

Of Dreams, Phantoms, and Places: Andrey Bely's *Petersburg*

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This paper will examine the idea of place, which is central to Andrey Bely's symbolist novel *Petersburg*. The title itself implies place, as well as emphasizes that Petersburg—the city—is the main hero of Bely's work. Perceptions of place combined with, and related to, those of dreams and phantoms can be understood within the larger framework of the novel by examining how they impose themselves upon the lyrical self of the author, and how he transforms them into a fabric of images. This understanding could be achieved by approaching the novel through a careful reading of one of its chapters. Chapter six of *Petersburg* seems to be an ideal starting point for an analysis of dreams, phantoms, and places. References to other chapters or sections of *Petersburg* will be made wherever it is relevant. However, it is in chapter six that the texture of the symbolic design and the vision of Bely's novel is realized.¹

In a letter about his novel to the critic Ivanov-Razumnik (December, 1913), Bely suggests that he did not faithfully portray the details of an authentic reality, either historical or revolutionary, of the years 1905-06, but rather that he gave a symbolic picture of Russia's approaching cataclysm. Bely insists that his "entire novel depicts the subconscious life of maimed thought-forms through the symbols of place and time."² He emphasizes further that the action takes place not in the real city—Petersburg—but in a conditional city imagined and created, "In the soul of a certain person, not named in the novel, whose mind has been overstrained with cerebral work."³

Bely's image of Petersburg is unusual in that, while preserving the outside characteristics of a concrete place in both topographical and historical terms, it is nevertheless not a real city but part of an idle "cerebral game," or of some transcendental category which has penetrated reality from beyond the realms of consciousness.

Although Bely uses in his portrayal of the city a number of specific details and identifying signs, both are utilized in such an arbitrary fashion that any semblance of authenticity is quickly dispelled. For example, the concrete places that are repeatedly mentioned are the Winter Canal, the Moika, Peter Square with its monument to Peter the Great, the Summer Garden, the Gargarin and the English Embankments, the Nikolaevsky and Troitsky Bridges, the Admiralty, the Neva River, the Islands, etc. However, what predominates in Bely's novel is an artificial topography that exists only in the author's consciousness. If we try to follow the movement of any character in the novel along the streets or bridges or sections of

¹Andrei Bely, *Petersburg*, tr. R.A. Maguire and J.E. Malmstad (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978). All references to the novel, unless otherwise specified, are to this edition, and will appear in the text. See also Ralph Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp.1-17.

²See letter to Ivanov-Razumnik, December, 1913, in Andrei Belyi, *Peterburg* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981). p.516.

³Belyi, *Peterburg*, p.516.

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. The same applies to government buildings that Bely names, or the homes in which his characters supposedly live. Outside of the novel, Bely's city does not exist.⁴

In the prologue to the novel, Bely states that he needs Petersburg mainly because it is the capital of the Russian Empire. Unless Petersburg is a capital: "It only appears to exist" (p.2). Bely not only alludes to the illusory quality of the city in which "nothing is what it seems," but also to the phantom-likeness of Petersburg, the city that might disappear. Bely needs Petersburg because of the city's ties to its founder Peter the Great. Moreover, the non-Russian, European quality of Petersburg helps Bely restate the question of the role of Russia as a symbol of both the East and the West. Bely's Petersburg, "appears on Maps: in the form of two small circles, one inside the other, with a black dot in the center; and from precisely this mathematical point, which has no dimension, it proclaims forcefully that it exists" (p.2). The city in Bely's novel is like a Janus, now showing its real and concrete side, now its unreal and illusory face. Therefore we are not surprised that the city appears to exist as a "mathematical point," and as a point in space and time in which astral spheres touch the real ones.⁵

As stated earlier, chapter six, which will be followed here in some detail, is a point of departure for our analysis of dreams, phantoms, and places in Bely's novel. Most of the section headings in chapter six are places; for example: "the Staircase," "the Street," "Nevsky Prospect," "the Caryatid," "A Dead Ray was Falling through the Window," "Petersburg," "the Garret." The epigraph with which the chapter starts is taken from the second part of Pushkin's poem "The Bronze Horseman": "Behind him everywhere the Bronze Horseman/Was galloping with heavy clatter."⁶ We realize immediately that the statue of the Bronze Horseman and its implied multileveled symbolism is going to play a major role in the entire chapter. The text of chapter six begins with the description of the terrorist Dudkin's wretched lodgings on Vasilievsky Island, which resemble Raskolnikov's coffinlike room. Both Dudkin, and as we will see later, Nikolai Ableukhov are, like the narrator, mouthpieces for Bely, and therefore important for our understanding of the entire novel. Dudkin wants to escape from his room and from his troublesome dreams. He recalls a nightmare of the previous night in which "some kind of an outline was running after him. And was dooming him irrevocably" (p.171). Dudkin's urge to go out to the street is motivated by his fear of dreams and phantoms. What were his dreams and phantoms?

