseman does not just function as a parallel to illuminate an aspect of the city or of a character, but adds another level to the story, in fact adds depth. The narration moves on several planes: Dudkin's state of hallucination brought about by drinking, which is simultaneously linked through the appearance of the statue to the importance of Peter the Great in the fate of Russia, the founding of Petersburg, the

⁶L.K. Dolgoplov, "Obraz goroda v romane A. Belogo 'Petersburg,'" *Izvestiia Akademii Nauk SSSR, Seriya literatury i yazyka*, 34 (1975), 46-59.

⁷The quote is by Dostoevsky, who has long been fascinated with Petersburg as one of the most "inhuman" environments in the world, at the beginning of the *Notes From the Underground*; see *The Short Novels of Dostoevsky* (New York: Dial Press, 1945), p. 132.

rift between East and West in Russian history, the Decembrist revolt as the beginning of continuous opposition to the autocracy of the Tsars, which in turn connects it with a whole set of other themes that the reader has been attuned to listen to by their repeated occurrence.

The Bronze Horseman motif, important as it is in Bely's novel, is by no means the only such literary allusion to the city's past. Another of Pushkin's creations, Liza from *The Queen of Spades*, figures prominently in *Petersburg*. Sonja Likhutina, like the heroine of the older novel, believes herself to be in love with another Hermann. Since she is a simpleminded person, she is only familiar with Tchaikovsky's operatic version of *The Queen of Spades*, which means that in this instance the allusions are to two separate backgrounds, the opera and Pushkin's short story. Again the plot moving on the surface (on the same location as the main scene of the opera) relates to a several-tiered background and the meaning of the events are thus greatly deepened.

Gogol's eerie description of the Nevsky Prospect becomes a recurrent motif of the novel, as does the little office clerk who is quite overpowered by a suffocating bureaucracy. Both reappear in *Petersburg* in the form of bridges over damp canals, mysterious figures disappearing in the fog, and descriptions of carriage rides along the "rectilinear prospect" (p. 10). They bring in their wake all the associations with misty winter nights, the immense administrative machinery of the Tsars' regime, and the plight of the little man toiling in this subhuman environment.

Sometimes Bely overlaps two references, as when he addresses the Falconet statue of Peter I: "Russia, you are like a steed! Your two front hooves have leaped far off into the darkness, into the void, while your two rear hooves are firmly implanted in the granite soil" (p. 64), which combines a reference to the Bronze Horseman and Gogol's famous comparison of Russia with a speeding troika at the end of *Dead Souls*.

Dostoevsky's Devils are alluded to several times, and in Bely's novel they become symbols for unscrupulous, rather ineffectual revolutionaries. Sometimes the mere mention of a fire on the islands brings about an association, or the chapter heading "Scandalous Uproar" (p. 114) is enough to remind the reader of the precedent at Mrs. Stavrogin's. In fact the situation where a love-sick young radical puts his ennui at the disposal of the party rather than jump from a bridge immediately, is a parody of Dostoevsky's plot in *The Possessed*. And when Dudkin in his closet of a room on the island stares at the "sticky yellow wallpaper," Raskolnikov is resurrected and with him the Napoleonic theme of the misguided young intellectual.

There are countless other references throughout the novel to the fictional Petersburg of the past which have been described and categorized in several books and articles.⁸ However, we shall not attempt a more thorough enumeration, since what interests us here is the effect produced by the introduction of historical and literary allusions. By skillfully interweaving these motifs with the plot of the novel, Bely gets the reader to incorporate all their associations and ramifications into the story, thus obtaining a three-dimensional picture of considerable depth.

In the first chapter of *Mimesis* Erich Auerbach compares the style of the *Odyssey* with that of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, and he makes the now famous distinction between the two ways of narration. One is fully "externalized, uniformly

⁸Cf. particularly A. Höning, *Andrej Bely's Romane* (München: Wilhelm Funk, 1965); and D.N. Breschinsky and Ž.A. Zhukova-Breschinskaja, "Literaturnyi bred A. Belogo," *Souremennik*, No. 25 (1973), pp. 3-25.

illuminated . . . at a definite time and a definite place, connected together with lacunae in a perpetual foreground . . . events taking place in leisurely fashion and with very little suspense.” In the other, “decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies in between is non-existent; time and place are undefined . . . the whole permeated with the most unrelieved suspense . . . remains mysterious and ‘fraught with background.’”⁹

Could we now take some of Auerbach’s criteria above and apply them to the two novels we have been looking at and especially to the treatment of the city in each of them?