Dudkin had been suffering from a persecution mania which continued in his dreams (three nightmares per night), in which he is pursued by Orientals and by a meaningless word "enfranshish" which appeared "the devil only knows from where" (p.58). We have been told earlier in the novel that his room is infested with bedbugs, which Dudkin had been destroying with insect powder or *persidskii poroshok*, literally "Persian powder." An Israeli scholar, Omry Ronen, recalls that on the containers for such powder one could find the words printed in Roman letters "en franchise" (duty free). Perhaps Dudkin, who does not know French, transposes this word meaningless to him, into Cyrillic letters and sees it both as "enfranshish," and

⁴See L. Dolgoplov, "Peterburg 'Peterburga': Gorod v romane A. Bologo," in *Na rubezhe vekov* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel, 1977), pp.260-73.

⁵Dolgoplov, p.256.

⁶*Pushkin Threefold*, tr. Walter Arndt (N.Y.: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc. 1972), p.425. All references to the Pushkin poem are to this edition.

its reverse the "Persian" named Shishnarfne.⁷ The hallucination of a Semite or a Mongol face with yellow lips appears to Dudkin during his nightmare. The face is that of the double agent Lippanchenko, as well as symbolically the fear of the Eastern domination that was pervasive in Russia at the beginning of the century. Fearing the enclosed space of his room and its yellow wallpaper, Dudkin runs out to drown his fright in alcohol.

In the section of chapter six entitled "A Dead Ray was Falling through the Window," Dudkin has a nightmare that he is conversing with Shishnarfne whom he had originally encountered in a dream in Helsingfors (now Helsinki) where his involvement with the party, his alcoholism, and his anarchistic theories of the destruction of culture began. Dudkin's dream involves both Shishnarfne and the phantom—the Bronze Horseman. It was in Helsingfors that Dudkin had also met Lippanchenko, a Ukranian, who passed himself as a Greek Mavrokordato, but whose features were those of a "semitic and Mongol." There Dudkin had fallen under Lippanchenko's control. Dudkin's dream of Shishnarfne—enfranchised then is both connected with Lippanchenko, and is an emanation of his own troubled soul.

In the following section entitled "Petersburg," Dudkin's dream takes on the form of a Persian Shishnarfne, who, as it becomes explicit later in the scene at Lippanchenko's cottage, is also closely connected with Lippanchenko. Shishnarfne and Dudkin talk about Petersburg, the city built on a swamp, the unreal city that "belongs to the land of the spirits" (p.205). Shishnarfne gradually becomes a contour against the window and then "merely a layer of soot on the moon-illuminated pane" (p.206), while his voice becomes stronger. The material substance of Shishnarfne, which becomes only a phonic substance, suddenly disappears. At that moment, still dreaming, Dudkin realizes that "Petersburg is the fourth dimension which is not indicated on maps, which is indicated merely by a dot. And this dot is the place where the plane of being is tangential to the surface of the sphere and the immense astral cosmos. A dot which in a twinkling of an eye can produce for us an inhabitant of the fourth dimension, from whom not even a wall can protect us. A moment ago I was one of the dots by the window sill, but now I have appeared . . ." (p.207). Dudkin's realization about the city being a dot is comparable to Bely's own reference to Petersburg as two small circles with a dot in the center, found in the prologue to the novel. For the purpose of our discussion it is necessary only to mention the fact that Bely was involved with both the theosophy of Blavatsky and Besant, and with the anthroposophy of Rudolph Steiner, which played a considerable role in one phase of his writing of *Petersburg*, and which contributed to the cosmic and mystical flavor of the novel.

What is more relevant is that for Bely, Petersburg appears as "an invisible world, the world of shadows" that could disappear at any point (p.207). Even earlier in the novel Bely had stated that "Petersburg streets possess one indubitable quality: they transform passers-by into shadows" (p.22). The word "shadow"—or its synonym "silhouette"—is applied in the novel to characters who lead lives of false existence in the visible world. They are the "underground" agents Dudkin, Lippanchenko, and Morkovin.⁸ Dudkin himself is referred to as "a bluish shadow"

⁷Bely, *Petersburg*, pp.346-47. Reference to the Persian powder was eliminated from the 1922 edition of *Petersburg*. It does, however, appear in the 1916 edition. See Bely, *Petersburg*, p.242. Another scholar suggests that Bely introduces an element of anthroposophy through Shishnarfne "a being from the spiritual realm" which becomes apparent in the "reversibility of his name." See V.E. Aleksandrov, "Unicorn Impaling a Knight: The Transcendent and Man in Andrei Bely's *Petersburg*," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 16, No.1 (Spring 1982), 20.