Döblin’s method, as we have attempted to show, is of a Homeric cast: he gives us an impression of “perpetual foreground” mainly by his way of unfolding the story in the present before our eyes.¹⁰ The light he sheds, though coming from several narrative points of view, is uniform. The narrative voice, it is true, keeps changing to adapt to the appropriate tone and language; but it does not usually create a difference in emphasis nor particularly highlight one aspect against another. The complexity of a situation or a psychological dilemma, or the chaotic state of the city are shown in a succession of images and pieces of information. Döblin’s technique has rightly been called “collage” or “montage,”¹¹ i.e. bits and pieces side by side, sometimes overlapping slightly, making up the complete picture. The only time when we have a juxtaposition is with references to the Bible, and we have seen that even there it was not so much a matter of juxtaposing as placing alongside to offer a comparison, a way of lighting up an aspect of the protagonist rather than lending him a history or a past.

We have also seen that the city does not play the role of background, but is another character, somebody (or something) perpetually twisting and thwarting Biberkopf’s intention to become a decent citizen. It gets the same kind of attention and illumination as Biberkopf or whoever happens to hold the spotlight.

The element of suspense, mentioned by Auerbach, is largely absent from *Berlin Alexanderplatz* since Döblin tells us in the opening paragraph how the novel is going to end. Moreover, as in baroque novels, every chapter heading always gives away the content.

Thus with very little change in emphasis or wording in Auerbach’s definition, we can see how Döblin’s book fits in broad outline into the category of novels where the action takes place “in the foreground,” and this despite the complexity of the plot or the chaos of the city. The result is one of incredible breadth and of a very vast, fully illuminated canvas, of an epic skillfully told to a contemporary audience.

When applying Auerbach’s criteria to *Petersburg*, we are tempted to see in it the mysterious writing “fraught with background.” Admittedly time is defined in the book, though again not in a straightforward manner, and the same tricks Bely likes to play on his readers as to location can be detected in the chronological sequence of events or in sudden, unannounced time changes that add to the difficulty of understanding, (as when, in the middle of ongoing events, Nikolai Apollonovich arrives for dinner dressed in his student uniform—setting the time back three or four years; p. 78).

⁹Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 11-12.

¹⁰Ziolkowski, p. 109 says that “Döblin argues in ‘The Structure of the Epic Work’ in opposition to customary aesthetic theory, that the epic does not relate past action; rather it represents or renders the present.”

¹¹Ziolkowski, p. 107; and Sharon Spencer, *Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. 177.

Bely does not illuminate all the phenomena or characters in his novel with equal strength. Some of them receive the full light from several angles, like the Senator and his son and most of their actions, while others are more or less left for the reader to guess at, as for example Senator Ableukhov's wife: nothing is known about her life abroad nor about her reasons for returning, though the homecoming is celebrated and described at some length. Every secondary character has one major scene where he is the central figure; with some this produces a very vivid yet strangely incomplete picture, since the strong light creates sharp shadows. How much in Lippanchenko's and Dudkin's characterizations remains mysterious to the end of the novel?

Moreover, as we have tried to show, an enormous amount of background is provided by Bely's method of using history and literature to add several layers of meaning to any single event or character. There is a synchronic element in the novel which accounts for much of the depth and complexity one senses on reading the book.

There is no doubt that the second part of *Petersburg* in particular is "permeated with the most unrelieved suspense." Nikolai Apollonovich, after his return from the ball, has set the clock mechanism of the bomb which is now ticking away somewhere in the Senator's house—a very tense situation hardly relieved by constant remarks about the bomb, while the narrative is mainly concerned with characters and situations not directly connected with the plot.

Lastly the role of the city is to provide a maximum of background without being just a piece of scenery for the action. As in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, the city has a life of its own, but here it is a many-layered structure of vast symbolical meaning as the capital of the Russian empire, the seat of government, the center of revolutionary activity, and the "city of Peter" sung by generations of Russian writers.

The two novels, while both featuring a city as a living, pulsing entity, shaping and almost crushing the people living in it, differ widely in their methods of presentation and general approach to the subject. Yet each author has in his way created a masterpiece with unique and novel treatment of conventional situations and material. Seemingly, the only remaining similarity is how little both novels are known outside their respective languages, which may be attributed to the difficulty in translating the particular charm lent by the Berlin dialect on the one hand and the poetic language on the other.