⁸Lubomir Doležel, "The Visible and Invisible Petersburg," *Russian Literature*, 7, No.5 (September, 1979), 473.

when he emerges from the islands. The association between the hallucination Shishnarfne and Lippanchenko underlines the connection between the supernatural world and the world of shadows. The city itself appears in the domain of the supernatural. It is not a human world, but a world ruled by Shadows. Yet it is not only shadows that rule this invisible world: phantoms do so as well. The phantoms in Dudkin's life are both the city and the Bronze Horseman, whose function is to destroy the irrationality of the world of shadows embodied in Shishnarfne.⁹ The phantom of the Bronze Horseman plays a role symbolic of the forces of Russian history. Peter himself is perceived as the "father" of Russia, and as a symbol of authority against which there has been a continuous rebellion.

At the moment when Dudkin realizes that "enfranshish" was a word out of his own dream, an emanation of his own cerebral game, he hears the words: "It is I . . . I destroy irrevocably" (p.108). This particular phrase is associated in the novel with the Bronze Horseman. Dudkin, in his garret, while recalling the phrase "I destroy irrevocably," thrusts his head through a broken window and looks at the city, specifically at Peter Square and at the statue of the Bronze Horseman that suddenly, as it seems to Dudkin, detaches itself from the rock and flies down. The Bronze Horseman proceeds to fly over the city, from one section to another. While the Horseman is flying over spaces Dudkin remains the prisoner of space: "Amidst his four walls he seemed to himself merely a captive prisoner, that is, if a captive prisoner does not have a sense of freedom greater than others, and if this narrow little interval between the walls was not equal to universal space" (p.211). Dudkin realizes that he is acutely mad and that Shishnarfne was "The reverse of abracadabra or—enfranshish" (p.221). He also suddenly knows that Lippanchenko has had power over his soul, the same was that the Horseman did, and that he, Dudkin, had betrayed Nikolai Ableukhov to Lippanchenko, and that Lippanchenko was a double agent. At this moment, when Dudkin became aware of what he must do regarding Lippanchenko, he suddenly has a noisy visitor: "Crash after crash resounded, the crash of metal, shattering stone" (p.213). At the landing to his garret that opens up into universal space: "The Bronze Horseman stood" and "the destinies of Evgeny were repeated" (p.213).

It is curious that Bely had suggested earlier in the novel that the enigmatic Horseman "extending a heavy patinated hand," which Dudkin had passed on his way back to his garret, is actually an emanation of Dudkin. "It seemed to him [Dudkin] that his back had opened up. Out of this back, as out of a door, something like the body of a giant reared and prepared to fling itself out of him" (p.64). Bely seems to imply that the Bronze Horseman is a figment of Dudkin's cerebral game, while at the same time affirming the Horseman's existence.

Bely interprets and alters the myth of Pushkin's Bronze Horseman here. While it "seemed" to Pushkin's Evgeny that the Bronze Horseman was galloping after him, Bely's Dudkin accepts the Bronze Horseman's appearance as a fact, however fantastic it may be. The movement of history has come full circle and "Aleksander Ivanovich [Dudkin]—Evgeny—now understood for the first time that he had been running in vain for a century" (p.214). The Horseman tells Dudkin that human history has reached a dead end, and asks Dudkin to endure yet a little while longer because terrorism and destruction are not a way out. Then, turning white hot, the Bronze Horseman pours his molten metal into Dudkin's veins. Pushkin's rebel Evgeny is identified with Bely's Dudkin, but Bely carries this identification even further. His Bronze Horseman addresses Dudkin as "My son." What Dudkin comprehends at the moment of the Horseman's appearance is that he must destroy Lippanchenko, and only then will he destroy his prison—the garret. But he also

⁹Doležel, 485.

understands that the existing power structure will collapse, as will Petersburg itself, under the metal's blow. The link between the metallic horseman and a piece of metal (the scissors) with which Dudkin later murders Lippanchenko becomes apparent. It also assumes a historical dimension.¹⁰ Dudkin, as a criminal emanation of the Horseman (we recall that the giant had come out of his back), uses as a murder weapon a pair of scissors, which symbolize his split personality, as well as Peter's splitting Russia into East and West.

In chapter seven, Dudkin kills Lippanchenko by splitting his back open. The body was found in the morning: "There was a pool of blood; there was a corpse; and a small figure, with a laughing white face. It had a small moustache, with bristling ends. How strange: the man had mounted the dead body. In his hand he was clutching a pair of scissors. He had extended an arm, and over his face—over his nose, over his lips—crawled the blot of a cockroach" (p.264). This seems to represent a total identification of Dudkin with the Horseman, and it takes place at the same time that the explosion of the bomb at the Ableukhov household occurs. The bomb, as we recall, was the symbol of the apocalyptic destruction of the city. From this point on, the Horseman vanishes from the pages of the novel. This final appearance of the Bronze Horseman is a grotesque parody: the mad Dudkin sitting in the horseman's position on the murdered Lippanchenko. Dudkin's extended arm resembles Pushkin's Peter who "Stands with outstretched hand/ The Idol on [his] bronze steed" (Pushkin, p.415). Bely's Peter ends as his own (Peter's) caricature. After the episode of Lippanchenko's murder and the explosion of the bomb, Bely moves his characters away from Petersburg.¹¹

As has been apparent from the analysis of chapter six, the associations between Peter and the Bronze Horseman pervade the texture of the novel. Nikolai Ablukhov, to whom Dudkin had brought the bomb in a sardine can, himself has several encounters with the legendary Peter and the Bronze Horseman legend. While talking to Morkovin, an agent both of the secret police and the party, Nikolai sees Peter as "some kind of a giant, with a dark green felt hat, black hair and a tiny nose, and a tiny mustache" (p.141). Nikolai sees Peter in the same tavern where he is drinking. The reference is to Peter I's legendary drinking with seamen. Another association with Peter occurs, again in chapter five, as Nikolai becomes intoxicated during his talk with Morkovin, and while looking at Peter and the sailor sitting at another table, Nikolai has a vision "From there, from afar, under full sail, winging his way toward Petersburg was the Flying Dutchman" (p.147). Bely not only combines Peter's interest in sailing and the admiration for the Dutch, but by associating him with the Flying Dutchman Bely projects the curse the Flying Dutchman bears on to Peter. This curse relates to Peter as a founder of the city which in Russian tradition is linked with the image of an accursed place.

As Nikolai leaves the tavern he feels that a giant, a metallic face, with a heavy "arm pointed menacingly" was observing him. The giant is Peter, "He who dooms us all—irrevocably" (p.148). The connection with Dudkin becomes clearer. Therefore Nikolai thinks that the city Petersburg had been pursuing him through his own cerebral play. Nikolai refers to the city as "Cruel-hearted tormentor! Restless specter" (p.148). Nikolai then finds himself in Peter Square, where it *seems* to him that the metal lips of the Bronze Horseman are parted in an enigmatic smile, and that the metallic hooves will come crashing down, while the words "I doom: irrevocably" (p.149), pursue him. At that moment, Nikolai suddenly knows that "he must" go through with his promise to the party to kill his own father. We should

¹⁰Doležel, 486.

¹¹Ada Steinberg, "On the Structure of Parody in Andrej Belyj's *Petersburg*," *Slavic Hierosolymitana*, 1 (Jerusalem, 1977), 141.

keep in mind that Nikolai had already killed his father, if only mentally, with scissors, which again identifies him with Dudkin. Nikolai, "roaring with laughter," like Pushkin's Evgeny, flees from the Bronze Horseman, knowing that he is doomed. And during his conversation with Dudkin, in chapter six, Nikolai finally perceives that all of the events and thoughts that had led to his fatal decision were a form of madness, because "that which dooms irrevocably—was real" (p.178). The complex relationship between the symbolic city, Russia's fate, the Bronze Horseman and Dudkin and Nikolai, as well as anarchy, patricide, and the Pushkin poem, becomes more explicit.

In the final analysis we have to agree with Bely's narrator that the text we have been examining has been "expended and scattered in the spaces of the soul" and that it has been part of the "cerebral, leaden games" (p.265) which have "plodded along within a closed-in horizon in a circle . . ." We recall that Petersburg appears on maps in the form of two small circles. Therefore we realize that in spite of all the concrete details that Bely had introduced in his novel, his Petersburg is part of a cerebral game which is expressed, as he wrote to Ivanov-Razumnik, "through the symbols of place and time." It is not the real city, Petersburg, that has emerged in Bely's text, but a city conceived as a poet's vision—a conditional city which appears reduced to the lyrical self of the poet, but which becomes alive through the fine texture of images. The complex juxtaposition of dreams, phantoms, and the city emerges as one of the masks of the lyrical self of the author, of his lyrical point of view as well as the source of his consciousness, his vision. One could almost suggest, to use Roman Jakobson's words, that Bely's poetics is based "on the personal, emotional experience—indeed appropriation—of reality," which Bely recombines and symbolically transmutes, by using the exquisitely woven pattern of dreams and phantoms, into the most tantalizing private symbol of place.¹²

¹²Roman Jakobson, "Marginal Notes on the Prose of the Poet Pasternak (1935)," *Pasternak: Modern Judgement*, ed. D. Davie and A. Livingstone (London: MacMillan, 1969), p.139. This article is a shorter version of a paper delivered at a seminar "The Idea of Place" at Washington University on January 29, 1983.